

The following content is provided under a Creative Commons license. Your support will help MIT OpenCourseWare continue to offer high quality educational resources for free. To make a donation or view additional materials from hundreds of MIT courses, visit MIT OpenCourseWare at [ocw.mit.edu](https://ocw.mit.edu).

**DAVID  
THORBURN:**

We turn today to Alfred Hitchcock, one of the most remarkable, if not the most remarkable and significant, of what we might call the great studio directors, the people who worked with great ease and success inside the studio system that developed in the United States-- began to develop in the United States in more than embryonic form, in early systematic form in the silent era and then was fortified and extended into the great mass manufacturing center for dreams and movies, the Hollywood system of the studio era.

And I wanted to begin by saying a word about Hitchcock in relation to that great system. If we think about a famous quotation from the great film scholar, pioneering film critic Andre Bazin, to whom we will return later in the semester. Bazin, among his other an influential comments, this one is a particularly powerful and significant one. "The American cinema," he wrote in 1957, "is a classical art," and it's unclear exactly what he meant by that, but most critics assume that what he meant by that is that it's a system that works according to essentially classical genre forms, that these genre forms have origins behind the movies, and that the system works in a kind of a generic way, and that at least that's a part of what he meant when he called it a classical art.

The American cinema is a classical art, but why not then admire it in what is most admirable, not only the talent of this or that filmmaker, but the genius of the system. And I think I alluded to this phrase or used this phrase earlier in the term, and I want to do justice to it by acknowledging its origins in Andre Bazin.

There's also a wonderful book by a film scholar from Texas named Tom Schatz called *The Genius of the System*, and it borrows, it uses this quotation as its inspiration, and it's a systematic analysis of the Hollywood studio system in which it talks about the interaction of individual agency-- the writers, the directors, the camera people, and so forth, the customers-- the interaction of those creative or semi-creative figures with the manufacturing and publicity practices and rituals that surrounded the production of movies in which he tries to provide a kind of integrated sense of how the system worked to explore what Bazin apparently meant

when he talked about the genius of the system.

Well, one way of understanding the genius of the system is to recognize that it creates an environment, first of all, of stability in which particular filmmakers or particular writers or directors can have confidence-- sometimes overwhelming confidence because they're ordered to do the job by the studio head-- can have confidence that the genre stories they're creating have an audience. And of course, that's been sort of established by the, essentially, assembly line system that develops, and the elaborate system of distribution and access that developed in the United States.

The major studios actually, although they only controlled something like 16% of the resources they-- of movie-making-- actually controlled a much larger percentage of the theaters, because many of the theaters either were owned outright by studios or until a certain point when a Supreme Court decision divested the studios from-- forced the studios to divest themselves from their theatrical holdings.

But when the system was in place, it was a monopoly system in which the rich got richer, in some sense, and the major studios controlled, owned many theaters themselves and by a system of what was called block booking, they forced theaters not just to book particular films and particular stars that they might like, but MGM would say to independent theater owners, if you want the MGM films, you have to take my whole card. You can't just choose the Clark Gable movies, you have to choose the whole thing. And this stability created an environment in which each major studio was confident that, in effect, it had a captive market for its product, and it created an immense sense of stability and confidence when the system was working at its best.

And of course, again, because it was a system that was committed to entertaining the largest number of people it could reach as possible, it meant that there were certain parameters that were established within which the entire system was forced operate. Whatever genre was involved, there were certain kinds of limits. It's what I was talking about earlier, trying to get at this aspect of the system earlier, when I talked about the idea of consensus narrative. If the Hollywood film is reaching out to the whole of the society and it's telling, essentially, a story that appeals to or is supposed to embody the consensus view, the largest general view of what the belief system of the society is, what that means is that there are limits, very sharp constraints-- political and moral constraints-- within which the text operates.

And as you know, especially if you've been reading your [? Cook, ?] the introduction of a particular sensory system introduced by Hollywood itself in order to avoid other kinds of censorship perhaps from the government, further constrained the kinds of stories that could be told. Well, within those constraints, of course, as I hope I've already begun to show you in our discussion of screwball comedy, there can be an immense range of difference, but it's still within certain controlled parameters.

And one of the ways to understand Hitchcock's immense success is to recognize that he had the kind of sensibility, the kind of artistic impulses, and maybe even the kinds of limitations that made the studio system a kind of perfect environment for him. Anyone who's looked at a Hitchcock-- more than one or two Hitchcock films, is aware of the fact that there's something obsessional, something deeply disturbing about Hitchcock's imagination. He's drawn again, and again, and again to the same kinds of situations, to scenes of violence against women, to scenes of confinement, but the studio system was a kind of perfect environment for these kinds of preoccupations.

On the one hand, the constraints of the system did not allow Hitchcock, even if he had the impulse to do so, to press so far into the perversity and disturbance that is the general subject matter he is looking at, as to actually fall into, say, pornography or to fall into something that will deeply offend some segment of the population. We can see that these were impulses in Hitchcock's imagination though, because after the-- Hitchcock lasted long enough, lived for such a long time-- he was a successful director in the silent era. Then he worked in Britain during the sound era and was the most well known and successful of all British directors in the early sound era. Then in 1940, he came to the United States for what as most people recognize as his American phase. He emigrated to the United States and that's a separate kind of distinct part of his career, as I'll describe in a little more detail in a moment.

Well, by the end of his career, Hollywood itself was undergoing profound changes for reasons we've already begun to talk about in this course, the most important of them being the advent of television and the way in which, through the 1950s, television began to leech away the consensus audience and the consensus function that Hollywood had played in American life. And the effect this was to, in some sense, liberate Hollywood, and we'll be talking about what this ambiguous liberation later in the course when we look at some of the great films that emerge in the 1970s that are free of the constraints of a consensus system. Films like *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* or *Cabaret*, the two films that we're going to be looking at later that

embody these sort of post studio era ideals and principles.

Well, one of the ways in which you can see the damage that was-- the help that was given to Hitchcock's own imagination by what I'm calling the genius of the system, is that you can see that Hitchcock's-- that the latest films that Hitchcock makes, the films that Hitchcock makes at the very end of his career, and especially a film-- two films, a film called *Frenzy* starring Michael Caine in 1972, and the last film the Hitchcock made in 1976 called *Family Plot*. The same basic materials, but there's something gratuitous about the nudity in these films. He wasn't allowed to show nudity in the studio era, and it was good for his imagination.

And when his imagination-- and any honorable-- any honest viewer of Hitchcock watching *Frenzy*, or especially *Family Plot*, and watch-- there's a scene in *Frenzy* in which a murderer strangles a woman. Now, there have been-- strangulation is one of Hitchcock's favorite forms of murder, and there've been many characters strangled in Hitchcock's movie, but this strangulation has a pornographic dimension to it that none of the early scenes like that did. And it has to do with the fact Hitchcock is now working in a film environment that is not telling him that he can't go too far, and he does go too far.

And there's a terrible scene in which a murderer takes off his tie, and he strangles this woman with a tie. The woman is naked from the waist up, and you see her breasts bobbling around on the screen while she's being strangled, and you can see that the camera is enjoying looking at those breasts, even though it's a scene of murder. It's a very, very horrible scene, a very disturbing scene. It's a scene that-- it almost is a scene that makes you believe in censorship, to think that censorship ought to be-- certainly, you wouldn't want young people to see this scene.

Now, the only reason that Hitchcock was free to create this scene is that there were no longer the same constraints being imposed upon him by what I want to call the constraining genius of the system. So my point is that Hitchcock was a man of obsessional genius of a certain sort, but he had the great good fortune to work within a system that also limited his liabilities, that didn't even allow the full expression of his obsessions in ways that might become deeply disturbing to audiences.

The fact of the matter is, when you look at that scene and then you think back at many earlier Hitchcock movies, you can see many equivalents of it. Violence and damage to women is a recurring obsession in Hitchcock. Hitchcock is a sick man in many ways. But he's not a sick

artist, he's a sick person. He turns his sickness into art. He turns his sickness into use by dramatizing it and reminding us of the-- so insofar as he's a good filmmaker, he's not a-- he's not a horrible perv, right? But there are perverted dimensions to Hitchcock.

And in fact, part of why we find him interesting is his films are always hovering on the brink of awakening in us feelings that are disturbing and unsettling, and that touch on deep taboos in the ways in which our culture sort of understands how we should behave, and especially in our attitudes towards sexuality, and towards seeing, toward the act of seeing, which in Hitchcock becomes a kind of voyeurism.

So one way to understand Hitchcock is to understand his genius, his greatness as a director as being directly connected to the fact that for the most part of his career, he worked in systems that constrained him. He worked in systems that had a very sharp boundaries, that didn't allow him to do certain kinds of things, and those limitations were turned into artful and valuable gestures.

An anecdote that Hitchcock told about himself many times, this deeply revealing anecdote. It may not be true. We're not really sure, but he told it so many times that it's true even if it didn't happen. That's a line-- it's true even if it didn't happen-- it's a line from Ken Kesey's wonderful novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. And the character, the narrator in the book, who was sort of a crazy man, or we think, he's in an insane asylum, he's in a loony bin when he starts narrating the story, tells us a story of his confinement in a lunatic asylum, and he says, you think the man who's saying this is raving and crazing? My god, this is true even if it didn't happen. And what he means is there's a kind of emotional truth, even if the actual facts aren't true.

And I think that's true of the Hitchcock anecdote as well, and this is the anecdote he repeatedly told about himself. He said, when he was a young boy, five or six years-old, he committed some indiscretion that his father disapproved of, and his father, in response, without saying anything to the boy, wrote a note, sealed it in an envelope, gave it to the boy, and told him to take it down to the local constable-- the policeman in the police station around the corner from where they lived in London.

So the young boy dutifully took the note to him, and then gave it to the constable, and the constable opened it, read it, and locked the boy in a prison cell, and kept him in there for a certain short amount of time, and then finally released him, and said, this is what happens to

bad boys.

And Hitchcock has said, ever since then, I have gone to any length to avoid arrest and to avoid confinement in confining spaces. And in fact, if you think about it for a second, over and over again in Hitchcock's films, a basic story, not the only story, but a basic story he tells is the story of someone who is wrongly accused. We might call it the wrong man theme, right? And someone who was on the run, who looked at the circumstantial evidence against him is-- or her, usually him-- is overwhelming, right? Absolutely looks it.

And all the authorities, all the legitimate authorities of the culture, think the protagonist of the Hitchcock chase film is guilty, right? And his obligation is to somehow not only escape the authorities, who are much more powerful than he, of course, and have at their fingertips all kinds of modern systems for searching, and following, and capturing people, and the fugitive is a lone fugitive on his own without resources and without allies. So he's up against tremendously difficult forces and these are the forces of legitimate authority.

So the theme of the wrong man, who's wrongly accused. The audience knows that he's wrongly accused. Often, Hitchcock will show the real murderer and will show us how circumstantially persuasive but also falsely evidence is, so through most of the movie, we identify with the fugitive, with the person who's running. We know he is innocent.

So part of it is-- so many of his films then sort of dramatize a kind of massive principle of injustice that happens again and again in his movies. Authorities are almost always after the wrong man.

And then many of his films, an overwhelmingly disturbing recurring element in his films, is confinement in tight spaces, is the sense of being caught. And you'll see one of the great, great instances of this, one of his most artistic accountings of this impulse, this fear of confinement, but this fascination with confinement, in the great film you're going to see tonight, *Rear Window*, which takes place entirely in a single confined space, in a room, because the man who-- the protagonist has a broken leg at the beginning of the film and he's literally unable to move out of his apartment. So the entire film is confined there, and, of course, many of Hitchcock's films love this.

So what an interesting anecdote to be told. And think, by implication, what it says about his father, not to mention what it says about Hitchcock himself to tell a story like this so many times over the whole of his career.

But the idea that a world that seems perfectly benign and protective could suddenly turn menacing and terrible, that behind any door or window lurks some monstrosity, that the ordinary world is just an illusion, that what you think of as ordinary, and plain, and prosaic can suddenly erupt in violence, or in terror, or in some form of unpredictable assault is a constant feeling you have in Hitchcock's films. His films dance along an edge in which the whole of the universe could be said to be, in some sense, endangered. The basic laws of our experience, of even sometimes the physical laws of our experience are upended, or denied, or suspended in Hitchcock's world.

Can you think of one example where the laws of nature itself suddenly go cuckoo? One of his most famous films.

**AUDIENCE:** *The Birds.*

**DAVID** *The Birds*, of course, the late film *The Birds*. What happens in *The Birds*?

**THORBURN:**

**AUDIENCE:** All the birds start attacking [INAUDIBLE].

**DAVID** Yes, the most benign and beautiful parts of nature suddenly began to attack human beings.

**THORBURN:** He gives some partial explanation in the film, where you see there's a scene in a restaurant where you see pictures of fried chicken, and people talking about how they love roast pheasant, and so forth.

But in all of Hitchcock's films, there is never an adequate, a truly adequate motive for the madness, terror, disorder that is released in the movies. There's often an attempt to explain them, but nobody takes the explanations very seriously, because the point is, his vision of life is a vision in which the world is an incredibly dangerous, wholly unpredictable, monstrously fearsome place. Maybe his dominant emotion is the emotion of fear. He dramatizes fear over and over and over again in his movies.

Here is a brief selection. He made over 50 films, and I think 53 total films, silent and sound films in his career. The list I put up there is just a very brief selection, but let me say a few things about the trajectory of that career and then I'll turn to a bit more about his technical genius and about the central themes of his work, which I've already begun to elaborate and won't repeat myself too much, I hope.

But let's talk a bit about his career, because like Howard Hawks and Frank Capra, Hitchcock is, even more than those two, a dominant figure of the studio era, maybe the dominant figure. Certainly, the director whose work has been most influential, has lasted the longest. One of the most interesting things about Hitchcock's career, as a whole, is that even after film came to be recognized as something more than mere entertainment, Hitchcock was always admired as a great entertainer and was a successful director from the silent era from the time he began to work in Great Britain.

When he made his move to the United States in 1939, he was Britain's most famous and most admired director. In fact, when he came to the United States, there was a kind of negative reaction in Britain, because they felt it was unpatriotic of this great director to desert his native homeland in the middle of the war, among other things. And he did feel guilt over this, in many ways, and some of that guilt is said, by some scholars, to express itself in some aspects of the other film you're going to see this evening, an earlier film, made in 1943 shortly after Hitchcock had come to the United States. It wasn't his first American film.

While he was making that film, he was receiving news from England about his mother, who was very ill, and she actually died while he was in the United States filming *Shadow of a Doubt*. And there are some scholars who say that his familial feelings, his guilt over leaving England, his guilt about deserting his mother come out in various ways in *Shadow of a Doubt*. I'm not so sure about that, because it's a pretty cynical, and tough-minded, and anti-sentimental film in its own way, but there are some elements of family life in it that perhaps recover or allude to aspects of Hitchcock's own career.

One significant thing, as I've already suggested, is that he was successful at every phase in the history of movies that, like Hawks and Capra, he began in the silent era, did distinguished work there, moved into the sound era and did distinguished work in the sound era.

He has something else in common with Hawks and Capra, and I only recently discovered this. It's not as systematic as in the case of Hawks and Capra, but he, too, studied engineering. So there must be something in this. You guys should maybe reconsider what you're up to here, because three of the most remarkable and technically adept directors in the history of the studio era all had partial training as engineers.

So he begins in the silent era, and in fact, let's go behind-- let me say just a little bit about his background. He was an outsider, in a certain way, even though he was an Englishman,



because he was a Jesuit. His parents were Catholic in Protestant England. And he felt himself, all his life, I think in some ways, to be a kind of outsider, someone who didn't exactly fit in traditional society.

He went to work after his schooling in the advertising department of a telegraph company, began to write the title cards for silent films as early as 1921, and then began for this telegraph company, began to work on certain feature films that were co-produced in Germany. And this is, of course, the great period of German Expressionism, when the great German silent directors are creating their science fiction and Expressionist works. And Hitchcock, in his early life, is immersed in that stuff, learns that stuff, goes to school in that, and you can feel the Expressionist impulse in the darkness and the disturbance that's a central part of almost every Hitchcock film.

He makes something like, I think, a total of six or seven silent films of which the-- do we have the list up there, yes-- of which the most important is-- *The Pleasure Gardens* was a co-production, the first film that he worked on systematically, and it was a German co-production. He wasn't the prime director in it. *The Lodger* is probably his most-- almost surely his most important and most Hitchcockian silent film. Can you guess the topic? It's Jack the Ripper. It's a silent film. It's a story about a landlady who thinks fearfully, nervously that she may have rented a room to Jack the Ripper, the famous killer.

So he's a successful silent director already, an admired director, makes the transition to sound, and in fact-- historically he'd be famous just for this one fact-- *Blackmail*, a British film he made in 1929, is the first British talkie. And he almost immediately began to figure out how to integrate-- was very interested in all the technical aspects of movie-making, especially interested in the way you integrate sound with image. And as anyone who's watched the shower scene in *Psycho*, for example, would be a famous example, anyone who's watch these scenes like that in Hitchcock will recognize the tremendous importance of music in his films. The way he uses music to deepen and complicate the moods he's creating, and especially how he can use music to enhance your sense of terror and fear as he does in certain frenzied, powerful scenes in his most remarkable films.

And then he goes on to really an immensely successful career as the director of action adventure mystery films of which I've listed the most famous and significant ones, films that are still interesting to people, that are still watched today for their own intrinsic excitement, even though many of them also feel a bit old-fashioned in their behavior. *The Man Who Knew*

*Too Much*, *The 39 Steps*, and *The Lady Vanishes*, and there are other films he made in this era, I'm only listing a selection, as I've said.

Then he makes the transition to the United States. He's lured here by David Selznick, the head of a great studio. Hitchcock is especially drawn to coming to the United States because he envies the technical resources that are available to American directors, who, because they have much more budget, they can do much more when they have enough money to add cameras, and to have adequate crews, and so forth.

And the first film he makes in the United States, *Rebecca*, a remake of a famous novel, won an Academy Award as best film of the year, although Hitchcock did not win a director's award. But it's the least Hitchcockian of all of his films, and perhaps he was restraining himself a little bit in an attempt to establish himself in the American audience.

It's a very interesting film, and you can still see that it, in some broad way, fits Hitchcock. It's a Gothic story, the classic English novels about governesses who go off in the country to strange mansions, and they are both attracted to and repelled by the handsome, sometimes scarred stranger who runs the place, right? I'm talking especially about what novel? *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Bronte's great novel. And of course, that pattern-- that [INAUDIBLE] that pattern repeats itself again and again in the movies, and *Rebecca* is a version of that kind of story.

And then Hitchcock goes on in the '40s to make a series of films in which his own interest in the technology of motion pictures and his own obsession with setting problems for himself that are difficult to solve, his own sort of engineer's obsession with the technology of motion picture begins to become clearer and clearer.

Another reason that *The Lodger* is an important Hitchcock film is that it's the first film in which Hitchcock himself makes a brief cameo appearance, and after that it becomes a kind of signature feature of his movies that at some point in the film, a character-- Alfred Hitchcock will appear briefly. He won't be identified, he won't be noticed in the credits, but as he became more and more well known, audiences began to watch for this. This bothered him in some way, because it meant that it distracted people from the movies themselves, because they were waiting to see when Hitch would emerge, so he began to do it earlier and earlier in the films in order to avoid distracting audiences.

But think what it means, having to devise a way for him to be in the movie. In many cases, it's easy. OK, a man's getting on a bus, so he can be in the crowd of the-- but what happens when

he makes films that are arbitrarily restricted, as he does in some cases?

For example, the film *Lifeboat*, in 1944, some of you know about it. It takes place entirely on a lifeboat. There are eight or nine characters. They've escaped a shipwreck. It's a World War II parable about Nazism, and they're all stuck in the lifeboat. And for the entire film, the film is confined to that lifeboat. It presents all kind-- it's not one of his best films, but the technical challenge presented is really interesting, isn't it?

*Vertigo* was an even more interesting instance, and a much more successful instance of the same desire or the same weird impulse in Hitchcock himself to create confining situations and then see what that confinement allows him to do, what grows out of these arbitrary limitation.

But just as a kind of minor instance of this kind of thing, if all the characters in *Lifeboat* are on a boat in the middle of the ocean, how can Hitchcock appear? Because he's not one of the main characters. Does anyone know how he did it? There's a newspaper lying on the floor of the boat, and you pick up the newspaper, and there's a picture of Hitchcock in the newspaper.

It's a trivial thing, but it [INAUDIBLE], but its triviality is exactly what makes it so interesting. In other words, what Hitchcock loved, this kind of problem. When he took these problems in a serious way and when these problems sort of led him into a kind of exploration of our darker, and more disturbed, and more uncivilized sides, he made remarkable films that are memorable and haunting.

And one more example of Hitchcock setting himself these difficult technical feats. The film *Rope*, well titled in a way. It's a murder mystery, but Hitchcock set it up in a way, it's actually, such that, it creates the illusion that the entire film-- I don't remember how long it is. Let's say it's a standard feature length film. Let's say it's 89 minutes long. It's a standard feature length film. It feels as if it's all unraveled in a single take, as if there are no cuts, no edits in the movie. Now, it's not exactly true, because the film was not capable, technically, of doing that.

What Hitchcock did was, he had cassettes of film that would last, say, 10 minutes. So he would make 10-minute long takes, but then he'd have to change the cassette, put in a new one, but he disguised the takes. He disguised the cuts. And in fact, it's an unbelievably tedious film, because when you're watching it, you feel you can't look away. One of the things that you discover when you're watching this film is that cuts are actually a relaxation. They let you relax. They break the rhythm in some way. And if you sit there for 89 minutes watching something

that seems to be unfolding-- and film, of course, unfolds in real time, also, therefore, right?

So he's playing both with another kind of confinement, which is the duration of the movie. He's saying, I'm going to make the duration of the viewing the same duration as the action of the movie, and I'm never going to cut, or I'm going to create the illusion that there's not going to be a single edit in my film. When you're watching it, you actually, yourself, feel trapped. You feel guilty if you look away, or you, but you constantly want to blink or look down, because it's almost as if the absence of edits creates a kind of continuous stream of imagery, and you feel you're trapped within it, like a wall that doesn't let you escape from it.

Well, that kind of-- I don't know that Hitchcock actually intended such a reaction, but is not inconsistent with Hitchcock's desire to manipulate your feelings as you're watching a film. And he became a master at manipulating your reactions as you watch the film.

So there are many-- and I could cite many other examples of this sort of technical obsession, but let me just say a couple of things about the major films. And he successfully, in every phase, but he really comes into his own, most folks critics would say, at the end of the 1940s with a series of-- maybe the early '50s-- with a series of films that run from '51 through, maybe, most people would say through *The Birds* in 1963.

And I haven't listed all the films he made in that era, but I've listed the most important ones, and you can judge for yourself how significant this is, why? Because look at how many titles you recognize. How many titles by directors so many years ago would you actually have seen? It's one measure of what an important figure, what a successful figure Hitchcock is that he's still so widely known, that he's more famous today than he was when he was making his movies.

As I started to say earlier, one of the most distinctive things or interesting and revealing things about Hitchcock's career is that through the mass of his career, even though he was one of the most popular directors, and his films made money, and he was a totally bankable director, no, maybe the most bankable director in Hollywood during the studio era, he didn't get much respect. Some people have suggested that one of the reasons for it is that he gave so much pleasure that there was a feeling that anyone who gave this much pleasure couldn't be an artist, that it worked against him that he was such a great entertainer. And there may be something to that.

But steadily over time, and especially since his death, his reputation has increased, and

increased, and increased. And in fact, recently, his film *Vertigo* was voted the best film of all time, the best film ever made, displacing Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*, which had been at the top of this list for something like 20 years. And this ascension in which Hitchcock was sort of denigrated as a mere entertainer to now being recognized as one of the greatest artists in the movies of the 20th century is a very interesting development, and it's a development that's partly a function of the fact that all of that happened after the movies were no longer the central narrative experience in the modern world in which they had already been displaced as a system.

So in this period between *Strangers on a Train* through *The Birds* in 1963-- some people might include *Marnie* in '64-- he made a series of masterpieces that are among the most significant and most powerful films ever made, two of which we're talking about tonight.

Hitchcock the technician. I've already implied something about this, but it's worth emphasizing this. Hitchcock became famous, especially in the industry, for the unbelievably fastidious, almost bored way in which he carried out his direction of a movie. By the time Hitchcock got to the set of the film, he had so obsessively planned out every aspect of the movie that he acted as if everything was all finished. He often annoyed his actors. Some actors disliked him a lot, because he gave very little instruction to his actors, and some actors like this, but many resented it a great deal.

See, he's been quoted a number of times as showing a kind of disregard for actors. At one point, he said actors are just cattle to be moved around on the set like animals. But it was more of the fact that the actors had trouble with him because he seemed to have worked everything out before he got to the set. He was always tremendously calm, he sat in his director's chair, would give directions, and he had storyboarded-- he had drawn out every single scene and every single camera angle before he even came to the set, so that it was as if he had worked everything out before he reached the set.

And what that meant, of course, is that no improvisation on the set. He would be very unhappy if people tried to deviate, never allowed people to deviate from the plans that had been set before. This is in shocking contrast to the way in which, let's say, a director like Jean Renoir or sometimes Orson Welles might operate in making their films. Quite the-- looking for the contingent and the accidental that happens while you're at work creatively. Hitchcock would have none of that. Hitchcock came into the process of directing with the film finished, completed in his head, completely, fastidiously blocked, angled, and so forth, and there was

no deviation from it.

And he actually did often act bored when he did it. How interesting that is. But he's also, of course, a supreme technician of the movies, a master of camera angle, a master of montage, a master of the mingling of music and image, right? And you'll see many, many examples of this in the two films we are going to see this evening.

How interesting, then, that he is this incredibly fastidious, granular technician who plans out every single camera angle before he comes on the set. What does this tell us? Why would he do that? What's interesting about it? What's most revealing about it? Why would someone do this?

Maybe if the subject matter you're trying to deal with is so unruly and so frightening that the only way you could handle it is by surrounding it with this pretense of fastidious coherence and control. And I think that there's no question at all that his cool demeanor, his mocking demeanor, and especially his sense when he comes to actually make the film, that all the problems have been solved, that everything has already been done, is an attempt to compensate for or defend himself against the roiling irrational power of the subject matter that his films mobilize.

What a wonderful revealing paradox, right? He's this fastidious technician, but his themes are the themes of craziness, of madness, of murder, of voyeurism, of violence, of rape, of strangulation, of fear, of pursuit, imprisonment, confinement, injustice.

One of the most interesting things about Hitchcock, and those of you who have seen more than two or three of his films will feel this much more strongly than those of you who've only seen a few of them, is how essentially passive, deeply unaggressive, and acted upon most of his protagonists are. They're being pursued. They're on the run. They're confined in small places. They're full of fear.

One of Hitchcock's recurring moments, a recurring scene, is the protagonist dangling from a height. And you'll see one magnificent instance of this at the end of *Rear Window*, where Jimmy Stewart is hanging like this above a void, and you see his face, and you can see his face register abject fear, right? We could call that one of Hitchcock's iconic moments. It occurs again and again in his movies, of characters hanging over a void, terrified, terrified of what is about to happen, and often they fall into the void, and some of the dream sequences in

Hitchcock show us characters falling through voids into nothingness.

So the subject matter of Hitchcock's films couldn't be more shocking and disturbing in some sense. They mobilize problematic subjects that are terrifying, and they obviously were so terrifying to Hitchcock that his only way of dealing with them was to surround them with all this appearance of control.

Another thing that follows from this, and it's a very-- on a final point to make about Hitchcock's films, is how often his reassuring or happy endings don't reassure or make us happy. And the reason, of course, is that he doesn't mean the happy endings. I'll come back to this again. But very often, even though his films fit perfectly within-- or imperfectly, but well enough-- into the convention that the endings in a consensus system, and the endings of these stories have to, in some sense, restore normality and reassure us, Hitchcock goes through the motions of doing that, but again and again, the endings of his films are morally ambiguous, and provide us with kind of subtext which put in question the reassurance that we have superficially been offered, as if there's a level of irony, and cynicism, and deconstructive contempt beneath, undermining the reassurance that the endings offer us.

And that's also a part of this idea that the themes that Hitchcock mobilizes are the dark elements of our subconscious and of our unconscious, and the fear that people have, fear of authority, fear of disorder, fear of disturbance, a sense that the ordinary world is full of menace and terror.

But again and again in Hitchcock's films, he doubles his characters, and you'll have a good character and an evil character, and the idea-- he grew up in the late Victorian era of Robert Louis Stevenson, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and he actually thought that was a version of human psychology, that there's a kind of dark or savage aspect in ourselves that's hidden or damped down by civilization, and if we let it come out, we could turn monstrous, we could turn horrible, right? And again and again in Hitchcock's films, we have a kind of doubling in which one character interacts with a more villainous or murderous character, who we come to recognize as a kind of double of the protagonist, or represents the darker, more disturbing energies within the protagonist's nature, right?

And in *Strangers on a Train*, what happens, a tennis star, who's having trouble with his wife, is on a train, and a guy pops up next to him and says, I know you're having trouble with your wife. I read about it in the newspaper. Let's make a deal. Nobody could track us. It'll be the

perfect murder. I'm having trouble with my wife. You murder my wife and I'll murder yours. Then the guy said, get thee behind me, Satan, right? Don't ever talk to me again. I'm very nervous about it.

A few weeks later, his wife is murdered, right? And then he starts getting messages from this guy, when are you going to fulfill your part of the bargain? That's what the film is about. And it's a wonderful, interesting movie.

The scene I want you to see now dramatizes some of this. It comes at end of the film, at the great climax of the film, and one reason I want you to see it is that it also shows another aspect of his what we might call the thematic world of Hitchcock's films, and it's his recurring interest in the subject of entertainment itself. What he became aware of and what his films often dramatize is the illicit and disturbing dimension of our desire to go to the movies, or of our desire to have the kinds of excitements we get when we go to amusement parks.

What Hitchcock understood was that these experiences have an illicit dimension. We sit in the dark, and what do we do when we sit in the dark? We watch people take their clothes off. We watch them murder each other. We're in the dark. We're safe. Nobody knows. We're solitary. We're anonymous. But we're, what are we? We're voyeurs. And what he understood was that voyeurism was at the heart of going to the movies, was at the heart of the movie experience, and that there-- we'll come back to this. We'll come back to this scene.

So at the end of *Strangers on a Train*, there's a particularly wonderful and dramatic example of Hitchcock looking at the space of entertainment as a space that can turn into an environment of menace and disturbance. And this is character-- and again, exactly because-- remember, I said one of his deep themes is what we might call the menace of the ordinary. Well, what could be more ordinary and reassuring than a child's merry-go-round?

Well, here's the great climax of *Strangers on a Train* in which the good and the bad, the good and evil sides have to engage in a kind of contest or wrestling match. And as you're watching, note the way in which, characteristic of Hitchcock, characteristic of him, there's a combination of terror and comedy. He unsettles us, also, because often the most terrifying scenes are leavened with a kind of macabre comedy that unsettles us even more. Here's the scene.

[VIDEO PLAYBACK]

[MERRY-GO-ROUND MUSIC]



Good guy, bad guy. He finally sees his double.

These are very helpful FBI people who do more harm than good. They shoot at the wrong person to begin with, and they accidentally shoot the person who's controlling the merry-go-round, so it goes out of control.

-Everyone stand back. Stand back, please.

-[INAUDIBLE], sir. That's him.

-He's the one. He's the one who killed him.

-[INAUDIBLE]. We know that.

**DAVID**

Part of the comedy here is they're wrong. They don't know who they're talking about. They

**THORBURN:**

have the wrong man, but we in the audience know it.

-Hey, [INAUDIBLE], stop.

-Or do you want to do it yourself?

-No. I guess you could make [INAUDIBLE].

-My little boy [INAUDIBLE]. My little boy. Please.

**DAVID**

See, only Hitch-- Hitchcock had such confidence that he could introduce a comic moment like that in the middle of what is a terrifying climax. The only director who would do that regularly.

**THORBURN:**

[LAUGHTER]

Now you know who the bad guy is, right? So the hero rescues the kid.

[SCREAMING]

Is this a montage or a mise en scene effect? A montage effect, right? See the close up on the animal, the way you get very-- the camera itself doesn't allow you to sort of look back and get a sense of the environment? Your emotions are controlled by the tightness of the shot, by the

quickness of the editing.

Comic version of a hero, right?

And this is quintessential Hitchcock. Are we saved?

Very helpful.

All right, that's enough. You get the idea.

[END PLAYBACK]

And so the fact that this space of entertainment-- can you get lights up? The fact that this space of entertainment could become a-- one more minute, people-- could become a space of terror is the point.

So finally, what would we say about Hitchcock? He's a double man. To borrow from the great essayist Montaigne, who said, we human beings are, I know not how, doubling ourselves, so that what we believe, we disbelieve, and cannot rid ourselves of what we condemn.

What Hitchcock tries or condemn or what Hitchcock thinks he hates keeps coming back in his films. Images of strangulation, of damage to women, images of fear and terror in the face of irrational authority. These themes keep returning again and again in his film with the power of obsession, but he controls the obsession with that fastidious technical distance that allows these obsessions to reach us in a way that disturbs and enlightens.