

## Section A: Hollywood 1930-1990 Comparative Study

### *Vertigo* and Hitchcock as Auteur - Teacher Guide

This section aims to address these main questions:

- What qualifies Hitchcock to be classed as an auteur? What are his 'signature' themes, obsessions, and cinematic style?
- How did Hitchcock become a 'brand' in Hollywood?
- To what extent can *Vertigo* be seen as an auteur film?

## Hitchcock as Auteur.

Alfred Hitchcock's films display a number of elements that could be said to be typical of the director: **thematic, stylistic, technological** and **institutional**.

## Institutions and Inspirations

- Hitchcock began his film career in the 1920s, during the Silent Era. Before becoming a director, he worked as a screenwriter and art director, so he understood how to write and build *mise-en-scène* effectively. The first ten feature films he made were silent, and he famously said: "The sound could go off and the audience should still have a perfectly clear idea of what is going on"
- he also worked at UFA Studios in Berlin, where he learnt the techniques of German Expressionism. This Modernist style of filmmaking aimed to represent the inner states of characters through unusual camerawork, lighting and editing. A good example is *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* (1920).

**Task:** *What similarities can you see between The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari and Hitchcock's early UK films like The Lodger (1927)?*

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- Soviet cinema was also a strong stylistic influence. Hitchcock particularly utilised what is known as the 'Kuleshov' technique of montage editing where an intercutting images can change the meaning of a sequence. He used this to build emotional intensity between characters and show point-of-view. For a director fascinated by spectating and voyeurism, this technique can be used to unsettling effect to make the audience feel complicit with disturbed characters
- he also worked mainly in black and white - only his final 15 out of 54 features were in colour. This means when there were technological advancements in cinema, he took advantage of them fully and added another level of cinematic experience to an already rich text (See below)
- in his UK films, Hitchcock had taken a key creative role in every area of film production: from sets and costume, to script, cinematography and editing, and music. He brought this approach to Hollywood when he moved there in 1940. This was unusual in the Studio System where directors were more like stage managers than artists.

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## Technology and Aesthetics

Hitchcock was keen to make use of the latest technology: first sound, then less heavy cameras, and colour.

**Sound** - Hitchcock was the first to make a British 'talkie': *Blackmail* (1927). He utilised music and foley sound effects to create 'sound-bridges' that link the action (e.g. the scream of a maid discovering a body becomes the sound of bus horn that awakens the killer), use of 'off-camera' sound effects to extend the world of the film, and expressionistic sound design (e.g. the famous 'knife' scene.)

**Task:** Watch the scene at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UvlyQaJbJgs&t=6s>. How have off camera sound and expressionistic use of volume been used to create suspense?

**Camera technology** - Hitchcock took advantage of lighter film cameras to extend the range of photographic movement and angle. This enabled his camera to 'swoop' around a scene, almost like it is another character; or to immerse us entirely in a character's viewpoint. His powerful use of close-ups utilised the emotional intensity generated by CUs of faces to imbue inanimate objects with significance approaching symbolic.

**Task:** Watch this scene from *Notorious* (1946)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JueGAaj5pu8>. How is camera used to show the vital detail of the key the character is carrying and what they do with it? Why might this have been impossible with older, heavier cameras?

**Extension task:** Watch *Rope* (1948). How has Hitchcock created the illusion that the film is all shot in continuous take? How does this affect the spectator? How does Hitchcock guide our attention to create suspense?

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**Colour:** Hitchcock took advantage of the richness of Technicolour to work colour motifs into his films, particularly the conflict between greens and reds in a range of films. **Task:** Look at the stills at these sites: [https://the.hitchcock.zone/wiki/Hitchcock\\_themes\\_and\\_motifs\\_-\\_the\\_colour\\_green](https://the.hitchcock.zone/wiki/Hitchcock_themes_and_motifs_-_the_colour_green) and [https://the.hitchcock.zone/wiki/Hitchcock\\_themes\\_and\\_motifs\\_-\\_the\\_colour\\_red](https://the.hitchcock.zone/wiki/Hitchcock_themes_and_motifs_-_the_colour_red)

## Narrative

Hitchcock experimented with a number of narrative techniques:

- non-linear narratives: plots that involved 'reveals' told in flashback or forwards
- 'kettle' locations: action is limited to one, increasingly claustrophobic location such as in *Rope* (1948) and *Rear Window* (1954)
- plots involving 'everymen' accused of a crime they didn't commit or accidentally stumbling on a criminal conspiracy. Characters are often 'ordinary' people caught up in events beyond their control.

## Themes

Auteurs often return to particular themes or issues and explore them using different characters and plots. One of Hitchcock's main themes was that of looking itself - how we look at other people, how it feels to look through someone else's eyes, what pleasures we get from that. In many of his films, but especially *Rear Window*, *Vertigo* and *Psycho*, the main character voyeuristically observes others (apparently) without their knowledge. Critics have said this is Hitchcock exploring the nature of cinema itself: all film spectatorship is voyeuristic; we the audience watch (in darkness) the personal lives of other people who aren't aware they are being observed.

Other consistent themes across his films are:

- taboo sexuality (he once described Scottie in *Vertigo* as a "necrophile - a man who wants to have sex with a dead woman")

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- doubles and dual or mistaken identity e.g. *Strangers on a Train* (1951)
- 'the wrong wo/man' - protagonist is wrongly accused of a crime, framed, or mistaken for someone in a dangerous profession e.g. *North By Northwest* (1959)
- ordinary people suddenly plunged into extraordinary (and dangerous) situations e.g. *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956)
- distrust of authority: from politicians to the police, people in authority who we are told to trust are actually sources of danger and fear
- beautiful, blonde women in peril. Hitchcock seemed to have a fetish for blonde actresses and an urge to see them endangered. He once said "blondes make the best victims, they're like the virgin snow."
- charming villains - instead of being thuggish and ugly, the villains are often suave, well-dressed and handsome e.g. James Mason in *North By Northwest*

**Task:** Watch the trailers for some of the above films. Where can you see some of Hitchcock's themes being used?

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## Hitchcock as a 'brand'

Hitchcock was one of the first directors to market himself as not just a film director, but as a kind of 'star'. There is still a soundstage in Hollywood with the famous caricatured profile of his face and a giant signature on the side. He used a variety of publicity stunts (such as forbidding audiences entry to *Psycho* after the film had begun) to create a buzz around each new 'Hitchcock Product'. Often the trailers for his films wouldn't initially feature any clips from film itself, it would just feature Hitchcock himself, explaining in his trademark drawl about his film. He also appeared in a small cameo in every film he made. His 'brand' was further extended into a TV drama series, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* that ran from 1955-65 (and was resuscitated in the 80s).

Task: Watch this trailer for *The Birds* (1963). How does it reinforce Hitchcock as a 'brand'? Watch at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ICxR7dlavwg>.

## Main Task: To what extent is *Vertigo* the work of an auteur?

Many consider *Vertigo* to be a perfect blend of auteur filmmaking (incorporating Hitchcock's 'signature' style and themes) and Classical Hollywood style.

Choose a focus scene from the film. You could use the two examples from *Vertigo's* factsheet, or the **Focus Sequence** section of this Study Guide. Where can you see Hitchcock's 'signature' themes, motifs and style?

To identify signature thematic and narrative elements you should watch and refer to specific characters or scenes from across the whole film.

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'Signature' style	Example from Vertigo
Lengthy 'silent' (i.e. no dialogue) sections. Story told visually	
Expressionistic use of camera/editing/ <i>mise-en-scène</i> / sound effects/ colour	
Editing: use of intercutting to create 'Kuleshov' effect	
Innovative camera angle and movement (incl. Zooming, dolly etc.)	
<b>Narrative and Themes</b>	
Ordinary people plunged into dangerous situations	
Doubles, imposters, dual or mistaken identities	
Non-linear structure: flashbacks/forwards, dream sequences etc	
Distrust of authority	
Taboo sexuality	
Protagonist(s) wrongly accused of a crime or on the run	
Blonde women in peril	
Charming (but sociopathic) villain	

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## Extension tasks:

*Watch another of Hitchcock's films. Where you can see similar film style and themes?*

*Watch the documentary Hitchcock/Truffaut (Jones, 2015), which documents a series of conversations between the two directors. How does this reinforce the image of the auteur?*