Lecture 9 - Hitchcock

I. Movie house culture
   - Entertainment
   - Genre and license
   - Invention vs. convention
   - "The genius of the system"

II. Alfred Hitchcock (1899-1980)
   - An anecdote
   - Hitchcock's career
   - Hitchcock the technician
   - Themes

III. The Double Man

Disclaimer: The following notes were taken by a student during the Fall 2006 term; they are not Prof. Thorburn's own notes.

- The Hollywood Era and Consensus Narrative
  - The problems of a society are acted out within consensus narrative.
  - In the middle ages, the consensus narrative environment was the church
  - Theater grew out of certain performative dimensions of religion.
    - The earliest theater traveled from town to town on wagons, and it was religious in nature.
  - From the silent era until the advent of television, film in America was a consensus narrative.
  - You used to be able to walk down 42nd street in New York, and there would just be block upon block of nothing but movie theaters.
    - Many of these theaters were unbelievably ornate, with gilt work, plush carpets, balconies…
    - Virtually everybody in society had access to these places
    - You could go and watch 4 or 5 movies in a row.
    - You could stay for hours and hours without getting kicked out.
      - Homeless people could go there
      - They were a place of illicit sexual trysting
      - Jack Kerouac describes spending several weeks at a time in a movie theater in On the Road

- Hitchcock (1899-1980)
  - We’ll be watching earlier Hitchcock in this class
  - Genre Work might look formulaic, but in fact it is the fact that it seems so comfortable that allows the form to explore the forbidden
    - In Hitchcock’s work, these forbidden elements often lie right under the surface
“High” art vs. “Low” art
Hitchcock is a particularly dramatic example – he’s so unique that we might want to call him a genre unto himself, within the genres of mystery or thriller
An anecdote, which Hitchcock told to many people: his father called him over one day and told him to take a note down the street to the local constable, and the constable read the note and then locked him in a jail cell, and told him “this is what happens to bad boys.”
- This is representative of the unexpectedness of life – a young boy who has no reason to think he is guilty of anything
- The eruption of something terrible and unexpected
Hitchcock’s work is full of sudden eruptions of violence and evil – it’s a world of black and white good and evil
He never graduated from college
He worked in film at a variety of levels
Worked for a time in German film, and he was fascinated by German expressionism.
He directed six silent films – he spans both the
- Blackmail, 1929, the first British feature with synchronous sound. About homosexuality – a very shocking subject at that time.
He made The Man Who Knew Too Much, The 39 Steps, and The Lady Vanishes in the 1930s – here he really came into his own, became famous
- Rebecca – bestseller, won an academy award, established him as an international figure.
- Shadow of a Doubt, 1943
- Rear Window, Verdigo, North by Northwest, Psycho, The Birds – these classics came later, in the 1950s and 60s
His two periods, early and late, are very different
We can think of Hitchcock as a technician and craftsman
- He was obsessed by every aspect and detail of how movies were made
- By the time he came on the set, he already had everything planned out
- He once called actors “cattle”
- He loved to set himself problems that were difficult to solve, so that these limitations would create a more creative and interesting film.
  - For example, in Rear Window, the entire film takes place in one room
He likes to make brief appearances in all of his films
His themes include: Disorder, Entrapment, Voyeurism, Instability, Evil…
Clip: A famous part of North by Northwest, in which a previously safe environment suddenly becomes a place of menace.
- This clip is an example of the trauma that he forces his innocent characters to go through
- Notice the crane shot at the beginning – why does it return at the end? Why is it important?
- Note how he uses silence
- Evil erupts from the strangest places in Hitchcock’s universe