



ALEXANDER VAN DER POLL
Correspondent

'If I made Cinderella, the audience would be looking for a dead body in the coach.'
Alfred Hitchcock

Part 1 appeared in the *CL* September/October 2005 issue, p 34.

On an evening in October of 1955, thousands of Americans turning on their television sets were greeted by the slow-emerging drawn silhouette of Alfred Hitchcock, accompanied by the strains of Gounod's *Funeral march of a marionette*.

Alfred Hitchcock, in partnership with MCA and CBS, had launched the *Alfred Hitchcock presents* television series. With this project, Hitchcock cemented his popularity; his name, and his image in the minds of the American public. The son of an English greengrocer had become an American icon...

Yet, the decade, which would see the ultimate rise of the star director, began rather inauspiciously. *Stage fright*, released

in 1950 was a critical and commercial failure. Despite a stellar cast including Jane Wyman, Michael Wilding, and Marlene Dietrich singing *The laziest gal in town*, its poor performance at the box office sealed, forever, the fate of Hitchcock and Sidney Bernstein's Transatlantic Pictures.

A new era

In keeping with his usual work ethic, Hitchcock had already started working on his next couple of projects, even before completing *Stage fright*. The most important of these was a film adaptation of Patricia (The talented Mr Ripley) Highsmith's debut novel, *Strangers on a train* (1951). The suspenseful story was the perfect source material for Hitchcock. The eventual screenplay would leave little unchanged from the book, yet it nevertheless met with critical and public acclaim, making *Strangers* one of the most successful Hitchcock films ever made.

Continuing under contract to Warner Brothers, Hitchcock produced and directed two further projects, *I confess* (1953) and *Dial M for murder* (1954). *I confess* met with mild response from audiences and critics, but *Dial M for murder*, aside from being

a great success, remains significant for two reasons.

The 3D craze was sweeping the American nation, and Warner Brothers felt that Hitchcock should jump on the bandwagon. *Dial M for murder* thus became the first (and only) 3D Hitchcock production. Hitchcock himself once lamented that the 3D process was a seven-day wonder; and that he had arrived on the seventh day. Indeed the film was hardly ever screened using the gimmicky process, and was largely seen by audiences in a 'flat' version.

The second, and probably most significant, reason for the film's importance, is that it introduced Hitchcock to actress Grace Kelly.

In Kelly, Hitchcock found the ultimate personification of the 'cool blonde'. She was everything that he could have hoped for, and more. Not quite a femme fatale, and not quite the wilting flower, Kelly was Hitchcock's ice princess. They would ultimately work together on a further two projects. When she married Prince Rainier of Monaco, Hitchcock sorely missed her. Despite both their best efforts to work together again (in *The birds* and *Marnie*) the people of Monaco made it clear that they would not share their princess with Hollywood.

After four major successes in a row for the Warner Brothers Studio, Hitchcock was about to sign one of the most lucrative director's contracts in cinema history...

Success is Paramount

Through the business acumen of MCA agent, Lew Wasserman, Paramount Studios offered Hitchcock a nine-picture deal. In addition to receiving the highest salary (per picture) that he had ever earned, he would be offered a percentage of the profits, as well as acting as producer on five of those films. Moreover, the rights of the pictures Hitchcock produced would revert to him eight years after their initial release.

Feeling highly motivated, Hitchcock embarked on a golden era of creativity. In a matter of five years, the Master of Suspense created half a dozen films, all of which are today regarded as classic cinema. *Rear window*, *To catch a thief*, *The man who knew too much*, *Vertigo*, *North by northwest*, and ending off the decade with the film that would launch a thousand imitations.

In *Rear window* (1954), Hitchcock was gladly re-united with Grace Kelly, and another favourite actor and close friend, James Stewart. Rounding off the cast was veteran character actor, Thelma Ritter.

The film was based on a short story by Cornell Woolrich, **It had to be murder** first published in the pulp magazine **Dime detective** in 1942. In fact, pulp fiction often supplied Hitchcock with ideas for his radio, and later television series.

The central motive in **Rear window** is that of voyeurism. A pastime that one suspects the director of having been particularly fond. As one reviewer noted, 'It's like being Hitchcock for 112 minutes.' (**The Second Virgin film guide**, 1993.) Indeed, **Rear window** is a brilliant exercise in this regard. In the film, a wheelchair-bound Jimmy Stewart spends his days spying on his flat-dwelling neighbours across the way. Simultaneously the viewer is watching Stewart, watching others (of course being watched by a voyeuristic director). A kind of vortex of voyeurism.

This theme would re-appear (in smaller measure) in later films like **Vertigo**, **Psycho** and **The birds**, to name but a few.

Unlike Hitchcock's first film for Warner Brothers, **Stage fright**, **Rear window** (a Paramount production) enjoyed enormous success. Critics and audiences applauded, and were hungry for more. Hitchcock received his fourth Academy Award nomination for **Rear window**, having previously been nominated for **Rebecca** (1940), **Lifeboat** (1944), and **Spellbound** (1945). Hitchcock was not about to disappoint them, nor lose momentum.

The next year, 1955, saw the release of **To catch a thief**. Again, the film starred Grace Kelly, this time opposite Cary Grant.

To catch a thief is almost certainly one of Hitchcock's most beautifully-photographed films. The idyllic French Riviera scenery, the VistaVision cameras, and the Technicolor film stock, all helping to achieve a kind of postcard beauty.

Though considered a minor entry in the Hitchcock oeuvre, audiences worldwide responded well to his particular mixture of humour and suspense. To say little of sexual innuendo. During an impromptu picnic of cold chicken, Grace Kelly's character seductively asks of Grant's, 'So which do you prefer? A leg or a breast.'

In our modern film industry, it takes particularly spectacular special effects to impress audiences. Computer-generated (CG) effects are par for the course. In the mid 1950s, however, there were no CG effects, no computers (at least not as we know them today), and seemingly simple shots required a level of ingenuity not many filmmakers today possess.

For the memorable cliff-top drive sequence, his wife Alma suggested that the scene be shot using cameras mounted on

helicopters. The very idea seemed absurd, and certainly had never been done before, but Hitchcock respected his wife's knowledge of cinema, and so, despite much difficulty, the scene was thus shot. Today, the scene still stands as a testament to Hitchcock's pursuit of cinematic innovation.

Hitchcock's third contribution, **The trouble with Harry** (1956) was a curious venture into the realm of black comedy. The plot revolves around a bothersome corpse (Harry's) which keeps appearing and disappearing, causing the residents of a small Vermont town no end of trouble, as each has their own reason for believing that they are responsible for his death.

The trouble with Harry may not be a masterpiece of cinema, but it did introduce the world to a talented new actor: Shirley MacLaine.

Another aside to this whimsical film is that the picturesque autumn-time village was filmed in winter; after having been ravaged by Hurricane Carol. Much of what is seen onscreen was filmed back in Hollywood on a soundstage. A testament to Hitchcock and his crew's ingenuity is that it is quite difficult to tell the difference between the real Vermont, and the studio recreation.

Hitchcock's next venture divides his loyal fans to this day. He had made **The man who knew too much** in England in 1934. Now, in 1956, Hitchcock saw fit to remake his own film. This time the stars would be James Stewart and Doris Day. Fans of the Master still disagree as to the merits of the remake versus the original, but Hitchcock himself seemed particularly proud of the latter version. He once said that the original was 'the work of a talented amateur, and the second was made by a professional.'

Incidentally, while filming **The trouble with Harry** Hitchcock first hired Bernard Herrmann to compose the musical score. He would subsequently be hired to score the next seven Hitchcock productions, and here he makes a cameo appearance in **The man who knew too much** as the conductor of the **Storm cloud Cantata** during the Albert Hall sequence.

Yet, the reason most people remember Hitchcock's forty-third film, is Doris Day's throaty rendition of the Oscar-winning, **Que Sera, Serra**.

After meeting a contractual obligation to Warner Brothers with 1957's **The wrong man** (starring Henry Fonda and Vera Miles), Hitchcock went on to produce his most controversial, most talked about, and perhaps, most enigmatic film.

Vertigo (1958) was based upon the novel by French authors Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac who had written the

book that formed the basis of the classic 1955 film, **Les Diabolique** (remade in 1996, starring Sharon Stone). Indeed Hitchcock's first choice was to make **Diabolique**, but having lost the chance to do so, he settled on **D'Entre les Morts (From among the dead)** which would become **Vertigo**.

The complexities and psychological influences on the film and its casting, is so immense that one could do no better than to read Dan Auiler's 1999 book, **Vertigo - the making of a Hitchcock classic**.

Hitchcock desperately wanted to cast Vera Miles (from **The wrong man**) as the 'cool blonde' Madeline Elster. Hitchcock had great plans for Vera Miles, aiming to shape her into the new Grace Kelly. However, she had fallen pregnant and announced her semi-retirement from acting. Hitchcock was despondent, and had to make do with newcomer, Kim Novak. Just as James Stewart's character tries to re-model a young girl into the image of his deceased lover, so Hitchcock had to re-model Novak into his image of Miles, who he in turn wanted to fashion after Kelly, in another kind of **Vertigo**-effect.

Young Miss Novak, however, proved to be very trying for the old director: She was inexperienced, and even dared to challenge the director's (and Oscar-winning costume designer Edith Head's) choice of wardrobe. At first, she refused to wear



Hitchcock and Francois Truffaut (1962)
Truffaut a director of the French New Wave interviewed Hitchcock extensively for a seminal film book



Baldy, off duty, chatting with his director during the filming of The birds (1963)



On the set of To catch a thief (1955) - Grace Kelly giving Hitchcock a haircut



Hitchcock receiving an honorary degree from Columbia University, New York 1972



the now-famous grey suit, although she relented eventually.

When **Vertigo** was released in 1958, most reviews were unfavourable. Most critics dismissed the film outright. The intricate plot, and re-invention theme similarly often confused audiences. To add insult to injury, most audiences of that time probably had no idea what the word **Vertigo** actually meant.

Despite its striking title design and memorable dream sequence (designed by Saul Bass) Bernard Herrmann's haunting score, and exceptional acting from Novak and Stewart **Vertigo** still failed to make a significant impact at the box-office. Barbara Bel Geddes, best remembered for her portrayal of Miss Ellie Ewing on television's **Dallas** (1978-1990), was cast in the role of Midge, Scottie's old college friend, and ex-fiancé. Ellen Corby, another future television star, would go on to play the role of Grandma Walton, in the hit television series, **The Waltons** (1972-1981).

The failure of the film was painful for the director, as this was, and still is, his most personal film. Nevertheless, over time **Vertigo** has become the director's most discussed film. It is currently hailed by critics worldwide as a masterpiece. And what a masterpiece it is, compelling one to see it repeatedly, each time experiencing its ethereal beauty differently.

On a short reprieve from Paramount, Hitchcock made one film for MGM in 1959. **North by northwest** remains the best example of a spy/chase film. With Cary Grant cast as the advertising executive, who is mistakenly identified as a CIA agent, and Eva Marie Saint cast as the femme fatale, Hitchcock just could not go wrong.

Again, Hitchcock used the artistry of Saul Bass and Bernard Herrmann's rousing music. In addition, he secured Oscar nominee Ernest Lehman, to write the taut script. Ernest Lehman, had been nominated

in 1954 for the Audrey Hepburn vehicle, **Sabrina**, and would be nominated again in 1959 for **North by northwest**. He would work once more with Hitchcock, on the director's final film, **Family plot** in 1976.

In-jokes abound in the film. Jessie Royce Landis, who plays Grant's character's mother, was in reality, a few months younger than him.

When Roger O Thornhill (Cary Grant) is asked what the 'O' stands for, his reply is a deadpan, 'Nothing'. Perhaps a subtle dig at Hitchcock's old partner, David O Selznick. Even the title of the film seems to indicate a quote from **Hamlet** where the young prince says that he is 'but mad north-northwest; when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw.' However, viewers with a quick eye and a firm grasp of geography will notice that Grant travels in a northerly direction, and at one stage uses 'Northwest Airlines', thus travelling North by Northwest Airlines.

The chemistry between the two leads also allowed Hitchcock to work in some rather risqué sexual innuendoes.

All these aside, it is still Hitchcock's mastery at cinema that makes **North by northwest** unforgettable. The famous Mount Rushmore sequence, with the leads crawling across the faces of America's finest presidents. Then there is the truly legendary crop-duster chase scene.

Who can forget the image of Grant, in a blue suit, running through a dusty cornfield, pursued by a bullet-firing crop-duster plane? The exploding truck at the end of the 'crop-duster' scene bears the logo of the company that Hitchcock's son-in-law worked for. There is that dark Hitchcock humour again!

The film was certainly an all-round success, but nothing could prepare the world of cinema for Hitchcock's next groundbreaking project.

A cinematic revolution

At the end of the 1950s Hitchcock had ten years of great artistic and financial success to look back on. His fifties films had amassed a total of twelve Oscar nominations, including two winners. Best cinematography for **To catch a thief** and Best song for **The man who knew too much**. In addition, the **Alfred Hitchcock presents** television series was entering its sixth season, under the guidance of Hitchcock's trusted assistant, Joan Harrison. In that decade, Hitchcock became a grandfather thrice over. Moreover, despite some setbacks in his health (mainly caused by his ever-increasing girth), life was good, and there seemed no stopping the Master of Suspense.

In late 1958, a little-known author by the name of Robert Bloch, had published a book, loosely based on the facts surrounding the gruesome murders, and acts of cannibalism, of Wisconsin farmer, Ed Gein. In addition to Bloch's take on the Ed Gein case, and Hitchcock's subsequent film, the same incident inspired two other famous films, the first being Tobe Hooper's 1974 cult hit, **The Texas chain saw massacre**, and Jonathan Demme's 1991 Oscar winning, **The silence of the lambs**, based on Thomas Harris's best-selling novel.

Proposed film treatments had been circulating various studios for months, but none dared accept the risky material. Alfred Hitchcock, on the other hand, jumped at the opportunity, and acquired the film rights immediately.

The working title for Hitchcock's forty-seventh feature, **Wimpy**, was one of the many ways he kept production details shielded from of the press. Working in secrecy **Wimpy** was set to take America by storm.

Filming in cost-effective black and white, and further cutting costs by using the crew from his television series, Hitchcock shot **Psycho**, (as the film would be called) in a

Stage fright (1950)

Marlene Dietrich tries to attract her director's attention



Strangers on a train (1951)

Hitchcock discusses the camera setup under the merry-go-round



I confess (1953)

Hitchcock uses a glass of water to create a visual metaphor for the justice system



Rear window (1954)

Always aiming for dramatic shots often involved difficult setups

TITLE	YEAR	CAMEO APPEARANCES			
*The pleasure garden	1925	None	The Paradine case	1947	Getting off a train carrying a cello (see Strangers on a train).
The mountain eagle	1926	None	*Rope	1948	Hitchcock's silhouette appears in neon in a view from the apartment window.
The lodger	1926	10 minutes in: sitting in a newsroom.	Under Capricorn	1949	5 minutes in: in Sydney Town Square wearing a coat, and brown hat.
Downhill	1927	None	Stage fright	1950	Hitchcock watches Jane Wyman rehearse her part as Dietrich's maid, looking puzzled.
Easy virtue	1927	Walking through a gate at a tennis court.	*Strangers on a train	1951	10 minutes in: Hitchcock gets onto a train carrying a double bass.
The ring	1927	None	I Confess	1953	Walking along the top of a staircase during the opening titles.
The farmer's wife	1928	None	Dial M for murder	1954	In a photograph, he is seated on the left-hand side.
Champagne	1928	None	*Rear window	1954	60 minutes in: winding the clock in the songwriter's apartment.
The Manxman	1929	None	*To catch a thief	1956	9 minutes in: on a bus next to Cary Grant and a birdcage.
*Blackmail	1929	On a tube train being pestered by a small boy.	The trouble with Harry	1956	20 minutes in: walking passed limousine of man looking at paintings.
Elstree calling	1930	None	The man who knew too much	1956	In Moroccan market place watching acrobats.
Juno and the paycock	1930	None	The wrong man	1957	Narrating the prologue; the only time this happened in his films.
Murder	1930	Walking past the scene of the crime (The boarding house).	*Vertigo	1958	11 minutes in: walking past Elster's shipyard.
The skin game	1931	None	*North by Northwest	1959	After opening titles; missing the bus.
The rich and strange	1932	None	*Psycho	1960	4 minutes in: outside the real estate agent's office.
Number seventeen	1932	None	*The birds	1963	At the start, he walks out the pet shop with his two dogs, Stanley and Jeffrey.
Waltzes from Vienna	1933	None	Marnie	1964	5 minutes in: stepping out of hotel room looking at 'Marnie' guiltily.
The man who knew too much	1934	None	Torn curtain	1966	Early in: in hotel lobby, with a baby on his lap who seems to soil itself.
The thirty-nine steps	1935	7 minutes in: dropping some litter in the music hall.	Topaz	1969	28 minutes in: at airport, a nurse pushes him along in a wheelchair.
The secret agent	1936	None	Frenzy	1972	In opening scene: wearing a bowler hat and not applauding the speaker.
*Sabotage	1936	None	*Family plot	1976	40 minutes in: his silhouette behind a frosted glass door; arguing with a woman.
Young and innocent	1937	Outside the courthouse holding a camera.			
*The lady vanishes	1938	Near the end, at Victoria station, smoking a cigar.			
Jamaica inn	1939	None			
*Rebecca	1940	Towards the end, he is waiting outside a phone booth.			
Foreign correspondent	1940	11 minutes in: walking past a hotel, reading a paper.			
Mr and Mrs Smith	1941	Halfway in: passing David Smith in front of his building.			
Suspicion	1941	45 minutes in: posting a letter at the Post Office.			
Saboteur	1942	30 minutes in: standing in front of Cut Rate Drugs in New York.			
Shadow of a doubt	1943	On a train, playing cards, holding a full suit of spades.			
Lifeboat	1944	In a newspaper; Hitchcock is seen in before and after pictures for a diet.			
*Bon Voyage / Adventure	1944	None			
Spellbound	1945	39 minutes in: emerging from a lift, carrying a violin case (see Strangers on a train).			
*Notorious	1946	At the Sebastian mansion, downing a glass of champagne, and leaving quickly.			

* Titles marked with an asterisk denote titles available in Library Service stock.



remarkably short period of time, and on a minimal budget.

The stars were Anthony Perkins, (who would forever afterward be typecast as a 'Norman Bates-type') and Janet Leigh. (Janet Leigh is the mother of Jamie Lee Curtis, the product of her marriage to legendary Tony Curtis.) Hitchcock cast Vera Miles in the role of sister to the doomed Marion Crane (Leigh).

Yet, the true stars of **Psycho** are perhaps the brooding atmosphere, and the now renowned musical score by Bernard Herrmann. The sound of the screeching all-strings orchestra during the equally famous shower scene still causes cold chills down one's spine.

When **Psycho** was finally released in 1960, theatre owners were instructed not to let any patron into the cinema after the film had commenced. 'The film you have to see from the beginning, or not at all, for no one will be seated after the start of: **PSYCHO**,' read the tag at the end of the five minute trailer.

Psycho ensured Alfred Hitchcock a permanent place in the annals of film history. The landmark film landed Hitchcock his fifth Academy Award nomination for best director, and even today one finds many web sites, college courses, fan clubs, et cetera which are all devoted to the exclusive study of this masterpiece.

Never one to rest on his laurels, Hitchcock proceeded with his next film. An adaptation of a Daphne du Maurier short story, **The birds**. Hitchcock had previously filmed two other Du Maurier stories, **Jamaica Inn** and **Rebecca**.

The strange tale of a small seaside town mysteriously being attacked by birds, would prove to be a painstaking exercise in special effects. Although technology had increased somewhat since the mid 1950s, by the early sixties it still seemed an insurmountable problem to make a mass attack by birds look realistic. Hundreds of birds had to be

trained. Trick photography, matte effects, and dozens of other methods were used to achieve the desired result.

(Matte: A technique for blending actors in the studio with location, or trick scenes. The actor is photographed against a non-reflective background, for example, black velvet, and a high contrast negative of this image is combined with the desired background. Thus men can move among animated monsters, or birds, in this instance, and ghosts can slowly disappear.)

In one scene, where star Tippi Hedren (mother of Melanie Griffith) is pursued by the feathered fiends, various birds were attached by thin string to her hair and clothes, to give a more realistic effect. **The birds** was yet another major success.

The beginning of the end

Sadly, Hitchcock's health was deteriorating rapidly during the late sixties, and his confidence was dealt a blow by two disappointing thrillers, **Torn curtain** (1966) and **Topaz** (1969). A planned film project to be shot in South Africa (where an aunt of his was residing), sadly, never came to fruition.

In 1972, Hitchcock returned to London to shoot **Frenzy**, which fared significantly better at the box office, and four years later, he completed his fifty-third, and final, film, the comedy-thriller, **Family plot** (1976).

Over the next few years, Hitchcock slowly sank ever deeper into a decline, from which he would never quite recover:

Perhaps the greatest mystery, and injustice, is that though he was nominated for five Best Director Academy Awards, he never won.

In 1979, Hitchcock attended a gala event in his honour. Hosted by the American Film Institute, he was presented with a lifetime achievement award. Watching the footage of this event is a painful experience. The giant, who thrilled the world for over

fifty years, was now merely a ghost of the man he once was. Hitchcock barely seems able to recognise lifetime friends like James Stewart, Cary Grant, and Ingrid Bergman, and is even less aware of his surroundings.

At the end of 1979, Queen Elizabeth II, of England, bestowed upon him the honour of Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire. Thus, only a few months before his demise, he became Sir Alfred Hitchcock.

At the age of nearly 81, on 29 April, 1980, Alfred J Hitchcock was no more, joined scarcely two years later, by his partner in life, love and work, Alma Reville Hitchcock.

Perhaps Hitchcock's greatest legacy is **Psycho**. With that film, he single-handedly revolutionised the 'horror' film. The so-called 'slasher' films of the 1980s and onward, owe a huge debt to the man who first had the courage to defy the restrictive censorship laws of the time, and show a naked person being 'slashed' to death.

In this regard, **Psycho** may be seen as the grandfather of the modern 'horror' film. Horror fans the world over would do well to remember the origin of their favourite genre, and bow to Alfred Hitchcock, before paying lip service to the Wes Cravens of the cinema world.

Yet, the legacy of the Master survives to this day. Restored versions of his masterpieces are becoming increasingly available. Many directors claim Hitchcock as their original inspiration. Dozens of movies have been directly influenced by his style of filmmaking.

Directors like Brian de Palma, films such as **A perfect murder** (1998), the remake of **Rear window** (1998) with Christopher Reeve as the wheelchair bound voyeur, **RSVP** (2001), **Entrapment** (1999) and countless others owe much to the legacy of Sir Alfred Joseph Hitchcock - the ultimate Master of Suspense.

2005

Vertigo (1958)

Hitchcock trying to achieve perfection in what was the most difficult scene in this movie



Psycho (1960)

Hitchcock directing the shower scene which took seven days and seventy-eight shots to complete

Marnie (1964)

With characteristic gesture, Hitchcock explains what he needs from Sean Connery



Family plot (1976)

During his last movie a visibly older Hitchcock required increased camera movement to heighten the dramatic effect during the graveyard scene