Mirroring a Century: Alfred Hitchcock and His Historical Contexts

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Alfred Hitchcock was born on August 13, 1899. He died on April 29, 1980. His life spanned the greater part of the twentieth century, bearing witness to the best of its accomplishments and the worst of its horrific tragedies. Given these facts, Hitchcock's body of work would seem to be one of the best ways to measure the rollercoaster experience of his own century, the 100-year period that saw more rapid social, technological, and moral change than any other in recorded history.

Interestingly, Hitchcock was born only four years after the invention of cinema itself. In December of 1895, the Lumière brothers debuted their Cinématographe at the Grand Café in Paris, France. Although others preceded the Lumière brothers in the use of flexible celluloid film to capture and exhibit moving pictures (Thomas Edison and W. K. L. Dickson, most famously), the Lumières were the first to use both celluloid film and a projection system to exhibit film for a large group in darkness. (Edison and Dickson exhibited their films in Kinetoscopes, single-viewer devices about the size of a stand-alone dresser. A viewer would insert a coin into the Kinetoscope and lean over the top of the machine and look down into the viewfinder to watch the film play out inside the device. Given the design, then, the Kinetoscope could only ever be a single-viewer experience.) Hitchcock claimed to have had his first experience at the cinema via traveling Bioscope shows, which featured a variety of films shown to the public at carnivals and fairs before they packed up and moved on to other cities (McGilligan 15). He almost certainly would also have experienced films via Kinetoscope devices, or one of their many imitations, in one East London parlor or another. Moving pictures were proliferating in a variety of forms at exponential rates around the turn of the century.

In short, Hitchcock and the cinema grew up together.

Commercial advertising and graphic design, both just coming into their modern incarnations, grew with them. By the time Hitchcock had secured his first real job—as a designer of advertisements for Henley's, a manufacturer of electronic cables—the field of graphic design had largely begun to show the influence of contemporaneous art movements such as Cubism, Futurism, Constructivism, and Geometric Abstraction. Noting the technological advances as well as the violent conflicts of the early twentieth century, Phillip B. Meggs argues that a new vision of graphic design was taking shape during this period:

> Amidst this turbulence, it is not surprising that visual art and design experienced a series of creative revolutions that questioned long-held values and approaches to organizing space as well as the role of art and design in society. The traditional objective view of the world was shattered. The representation of external appearances did not fulfill the needs and vision of the emerging European avant-garde. Elemental ideas about color and form, social protest and the expression of Freudian theories and deeply personal emotional states occupied many artists. (Meggs 269)

Such revolutionary changes influenced Hitchcock's design work and, later, his film work, in substantial ways. One can see the early influence best while watching *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog* (1927), Hitchcock's first foray into the genre that would make him a household name. While filmed strictly in the vein of German Expressionists, like those Hitchcock encountered during a brief stint at UFA, the German film studio, the title and intertitle cards reflect the strong influence of Constructivism and, in particular, Geometric Abstraction. Some, in fact, feature artistic renderings of nighttime houses—cast in a dark and blocky expressionist mode—foregrounded by abstract intersections of concentric circles and jutting lines that would look right at home in the works of Russian painters like Wassily Kandinsky, El Lissitzky, or Kazimir Malevich.

Above and beyond these design influences, however, McGilligan writes that Hitchcock greatly admired German Expressionist Murnau's *The Last Laugh* because it contained

no intertitles and therefore served as "'the prime example of expressing a story idea' as 'told visually from beginning to end'" (63). Examples of this same philosophy are resplendent throughout *The Lodger*, and while Hitchcock's film does indeed use intertitles (at one point in post-production, far too many, recalled the film's editor, Ivor Montagu), the greatest communications of mood, theme, action, and emotion are communicated through visuals rather than through the use of intertitles (McGilligan 84). The film opens with the discovery of a young, blonde woman's murder. We watch as the news spreads from the crime scene; to the newspapers; to the "aerials" (wireless radios); to the news-ticker display above Piccadilly Circus; and, finally, to the newspaper as read by chorus girls in a nightclub featuring the latest revue, "Golden Curls." Throughout the five-minute sequence, Hitchcock cuts to actual intertitles four times—but only once to convey information about the murder itself (a brief description of the killer, as described by a witness). In another, a newspaper boy expresses joy that the murders always happen on Tuesdays, which helps sell papers, thereby making Tuesday the boy's "lucky day." In the remaining two intertitles, Hitchcock uses the intertitles to locate us in the spaces where this information is processed and relayed out to the larger public. In each of these last two, the word "Murder" is flashed on the screen in a bold, Expressionist typeface, while below, the medium of news dispersal is noted: "Wet from the press" in the first, and "Hot over the Aerial [the radio]" in the second. Accordingly, these announcements are followed by tightly edited sequences of the news moving in and around the city—the inner workings as the information travels from newsroom to press, from radio announcer to shocked listeners (one lap-dissolving into another, and another, etc.). All other information about the murder—and the Londoners' reactions to it—is conveyed via the specific media platforms: the teletype machine at the newspaper is shown in close-up, printing murder information in real time; the news-ticker display above the city moves horizontally from right to left across the screen, as if we are watching the information unfold with the shocked crowds in the middle of the city. In short, Hitchcock conveys most of

his information visually rather than through the use of excessive intertitles. When words do appear outside the four major intertitles of the sequence, they manifest within the context of the scenes themselves: headlines on newspapers; details on ticker tape; snippets on skyscraper "zipper" boards. The modernist intertitles are interesting in their own rights, however, particularly given that they were designed (as were all the title and intertitles cards) by graphic designer E. McKnight Kauffer, whose poster designs for the London Underground had brought him much acclaim (McGilligan 84). Kauffer had seen the highly influential modernist art exhibit, the Armory Show, at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1913, at which he would have been exposed to major Post-Impressionist, Cubist, Futurism, and Constructivist artworks that would almost certainly have influenced his personal artistic styles ("Edward McKnight Kauffer"). The Geometric Abstraction present in Kauffer's more complicated intertitles add much to this sequence and, indeed, to the atmosphere of the film as a whole.

In another of *The Lodger*'s particularly striking sequences, the Lodger (Ivor Novello) is shown the room he will rent in the London home of the Buntings. Given the recent crimes in the city, we can't help but wonder whether the Lodger might, in fact, be "The Avenger," the notorious serial killer of women whom the Lodger resembles both in look and manner. As he stands in his new room, the Lodger glances around, noting that all the walls are decorated with framed pictures of beautiful and alluring young, blonde women. Hitchcock intercuts between fluid panning shots that follow the Lodger's moving gaze at these pictures and static medium shots of the Lodger's increasingly disturbed reactions. The intercutting comes to rest on a shot of the Lodger standing by the mantle of a fireplace, above which a mirror hangs, capturing the view of one blonde's portrait on the opposite wall. This final shot in the sequence is striking, first because it seems to implicate the Lodger in the crimes committed by The Avenger through the way it features—in the same shot—both the picture (reflected in the mirror next to the Lodger) and the Lodger's disturbed reaction to the picture as he sees it facing him on the opposite wall. The shot also demonstrates, however, a dramatic experiment with

spatial dynamics that draws on a similar playfulness in artistic works such as Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait* (1498) and Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656). Both paintings feature a novel "extra-spatiality"—a term we might use to describe the suggestion of extra, but impossible, space made possible in the image through the use of mirrors within the image or through some other technique (see Stephen Heath's seminal essay, "Narrative Space," for a detailed discussion of the connections between modern art and space in Hitchcock's work). Picasso and Braque tried to accomplish similar goals in different ways during the two decades preceding the release of *The Lodger*. By rendering multiple points of view of a three-dimensional object within a single two-dimensional image on canvas, these first Cubists also played with extra-spatiality, expanding on the techniques of Van Eyck and Velázquez by departing from the use of single-point perspective (the regression of size in images as they approach a vanishing point on the distant horizon). Given the popularity of Cubism during Hitchcock's formative years, one can't help but wonder if his own spatial experiments in *The Lodger* might not have derived from artists such as these. Let us not forget, either, that Hitchcock came of age in the era of both Albert Einstein (with his theories of Special Relativity [1905] and General Relativity [1915]) and Niels Bohr (who pioneered the study of quantum physics), both of whom speculated on the existence of multiple dimensions. For his part, Einstein was fascinated with gravity's warping of spacetime, while Bohr, on the other hand, took extensive interest in the ways that known and predictable laws of physics break down at the quantum level. Scholars such as Philip J. Skerry and Cole Smith have already charted the connections between Hitchcock and Einstein (see Works Cited), so we need not repeat those arguments here. Suffice it to say that, as a product of his era, connections can be drawn just as easily between Hitchcock and modern art as between Hitchcock and the ever-shifting understanding of space and time—a connection that would play a large role in *Vertigo* (1958), as Smith explains.

Hitchcock's work in the late 1920s and into the 1930s consists of films spent honing his craft through genres that posed a variety

of challenges. While he still made thrillers—*Blackmail* (1929), *Murder!* (1930), and *Number 17* (1932), for example—he also directed a number comedies and dramas and even a musical, *Waltzes from Vienna* (1934). Of the many films from this seven-year period following *The Lodger*, *Blackmail* is probably the most important, for it reveals Hitchcock at the top of his genre game during the crucial period of the industry's transition to sound. As would be the case for the rest of his career, Hitchcock used sound expressively for *Blackmail*, and while much of the film still follows silent traditions, key scenes employ sound as a way to reflect the psychological state of the characters rather than to simply convey plot information.

From 1934 to 1945, Hitchcock produced films that largely reflected the increasing tensions of a world preparing for war. Fascism had been on the rise in Europe since 1922, when Benito Mussolini came to power in Italy, and this dark tide grew even more foreboding when Adolf Hitler became Germany's chancellor in 1933. The fascist threat manifested itself in a number of Hitchcock's suspense thrillers in subsequent years. In 1934, Hitchcock released what may have been his most successful film to date, the original version of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, in which he cast German actor Peter Lorre as a charming villain plotting a political assassination. *The 39 Steps* (1935), *Secret Agent* (1936), *Sabotage* (1936), and *The Lady Vanishes* (1938) round out Hitchcock's espionage pictures in Britain, but the trend of espionage and war themes continued even after his move to Hollywood in 1939. After his success with the gothic thriller *Rebecca* in 1940, Hitchcock resumed his run of espionage and war-themed pictures with *Foreign Correspondent* (1940), *Saboteur* (1942), *Lifeboat* (1944), and three propaganda shorts produced exclusively for the war effort: *The Fighting Generation* (1944), a War Bond film; and two films shot in French on behalf of the British Ministry of Information *Bon Voyage* (1944) and *Aventure Malgache* (1944). Even after the war, Hitchcock devoted one of his masterpieces, *Notorious* (1946), to the subject of secret agents infiltrating a Nazi spy ring living in exile in Brazil. While Hitchcock has never been considered a director of war