

## “Just Call Me Hitch . . .”: The Enigma of Alfred Hitchcock

A review of the film



**Hitchcock**

(2012)

Sacha Gervasi (Director)

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Reviewed by

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Luck is everything. . . . My good luck in life was to be a really frightened person. I'm fortunate to be a coward, to have a low threshold of fear, because a hero couldn't make a good suspense film.

—Alfred Hitchcock

Alfred Hitchcock first pioneered the use of a camera made to move in a way that mimics a person's gaze, forcing viewers to engage in a form of voyeurism. Using his specific brand of filmmaking, Hitchcock was enormously successful with early hits in Europe, including *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934) and *The 39 Steps* (1935), culminating in his emigration

and subsequent popular success and celebrity in Hollywood with *North by Northwest* (1959). Although well received and popular today, his next film, *Vertigo*, was poorly received by the critics and the public, and he suffered both personally and professionally from it. However, considering his filmography as a total body of work, Hitchcock produced some of the most indelibly visceral images on film, with the shower scene in *Psycho* (1960) being the most memorable of them all.

Thus, it was with delight and anticipation that two long-married suburban couples waited in a darkened theater for the beginning of the movie *Hitchcock*, ostensibly spun about the unfolding manifestation of the iconic movie. What we viewed was a bifurcated love story about an enduring marriage crossed with Hitchcock's passion to make a movie about a mass murderer that, at the time, could barely eke past the strict standards of 1950s' Hollywood censors despite the fact that no nudity or gratuitous violence was shown, only hinted at. Secure financial backing from the studios was not forthcoming, which ultimately forced Hitchcock and his wife, Alma Reville, to personally finance the production of *Psycho*. *Hitchcock* is a rendition of their trials and tribulations during the production.

We are content to allow professional movie critics to discuss and debate the relative merits of the movie's acting and production values. Our efforts will concentrate on three dominant psychological themes that are the sinew and connective tissue tying the movie's narrative together. First is the psychodynamic interpretation of Hitchcock's childhood with an overbearing and domineering mother and an abusive father who died when Hitchcock was in his early teens. Interestingly, in the movie, Norman Bates described his own relationship with his mother and deceased father in very similar terms, which in psychodynamic fashion is conveniently tied to his homosexuality and the corresponding expression of the mother-son bond.

Second, pervasive within both his professional and personal life is the presence of fairly significant psychological issues that take the form of paraphilia (voyeurism) and what has been described as a megalomaniacal obsession with rigidity and control. Third is Hitchcock's peculiar behavioral constellation of misogyny paired with long-term marital stability with his wife and creative partner, Alma.

Alfred Hitchcock was an only child born in July 1899 in East London to devoutly Catholic parents who sent him to boarding schools until his father's death when Hitchcock was just 14 years of age. The absence of a father along with the presence of a powerfully controlling mother figure is the thread that ties the mother-son relationship experienced by mass murderer Ed Gein (upon whose story the original movie, *Psycho*, was based and who later served to partially shape Anthony Hopkins's portrayal of Hannibal Lecter in *Silence of the Lambs*) to Hitchcock, who experienced a mother-son relationship that was not of the same order of psychopathology, yet was characterized by a parenting style that was authoritarian, frequently debasing, and seems to have had a major influence on his later obsession with strong mother figures in his later movies. Childhood anecdotes about the nightly recital of daily events at the foot of her bed evoke images that are far from warm and

loving. “Naughty” behavior frequently found him directed to the local constable by his father for a brief incarceration in an available cell, which he described later as terrifying.

Although no physical harm accrued, this type of parenting may have been the precursor to Hitchcock’s reputedly being widely considered a tyrant surrounded by sycophants with a compulsive obsession for controlling the appearance, clothing, and professional and personal behavior of the beautiful blonde actresses who were under contract at his studio. It may also have heavily influenced the almost-routine insertion of mother–son dynamics into his films. For *Psycho*, that relationship is rather overtly communicated by Norman Bates in his statement, “A boy’s best friend is his mother.”

Although there is no extant record of Hitchcock ever participating in a psychoanalytic or clinical process, the voyeurism that is portrayed as an obsession (indeed, a paraphilia) may have been an offensively bad habit within his personal life, but it may also have defined his personal approach to cinematography because his watchfulness provided him the ability to replicate nuance on screen that others, without this particular proclivity, generally miss. The link between director and audience is beautifully revealed in a climactic scene shot during the premier of *Psycho*, where Hitchcock peers through the doors of the theater, views the audience, anticipates, and indeed conducts and orchestrates the audience reaction to the now-inimitable shower scene with Janet Leigh.

Hitchcock’s demonstrated compulsive need to control his universe via meticulous use of storyboards, exquisite planning, and attention to detail is also dutifully portrayed in the film. As an example, the movie highlights the filming of the famous shower scene, for which deliberate care was taken to obscure almost all shots of Janet Leigh in the shower; intuitively, Hitchcock sensed that the viewer would engage in what visual scientists refer to as *perceptual completion* (Pessoa, Thompson, & Noë, 1998). No images were explicit, but the ultimate effect of this strategy was that viewers subliminally inserted horrific and pornographic images of their own making where the director intentionally left ambiguity. The resulting effect was to create a heightened experience of fear, designed to emanate from within viewers.

Hitchcock’s innate observational skills, derived from both his skill and damnation as a voyeur, served him well as a director and made him a shrewdly competent observer of human behavior as well. In the expression of these behaviors, we witness the full range of adaptive and maladaptive behaviors coexisting within the same person.

Given Hitchcock’s demonstrated misogyny, compulsive behavior, and voyeurism, the film’s final theme of marital stability is unexpected, although clearly as important a factor to his success as any other. His relationship with his wife, Alma, is central to the film, which alternates between describing a steadfastly dedicated union, if not always harmonious, and depicting both of them involved in extramarital involvements, at least emotionally if not corporally.

The end of the story may be a bit too neat; however, their marriage lasted over five decades and is evidence of the possibility that rumors of his misogyny may have been the

result of misperceptions or misunderstandings. Whatever the truth, his misbehaviors were ultimately tolerated by her.

Alma's role in his success was portrayed as pivotal and his trust in her professional judgment as absolute. Although not in the film, Hitchcock's acceptance speech for the 1979 American Film Institute's Life Achievement Award perhaps best captured the essence of their relationship:

I ask permission to mention by name only four people who have given me the most affection, appreciation, and encouragement, and constant collaboration. The first of the four is a film editor. The second is a scriptwriter. The third is the mother of my daughter, Pat. And the fourth is as fine a cook as ever performed miracles in a domestic kitchen. And their names are Alma Reville. (Hitchcock, 1979, para. 5)

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## References

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