

[The Dead Guy Interview]

Alfred Hitchcock
(1899-1980)

WITH
MICHAEL A. STUSSER



BELATED OBITUARY: Today, the famous profile of Alfred's impish mug represents all that is great in film: droll wit, high style, surprise, gimmickry, and big, fat thrills to go with your popcorn. Starting in silent pictures in 1920s' London, Hitchcock seemed to inherently understand the importance of visual storytelling—incorporating strange camera angles and startling close-ups to shock and entertain audiences. The so-called “Master of Suspense” cranked out 60 films over six decades, many starring the world's greatest leading actors, including Cary Grant (“North by Northwest”), Ingrid Bergman and Gregory Peck (“Spellbound”), and Laurence Olivier (“Rebecca”). Sir Alfred also hosted the long-running TV show “Alfred Hitchcock Presents” (later known as “The Alfred Hitchcock Hour”) from 1955 to 1965, which brought increased popularity to the new medium and its rotund M.C. Although Hitchcock never won an Oscar for best director, he did get a golden guy in 1967 when he received the Thalberg Memorial Award. He also received the American Film Institute's Life Achievement Award in 1979 and was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 1980.

MF: You're creepin' me out here. “Psycho” may be your most famous film, mainly for the shower scene.

AH: Some of my films' most exquisite murders have been domestic, performed with tenderness in simple, homey places such as the kitchen or shower. The trick to scaring people is to set the scene in an everyday situation, then toss in a nightmarish scenario. Frightmares, I call them.

MF: The late Janet Leigh said she was never able to take a shower after doing that scene.

AH: Good thing we didn't film it in the loo!

MF: Sir, hate to tell you this, but they re-made “Psycho” in 1998.

AH: Good Lord! Who had the gall to do that?

MF: Gus Van Sant.

AH: I'm sure that had them running for the exits. Though I did quite enjoy “Good Will Hunting.”

MF: Any parting thoughts?

AH: The length of a film should be directly related to the endurance of the human bladder. And always make the audience suffer as much as possible.

MF: Speaking of suffering, “The Birds” is your only movie that didn't end with “The End.” What's up with that?

AH: Unending terror, my boy.

MF: Cheers to that. 🍷

mental_floss: So, Hitch. Murder? Rape? Birds pecking people's eyes out? Where'd you get your dark side?

Alfred Hitchcock: For gruesome story fodder, you really can't beat the Bible. Also, as a child I was fascinated by “Hansel and Gretel” and “Little Red Riding Hood.”

MF: I read those, too, but I didn't devote my life to writing sinister tales.

AH: If one is raised by Jesuits, as I was, these concepts are bound to intrude into one's films.

MF: You once said “actors are cattle.” Do you really think that?

AH: No, dear boy. I said actors should be treated like cattle. I love them, but they need to understand their roles in the process. When an actor comes to me and wants to discuss his character, I say, “It's in the script.” If he says, “But

what's my motivation?” I say, “Your salary.”

MF: Fair enough. So what's with you and all the blondes?

AH: I picked my heroines – and killers – to please women. They're half my audience, after all. If a man is going to a movie, he is most likely going with a woman, and he is going to ask her what she wants to see. Plus, truth be told, I'm a bit of a voyeur.

MF: Who's your favorite leading lady?

AH: Alma Reville. She also played the role of my wife, of course, for 53 long years.

MF: You made cameo appearances in every film you made from the 1940s on. Is there one that stands out?

AH: The shot of me in “Lifeboat” (1944) was a goodie.

MF: Tough to appear in a movie about nothing more

than a guy in a dinghy. How'd you pull that off?

AH: Sleight of hand. In one shot, I placed myself in a newspaper advert as the before-and-after photos for the Reduco Obesity Slayer corset.

MF: To be honest with you, sir, you seem obsessed with violence and sex.

AH: Spot on! And your point is?

MF: Well your films also have greater meaning. Right?

AH: If you'd like them to. “Spellbound” (1945) can be interpreted as a Freudian dream. “The Birds” (1963) very well may be about evil as an environmental fact of life. And then there's “Psycho” (1960), which closes with a set of eyes—starting with the killer's peeping one, ending with the open eye of the victim. Perhaps there's a third eye in there. That of the viewer, eh?