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## CURRICULUM

This teaching guide has three curriculum objectives:

- To help students and teachers using films and videos in the context of the following secondary school curriculum - English Language Arts, Film and Media Studies, Social Studies, and Visual Arts
- To assist educators who are planning to teach film studies for the first time
- To suggest ways in which traditional literary concepts may be taught using a medium other than printed text

**Note:** Classroom activities are provided after each section along with an answer key at the end of the guide. Answers are not provided for all activities as some questions depend on teachers to choose films they are already working with in their classes.

### ***VERTIGO*** (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958)

For many critics, *Vertigo* is Alfred Hitchcock's greatest and most visually stunning film. It is not in any sense a nice film. It is dark and cynical, and unlike most Hollywood movies, it doesn't offer a terribly redeeming ending.

The story begins with an opening 25-shot sequence showing a man being chased across the roofs of apartment buildings followed by a cop in uniform and John "Scottie" Ferguson, a police detective played by James Stewart. Although short, this scene is crucial. Scottie nearly plunges to his death trying to leap from one building to the next. Dangling above the city streets, he develops a severe case of vertigo (i.e., dizziness induced by a fear of heights), which is shown through a dramatic trick shot where the ground falls away as Scottie hangs precariously from a collapsing eaves draught.

From here the film cuts to Scottie sitting in the apartment of his friend, Midge (Barbara Bel Geddes). Scottie has taken an extended leave of absence from his job to recover from his illness. To keep himself occupied he visits Gavin Elster (Tom Helmore), an old college buddy. Elster asks Scottie to follow his mysterious wife, Madeleine (Kim Novak), who seems to be dangerously close to committing suicide. Initially Scottie refuses, but eventually he relents. So begins a fascinating pursuit that will ultimately end with Scottie in a deadly chase at the San Juan Bautista bell tower.

### **Questions to think about while viewing *Vertigo*:**

1. Some film critics suggest that classifying *Vertigo* as a detective thriller is misleading. Identify other more apt descriptors of the film's themes.
2. In many ways *Vertigo* is a film about love and obsession. Consider how Alfred Hitchcock conveys these ideas to the audience during the scenes when Scottie begins his investigation of Madeleine by trailing her around San Francisco.
3. Remember that *Vertigo* was made during the 1950s, a time when it was not possible to talk about sex openly in Hollywood movies. Sex, however, is implicit throughout the film. How does Hitchcock raise this issue without showing sex explicitly?

### **Discuss the following questions after watching *Vertigo*:**

1. Perhaps one of the most surprising elements in the film is that Alfred Hitchcock reveals the truth about Madeleine's murder two-thirds of the way through the film. Let's assume that Hitchcock did this deliberately. Why do you think he did this?
2. Some critics have argued that *Vertigo* is one of the most cynical movies made in the history of film. Why might they say this? What is it about Scottie's affections for Madeleine/Judy that seem so disturbing?

## ALFRED HITCHCOCK AND FILM HISTORY

An Alfred Hitchcock film is a film unlike any other. With few exceptions, his movies are visually stunning and subtle, thematically moody and complex, and altogether sophisticated and well-crafted affairs. They succeed for a regular film audience and also contain much that satisfies the demanding eye of film critics and filmmakers. To please such different audiences is no small task. Just as often, movies that critics and filmmakers like seem uninteresting to the general public. Not true in the case of Hitchcock. As most who have seen his movies will attest, Britain's greatest contribution to feature filmmaking offers something for everyone.

Perhaps Hitchcock's greatest feat as a filmmaker is that while he dominated one genre (suspense thrillers) and occasionally made films in completely different genres (musicals, melodramas, romantic comedies, and screwball comedies), in at least one instance, he developed an entirely new genre (the slasher/horror picture) with the production of one movie: *Psycho* (1960). With this range, dexterity, and control over his chosen art form, perhaps it's not surprising that, for many critics, Hitchcock's contribution to the history of cinema equals that of other cinema giants, including D.W. Griffith, Sergei Eisenstein, Jean Renoir, and Orson Welles.

### Hitchcock and the Thriller

To begin, Hitchcock was formally educated with the Jesuits at St. Ignatius College in London before joining the British film industry in the London office of Famous Players-Lasky in 1921. Although Hitchcock began as a title writer, he quickly moved on to become a scriptwriter, set designer, assistant director, and finally, director of his first feature in 1925 (*The Pleasure Garden*). Throughout the 1920s, Hitchcock would be influenced by German expressionism and would quickly find a home for his imagination in the world of the suspense thriller. By the end of the 1920s, Hitchcock would produce Britain's first talkie (*Blackmail* [1929]) and, beginning in the early 1930s, he would develop some of the themes that would come to define his greatest work.

For instance, in 1934, with the release of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (remade by Hitchcock in 1956), audiences would first discover Hitchcock's preoccupation with horror in the midst of the ordinary and the innocent. This theme would recur in a number of later films, including *Spellbound* (1945), *Strangers on a Train* (1951), and *The Birds* (1963). In 1935, with the release of one of Hitchcock's early masterpieces, *The 39 Steps*, audiences would find a second Hitchcock theme - the innocent man who must prove his innocence while being chased by both the villain and the police.

In *The 39 Steps*, this theme is given life through the story of Richard Hannay, the owner of an apartment where a female secret service agent has been mysteriously killed. Not sure how to respond to the murder, Hannay flees London on a train headed north to Scotland where he places himself in the hands of a villain, only to escape and to find himself being chased by the police who suspect Hannay of the original murder. Ultimately the film ends back in London where all secrets are revealed, and all problems are solved. The central theme of *The 39 Steps* would recur in later Hitchcock movies, including *The Wrong Man* (1956) and *North by Northwest* (1959).

In 1936, with the release of *Sabotage*, a third Hitchcock theme would appear - his preoccupation with the power and seductiveness of the audience's position as cinematic spectators. This theme would return in some of Hitchcock's most important movies, including, *Rear Window* (1954), *Vertigo*, and *Psycho*. In *Sabotage*, various references are made to the power and pleasure spectators take in watching movies because the main character in the film, Verloc, is a theatre manager. In *Rear Window*, Hitchcock builds the entire movie around the seductive power spectators have as watchers of a world happening inside the film frame. Throughout *Rear Window*, the main character, L.B. Jeffries (played by James Stewart) is stuck in a wheelchair (due to a broken leg) and from this perspective, he comes to symbolize the position of the spectator in the movie theatre. What Hitchcock shows us in the movie is how enticing, captivating, and ultimately dangerous the position of the spectator can be. As *Rear Window* nears a climax, Hitchcock suggests that it is the very voyeurism that we most crave in going to see movies that is to blame for the trouble caused L.B. Jeffries. The trouble with voyeurism is a theme Hitchcock will take up again in some of his best work.

Hitchcock's most famous films are undoubtedly his thrillers, a genre of movies that, in many ways, he helped to define. Thrillers are really any movies that attempt to create excitement and include stories about murder, conspiracies, violence, or, in the case of psychological thrillers, unusual characters with unstable mental states. By the time Hitchcock left Britain in 1939 to pursue his career in Hollywood, thrillers were beginning to appear in many guises. Film noir movies - which first appeared from the early 1940s until the late 1950s - were, in many ways, thrillers with a dark and cynical edge. During the full flowering of colour in Hollywood in the 1950s, thrillers took the form of sophisticated, complex tales of psychological intrigue. These were the sorts of movies that Hitchcock excelled at. Beyond the pictures noted above, other great Hitchcock films from the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s include: *Rebecca* (1940), *Foreign Correspondent* (1940), *Lifeboat* (1944), *Notorious* (1946), *Rope* (1948), *Dial M for Murder* (1954), *The Trouble With Harry* (1955), and his last significant movie, *Marnie* (1964).

In the years following the release of *Marnie*, Hitchcock would produce four more movies, of which only *Frenzy* (1972) is remembered as a successful example of a Hitchcock thriller. After his death in 1980, the legacy of Hitchcock in the film industry would immediately become clear. The opening and closing scenes in director Brian De Palma's *Dressed to Kill* (1980) brazenly copied shower sequences from *Psycho*. This effort would be one of a series of attempts to recreate the tension, suspense, and intrigue characteristic of Hitchcock's best work. More recently, the ultimate tribute to Hitchcock came in the form of Gus Van Sant's remake of *Psycho* (1998). So enthralled was Van Sant with the master's original, he used the shooting script from Hitchcock's 1960 film to shoot the remake, unfortunately, with only limited critical and popular success.

**activity 01**

*Loved by audiences and critics alike, Alfred Hitchcock is remembered as one of the greatest filmmakers in the history of cinema. Working in small groups, discuss which recent filmmakers both audiences and film critics love. Select at least three contemporary filmmakers that fit into this category, and identify at least two movies made by each filmmaker. Once you have done this, determine what it is about the filmmakers' works that appeals to both audiences and film critics.*

**activity 02**

A major theme that preoccupied Hitchcock throughout his career is how innocent or ordinary characters and situations can be used for telling stories about murder and mayhem. For instance, Hitchcock was fascinated with the idea of portraying horror in the midst of the most ordinary settings and placing his main characters in situations of utter confusion where both the villain and the police chase them.

*Imagine that you are a locations scout for a film company working in your community. Choose an all-too-ordinary setting that you think would be an ideal location for a thriller. Using the chart below, describe the location, why you think it would provide an ideal setting for a murder mystery, and the main characters around whom you would want to build your story. Choosing main characters is essential here because, as so many of Hitchcock's films attest to, by selecting characters who seem all too ordinary, it is possible to create the most dramatic effect for audiences.*

LOCATION	WHY IT IS IDEAL	MAIN CHARACTERS IN YOUR STORY

## VERTIGO AND PLOT STRUCTURE

For many critics, *Vertigo* is Hitchcock's greatest and most visually stunning film. This said, it is not in any sense a nice film. The tone is dark, and the themes centre on a cynical interpretation of love and the relationship between men and women. Unlike most Hollywood films, *Vertigo* does not offer a terribly redeeming ending, and if the story is cast in the form of a detective thriller, it is best understood as a development of a prologue and three movements.

### The Prologue

The prologue is the opening 25-shot sequence showing a man being chased across the roofs of apartment buildings, followed by a cop in uniform, and John "Scottie" Ferguson, a police detective played by James Stewart. Although short, this scene is crucial to the film. Scottie nearly plunges to his death trying to leap from one building to the next. Dangling above the city streets, he develops a severe case of vertigo, (i.e., dizziness induced by a fear of heights). This is shown in a dramatic trick shot where the ground falls away as Scottie hangs precariously from a collapsing eaves draught.

### The First Movement

From here, the film cuts to Scottie sitting in the apartment of his friend, Midge (Barbara Bel Geddes). This sequence begins the film's first movement. In it, we learn that Scottie has taken an extended leave of absence from his job to recover from his illness. To stay busy, Scottie visits Gavin Elster, an old college buddy. Elster asks Scottie to follow his mysterious wife, Madeleine (Kim Novak), who seems to be dangerously close to committing suicide. Scottie initially refuses but eventually agrees, and much of the rest of this movement shows Scottie following Madeleine around San Francisco.

In tracking her every move, Scottie becomes fascinated with Madeleine. In part, he is interested in why she thinks she is the reincarnation of her Spanish grandmother, Carlotta Valdez, an abused woman who took her own life. In part, he is taken with her beauty. When Madeleine finally tries to kill herself by jumping into San Francisco Bay, Scottie plays the white knight and rushes in to save her. With this act, the first movement ends.

### The Second Movement

The second movement opens in Scottie's apartment. Scottie is seen lighting a fire just before the camera begins a slow pan from the living room, past the kitchen where Madeleine's cloths are hanging to dry, to the bedroom where Madeleine lies face down, shoulders naked, in Scottie's bed. The phone rings, waking Madeleine, and she walks rather uncertainly into the living room wearing Scottie's housecoat and quite obviously wondering why she is there. Scottie explains what has happened — that he fished her out of the bay and saved her life — and gives her a cup of coffee to warm her. When the phone rings again, Scottie leaves the room, and Madeleine uses this as an opportunity to escape.

If it weren't obvious before, what else becomes clear in this scene is that, in following Madeleine around San Francisco, Scottie has also fallen desperately in love with her. How do we know this? By the long looks and gazes Scottie casts at Madeleine and the quite obviously romantic music provided by composer, Bernard Herrmann. Add to this, the soft, romantic lighting on Kim Novak's face and a none-too-subtle suggestion about Scottie's feelings is made clear. But this isn't all that Hitchcock wants us to understand in the apartment scene. It's also clear, if it weren't before, that this sequence is about inviting audiences to fall in love with Madeleine. Right along with Scottie. Why might one think this? Because in the first third of the film, Hitchcock has worked hard to make sure that, as spectators, we identify with Scottie. Along with him, we follow Madeleine throughout San Francisco, watch her dive into the bay, and empathize with Scottie's efforts to save her. With all this time spent seeing through Scottie's eyes, it shouldn't be a surprise to think we are also being invited to fall in love. After all, in the background of this whole scene the question lingers: how did Scottie get Madeleine's clothes off?