**Module 10: Film Style**

Film Style is not an easy term to define, but it compels us to look for common elements in a director’s body of work. It can include everything from common themes to the use of certain camera shots, visual references to films by other directors, the use of distinctive editing techniques, or collaboration with particular Cinematographers and Composers. In Modules 11-12, we will compare and contrast some common elements in the films of James Cameron, Martin Scorsese, and Christopher Nolan. Here are just a few of the other directors that I think have a recognizable style: Quentin Tarantino, Tim Burton, Charlie Chaplin, Orson Welles, Robert Altman, Stephen Spielberg, and of course, Alfred Hitchcock.

Hitchcock makes for a great case study.  He was called “The Master of Suspense” for a lot of stylistic reasons.  Here are some patterns we see in many of his films:

**He often has an ordinary person who gets caught up in an extraordinary situation.**

In *Strangers on a Train,* Guy Hanes (Farley Granger) is a tennis star who wants a divorce so that he can marry a Senator’s daughter that he has fallen in love with. He meets a sociopath named Bruno Anthony (Robert Walker) on a train; Bruno has read about Guy’s problems in the gossip column in the newspaper, and suggests that he and Guy “trade” murders – Bruno will take out Guy’s wife in exchange for Guy murdering Bruno’s hated father.

In *North by Northwest,* Cary Grant plays Roger Thornhill, a New York advertising executive who is kidnapped by a group of spies who mistakenly think he is a CIA agent trying to thwart their plans to smuggle some stolen government secrets out of the United States.

In *Vertigo,* Scottie (James Stewart) has to take early retirement from the police force because of his fear of heights. He is lured into a private detective situation by a man posing as an old college friend, who takes advantage of Scottie’s condition to pull off the murder of his wife.

In *Rear Window,* Stewart plays LB Jeffries, a famous photographer laid up with a broken leg, who passes the time using his binoculars and cameras to spy on all of the neighbors in his courtyard style apartment building; the drama heightens when he thinks he sees one of those neighbors bump off his bedridden wife. The scenario seems to suggest that the killer dismembers his wife, and puts the pieces in various suitcases that he takes out of the apartment in the dead of night.

In *Psycho,* Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) is really a very ordinary woman; she has worked at the same real estate company for the past ten years. She wants to get married to her divorced boyfriend, who thinks marriage will have to wait until he is making more money. When a wealthy client pays for a house with $40,000 in cash at the close of business on a Friday, she is presented with an extraordinary temptation – to steal the money so that she and the boyfriend can get married.

**His films often had scenes that utilized famous landmarks or were strikingly visual, because Hitchcock understood the power of these strong visuals. He would build the plots of his films around the use of these scenes.**

In *Foreign Correspondent,* the murderer poses as a photographer; after killing an official, he disappears in the middle of a sea of black umbrellas people are carrying on the steps of a government building in Amsterdam.



In *Saboteur,* an aircraft factory worker is framed for starting a fire at his factory; he wants to clear his name, so he pursues the real arsonist across the country, and confronts him in the final scene on the top of the Statue of Liberty.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y-2UMB-9yVM>

In *Strangers on a Train,* the police suspect Guy of killing his wife, and follow him to the Amusement Park where the murder took place; Guy is there to confront the actual murderer, Bruno, and the climactic scene takes place on a carousel:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uykR8csyO-w>

In the 1956 remake of *The Man Who Knew Too Much,* the murder is supposed to take place with a gunshot timed to the crash of cymbals during a symphony in the famous Royal Albert Hall in London:



In *North by Northwest*, the final scene is a dramatic chase across the carved faces of the 4 Presidents on Mt. Rushmore:



**Thematically, Hitchcock often included characters with various forms of mental illness.**

In *Rebecca,* the housekeeper, Mrs. Danvers, is a kind of necrophiliac (one who worships the dead), because of her obsessive devotion to the late wife of her Master. When he brings home a new wife, she makes it her business to let the new one know that she will never measure up. This is the creepy scene where the new wife visits the bedroom of the dead wife, which the housekeeper has maintained exactly as it was on the day the first wife died:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V6mt0ChEPLY>

In *Spellbound,* Gregory Peck plays a man with a serious form of amnesia. Ingrid Bergman plays his psychiatrist; Hitchcock collaborated with Salvador Dali on a sequence where the doctor is trying to help Peck recover his memories:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JyPe1Jahyfo>

In *Strangers on a Train,* Bruno is a sociopath who hates his father, and whose doting mother is also mentally unbalanced, but more comically dissociative:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2hlDkSg-Ycc>

In *Rear Window,* LB is really a voyeur or a “Peeping Tom”. He seems like a very respectable man, but what kind of man has a pair of high powered binoculars and also camera equipment with long telephoto lenses that he uses to spy on his neighbors through their open windows?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w5pn48wzBuw>

In *Vertigo,* Scottie suffers a complete nervous breakdown after the death of Madeline, a woman he had been following in a private investigation case, and that he had fallen in love with. She commits suicide, and he has this nightmare while he is in the hospital:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4WAxDlUOw-w>

Scottie is also a necrophiliac; he meets this woman on the streets of San Francisco who resembles the now dead Madeline. Scottie does everything he can to make this woman look exactly like her dead counterpart; he changes the color of her hair, has a stylist give her the same hairstyle, buys clothes exactly like the dead woman wore – it really is quite creepy, and very effective:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tesqTwX7cpc>

In *Psycho,* we have one of the scariest film characters ever in Norman Bates, with his split personality being gradually taken over by his Mother persona. He too is a voyeur, as you see him looking at Marion through the secret hole in the wall.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ghew-s2zPjE>

**Hitchcock always appears in his films.**   This may seem unimportant, but his audiences expected this, and were always on the lookout for these cameos. It was part of the fun of going to his films; people would always try to spot him in his roles as the bystanders:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_YbaOkiMiRQ>

**Hitchcock always cast these glamourous women to be the lead actresses in his films.** Hitchcock himself was physically a very ugly man; he compensated for this by casting some incredibly beautiful women in leading roles in his films, including Ingrid Bergman, Grace Kelly, Janet Leigh, and Kim Novak.



(Above: Hitchcock with Claude Jade on the set of *Topaz;* Grace Kelly, Janet Leigh, Tippi Hedren, and Ingrid Bergman)

**Hitchcock also is known for often using “Point-of-View” (POV) shots to draw the attention of the audience to important details related to the plot.** Sometimes this would be done with the camera on either dolly tracks or on a crane.

In *Notorious,* he used a crane shot to focus our attention on a key in the hands of Alicia (Ingrid Bergman); she plans to give this key to the wine cellar to Devlin (Cary Grant), so that he can sneak into the wine cellar during the party and find out what secrets that Alexander Sebastian and the other Nazis are hiding in there:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JueGAaj5pu8>

In the opening scene of *Rear Window,* notice how the camera moves from the face of LB Jeffries, to his broken leg in a cast, to pans of his camera equipment and what must be some of his more famous photographs, revealing him to be the kind of photographer who travels all over the world on his assignments:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I5It0nmoYE4>

In *Psycho,* in the scene where Marion decides to steal the money, Hitchcock has the camera pan to the envelope with the money, and then pan to the suitcase that Marion is packing; this has the effect of helping us understand what Marion is thinking:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1LcSwRtLx-Y>

Hitchcock repeats this move in the incredible shot that goes from Marion’s dead eye on the bathroom floor, to the bedroom where we again see the envelope with the money on the small table next to the bed, and finally up to the window, where we see the creepy house on the hill and we hear Norman’s voice, as he admonishes “Mother” for what she has done.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8VP5jEAP3K4>

(start about 3:00 into the clip, and you can see part of this, up to the envelope on the table)

In an incredibly innovative shot for the time, Hitchcock and Cinematographer Robert Burks created a real feeling of vertigo for Scottie in *Vertigo* by simultaneously zooming in and physically moving the camera further away. This is another dramatic example of a POV shot:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GjPCk494e5Q>

Other common things you see in Hitchcock films include the use of a “macguffin”, a central plot device that is ambiguous, like the microfilm in *North by Northwest;* the audience never knows the significance of what may be on that film. Another example would be the uranium ore in the wine bottles in the cellar of *Notorious;* the audience again has no idea of why this mineral is significant, even though many years after this film was made we found out that this was a key ingredient in atomic weapons devices.

You also see examples of what we call a “red herring”; the audience is on edge, and something innocuous will happen to make the audience “jump”. Examples of this are found in *Psycho,* when Norman is putting Marion’s body in the trunk of her car. A car passes by on the road in front of the motel, and we all freeze, just like Norman does. Another example is in *North by Northwest;* as Cary Grant waits for his mysterious meeting in middle of nowhere in Iowa, a car drives up from a farm on the other side of the road, and a man gets out, to wait for the bus. It means nothing.

Hitchcock also was a big fan of using rear projection in many of his scenes; the location shots would be filmed, and then projected onto a screen that the actors and actresses would then act in front of.

The Crop Duster Scene from *North by Northwest* is a great example of this; see if you can spot when the edit shifts to a studio shot from the location shot:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbpUcAI86MY>

You can also see this technique used in most of the driving scenes in his film, including those in *Notorious, Psycho,* and many others. The car would be onstage, in front of the rear projection screen. Mostly these shots look pretty cheesy today, but that was the best they could do in that era.

The following 12 minute video is an excellent analysis by Steven Benedict of the style of director Steven Spielberg, showing how he learned some of his techniques from watching films from other great directors (and a very good reason why anyone who wants to be a director should always carefully study and analyze the films of these cinematic masters):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-uCBYFHRHU0>

Quentin Tarantino is the other director whose style we will briefly analyze for this learning module. He is enormously popular with students who study film and have to write essays for classes like this one. His most popular films include *Reservoir Dogs, Pulp Fiction, Jackie Brown, Kill Bill I and II, Django Unchained, and Inglourious Basterds.* Tarantino is a huge fan of all kinds of cinema, from the schlocky to the sublime; his films reference many wide ranging genres, including spaghetti westerns, martial arts films, and Blaxploitation films.

And his films are very gory and violent, something that has been the subject of controversy. Many of the scenes rely on shock value, which Tarantino seems to relish in an era when audiences seem mostly desensitized to most forms of brutality.

In this scene from *Reservoir Dogs,* Mr. Blonde cuts a guy’s ear off, while dancing to “Stuck in the Middle with You”:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGqB6JIUzBo>

In this scene from *Pulp Fiction,* Vincent (John Travolta) inexplicably blows a guy’s head off in the back seat; he and Jules (Samuel L. Jackson) then have to spend a lot of screen time trying to clean up the mess:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LBBni_-tMNs>

In *Kill Bill Volume I*, The Bride (Uma Thurman) takes her revenge on another woman who was part of an assassination squad that had shot the Bride and left her for dead four years earlier:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kgRlzeYc1nk>

Tarantino also loves to use scenes we call “homages” to other directors; it’s like an “in joke” for others in the audience who have also seen thousands of films and will recognize what he is doing. This video clip is a compilation of some of these scenes, side by side with the films they are referencing:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XG9wGUvw0MQ>

Here is a wonderful compilation of great scenes from Tarantino films, along with an interesting commentary; this provides a great overview of Tarantino’s style:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j7gbomB_ZhY>

*Run Lola Run* is one of my favorite films, and it is also highly stylized. This 1998 film from German Director Tom Tykwer is a tremendous amount of fun to watch and analyze. Please view the film before you read the rest of these notes. You may find that you need to search for the film using its German title, *Lola Rennt.*

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Here’s a wonderful cartoon that sums up the basic action in this film, sent to me by a student last term:



The film starts with two quotes: one is from the famous English poet TS Eliot.

*“We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.”*

Think about this in relation to what plays out in the film; simply put, Lola’s boyfriend, Manni, botched a drug deal; he left a bag with about $60,000 in cash on a subway train after being spooked by the cops. He calls Lola on the phone, and tells her that he’s got to come up with the money in 20 minutes or his drug dealer will kill him.

Lola’s best idea to get the money is to get it from her father, so she starts running towards his office at a bank holding company.

The scenario plays through 3 times; the first two times produce outcomes that are not what Lola wants, so she “turns back the clock” to replay the scenarios. One of the keys to understanding this presumably implausible plot device is to just be willing to go with this idea on a metaphysical level – what if we could “do things over”? What would we do differently?

Each encounter in the scenario is connected, just like the dominoes that topple into each other at the beginning of each “run”; that is the meaning of the encounters Lola has with the woman on the street with a baby carriage, the guy on the bicycle, the woman in the hallway at her father’s bank, and in the animated segments with the guy with the snarling dog in her apartment building. When something happens to throw off the timing of the sequence, like Lola tripping over the dog and falling in Scenario 2, notice how everything else changes as well.

Music and poetry play a big part in this film. Here are the lyrics to “I Wish I Was a Hunter”:

*I wish I was a hunter   
in search of different food   
I wish I was the animal   
which fits into that mood   
I wish I was a person   
with unlimited breath   
I wish I was a heartbeat   
that never comes to rest*

A strong techno beat drives much of the film, including when Lola is running. But notice how the music drops out completely in the scenes at her father’s office when he is talking with his mistress. Notice also how the music changes to a 1950’s American song “What a Difference a Day Makes” when Lola and Manni are trying to flee the police at the end of the first scenario.

There are many motifs in the film. “Time” and “clocks” are motifs, constantly being used. The color Red is a motif --- everything from Lola’s hair to the color of the ambulance to the filter used for the “red” scenes that bridge the different scenarios, when Lola and Manni are questioning the realness of the love they have for each other. The color yellow is a motif. Spirals are a motif. Lola’s screams are a motif --- think of the 3 times that she uses her ear-piercing shrieks to achieve different things. The flash-forward scenes with the sound effects of a photographic shutter are another motif – many students find these scenes confusing, but the idea is that all of our chance encounters with each other every day potentially have great meaning for us, with potentially being the key word here. Maybe today will be the day that through a chance encounter, you meet someone who will have a major impact on your life.

There are many different kinds of cinematography used – grainy black and white footage for the flashback scenes of the drug deal, animated scenes of Lola running down the steps in her apartment building where she encounters the guy and his snarling dog, 360 degree circular shots of Lola as she tries to figure out what to do, etc. Great camera angles add to the interest and tension of certain scenes, as does the “rhythmic” editing to the techno sound track.

Thematically, things work out incredibly well for Lola in the third scenario. Why? I think it’s because she stopped trying to force an outcome, asked for help, and let it happen. After she misses her father at the bank in scenario 3, she keeps running because she does not know what else to do at that point. She asks for help, asks for a sign, and gets it when she is almost run over by a truck in front of a casino; she goes and wins exactly what she needs.

Shortly before this, she had given the bank guard this really hateful stare that made him feel like one evolutionary step ahead of a tapeworm and that helped bring on his heart attack. But the power to harm can be transformed into the power to heal, which is what she does by holding his hand when she discovers him in the back of the ambulance she climbs into. I think the director wants to emphasize how much impact we all have on each other, and to implore us to be responsible for that impact.

And then of course, a blind woman points out the bum (who now has the drug money) when he rides by Manni on a bicycle; Manni chases him and gets the money back, makes good with his dealer, and then asks Lola what’s in the bag she is carrying when they finally meet up. Lola quit trying to dominate the situation, and let her faith/the universe/a higher power/an angel (or fill in the blank for how you would explain it) help her find a solution. She found a sense of harmony with her world by realizing that she couldn’t control everything, she couldn’t do it all by herself.

Again, I think this is a really great film with a lot of style. I never get tired of watching this film, which I have seen at least 40 times by now.

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