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**"SOUNDS LIKE A SPY STORY": THE ESPIONAGE THRILLERS OF ALFRED
HITCHCOCK IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY ENGLISH AND AMERICAN SOCIETY, FROM
THE MAN WHO KNEW TOO MUCH (1934) TO TOPAZ (1969)**

An honors paper submitted to the Department of History and American Studies
of the University of Mary Washington
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors

Kimberly M Humphries

April 2016

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HIST 485

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Kimberly M. Humphries

Abstract

Throughout a career that lasted for almost half a century, Sir Alfred Hitchcock (1899-1980) directed fifty-three feature films, many of which are still watched and regarded today as epitomes of classic English and American film. One of his most revisited genres is the espionage thriller, which comprises twelve out of the fifty-three films he directed in England and the United States and includes two short films. In analyzing fourteen films, beginning with the English-made *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934) and concluding with the American *Topaz* (1969), this paper argues that Hitchcock's spy thrillers are products of their time and reflect the sentiments and fears of English and American societies before and during World War II, as well as during the Cold War. However, although the espionage thrillers reinforce and utilize the politics of their times, they are not one-sided in their politics or ideals, and they speak to bigger questions of human morality.

With a career spanning over half a century, director Sir Alfred Hitchcock (1899-1980) cultivated a profound and lasting legacy in Western film and media as “The Master of Suspense.” Today, among Hitchcock’s most well-known and critically acclaimed movies are thrillers: classics of the genre such as *Rear Window* (1954), *Vertigo* (1958), *North by Northwest* (1959), and *Psycho* (1960) that mark a Golden Age in Hitchcock’s filmography. They continue to resonate with modern audiences “because of other, deeper themes—themes, images and *ideas* of which we [are] perhaps only casually or obliquely aware until after multiple viewings.”¹ They are gripping works of modern film and art; Hitchcock’s mastery in developing suspense among audiences decades after their releases and after his death is a testament to how absorbing, prolific, and timeless many of his movies are.

Amongst the fifty-three movies and smaller projects he directed from 1925 to 1975, fourteen of them fall into a popular genre that developed during the mid-twentieth century: the espionage thriller. *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1935) and *North by Northwest* are two of these thrillers that are considered to be some of Hitchcock’s greatest and most renowned works, but the remaining twelve are amongst Hitchcock’s lesser-known films, generally reserved for Hitchcock enthusiasts and otherwise neglected in modern audiences’ eyes. Hitchcockian scholars have not overlooked their importance in understanding Hitchcock as an *auteur*.² However, even when coupled with *The Thirty-*

1. Daniel Spoto, *The Art of Alfred Hitchcock: Fifty Years of His Motion Pictures*, 2nd. ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 313-14.

2. The word *auteur* is French for “author.” In film and media studies, an *auteur* means a director with such artistic influence over a film that he or she is considered an “artist” or “author” with his or her

Nine Steps and *North by Northwest*, the one theme that relates them to one another—the genre of “espionage thriller”—has been rarely discussed throughout Hitchcockian scholarship. The fourteen espionage thrillers make up approximately one quarter of Hitchcock’s filmography. These movies span over thirty-five years, from 1934 with the original English version of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, to 1969 and the American-made *Topaz*. Such a long stretch of time indicates that Hitchcock made and released these espionage thrillers while incorporating the various historical, political, and societal contexts surrounding them: England in the 1930s leading up to war with Germany, American involvement in World War II (1939-1945) during the 1940s, and American society during the Cold War of the 1950s and 1960s. Nonetheless, these movies have received very little historical attention as imperative and critical representations of mid-twentieth century society in the United Kingdom and the United States. They use the headlines and sentiments of the day, making them relevant to the audiences of the time, and often evoke expectations of British and American citizens during their respective time periods. However, they all also speak to grander themes of humanity and morality rather than one political ideology. As artifacts of twentieth-century English and American societies, Hitchcock’s espionage thrillers convey different values and sentiments representative of their respective time periods, while also evoking deeper questions of depoliticized, universal human morality.

1930s: The English Thrillers & Pre-World War II England

Hitchcock's career began in England during the 1920s with silent movies. He found work at London film studios working as a film editor and an art director for a variety of silent pictures produced in the early and mid-decade.³ His debut in film directing, *Number Thirteen* (1923), was one of the several pictures produced, but ultimately never finished due to financial strains.⁴ Hitchcock would move on to work with a variety of film studios, both foreign and English, to direct his first films of his career.⁵ Through financially and critically successful films such as *The Pleasure Garden* (1925), *The Lodger* (1927), and the director's first talking film, *Blackmail* (1929), Hitchcock quickly became one of the most recognizable English film directors during the British interwar period. By 1933, Hitchcock had already directed and released seventeen feature films before signing a multipicture contract with the Gaumont-British Picture Corporation.

When Hitchcock signed this contract, European politics was just erupting. In January 1933, mere months before the start of Hitchcock's contract, Adolf Hitler was elected chancellor of Germany; a month later, a mysterious arson attack occurred on the Reichstag legislative building in Berlin. Hitler and his Nazi Party blamed the attack on communists infiltrating Germany. The arson paved the path for the Enabling Act of 1933,

3. Patrick McGilligan, *Alfred Hitchcock: A Life in Darkness and Light* (New York: Regan Books, 2003), 47-8.

4. *Ibid.*, 54-5. To this day, the two completed reels of *Number Thirteen* have never been found.

5. *Ibid.*, 67-9.

which allowed the chancellor to enact laws without the Reichstag's approval, thus establishing Hitler as dictator of Germany.⁶ For the next six years, many Europeans were taut and agitated, anticipating a war to break out as Hitler and Nazi Germany sought to reestablish a German empire that had been lost to the end of the Great War (1914-1918) and the Treaty of Versailles (1919).

With one war still fresh in the memories of the European people and another on the imminent horizon, this interwar period saw a dramatic, darker shift in cultural and societal outlook. This gloomier outlook trickled into a sect of fiction writers who transformed an entire genre: interwar spy fiction. Although political spies and saboteurs have existed for thousands of years, the emergence of espionage as a topic of fiction did not occur until the nineteenth century. British espionage fiction before and during World War I reflected British ideals of imperialist culture, where “public fears of invasion and of managing and resolving the invasion ‘crisis’” reigned, and the complex web of European alliances created fertile ground for espionage fiction to flourish.⁷ The interwar period, however, saw British espionage fiction take on a new “darker morality” that brought the genre from its status as quick entertainment to a literary and aesthetic achievement.⁸ A similar claim has been made about Hitchcock's movies under his Gaumont-British contract. From 1933 to 1938, Hitchcock directed his “classic thriller sextet” that typically dominates the perception of “British Hitchcock”—*The Man Who*

6. McGilligan, 155.

7. Ibid., 26-27.

8. Ibid., 53.

Knew Too Much, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, *Secret Agent* (1936), *Sabotage* (1936), *Young and Innocent* (1937), and *The Lady Vanishes* (1938).⁹ Of this sextet, *Young and Innocent* is the only one not to fall under the subgenre of an “espionage thriller.”¹⁰

The Man Who Knew Too Much was the first of these Hitchcock and Gaumont-British films, as well as the first espionage thriller of the filmmaker’s career. The plot follows Bob Lawrence (Leslie Banks), his wife Jill (Edna Best), and their daughter Betty (Nova Pilbeam), an upper-middle class family vacationing in Switzerland when their friend Louis Bernard (Pierre Fresnay) is killed. As he dies, he passes critical intelligence information on to Bob. However, the Lawrences are silenced when Louis’s assassins kidnap Betty, threatening to harm her if they pass Bernard’s information to the British government. Upon returning to London, Bob and Jill learn of the plot behind the assassination of a European diplomat named Ropa and decide to take matters into their own hands and save their daughter, while simultaneously interfering with the assassination plot.

9. Tom Ryall, *Alfred Hitchcock and the British Cinema* (2nd ed. London: Athlone Press, 1986): 115

10. For the purposes of this research, *Sabotage* and *Young and Innocent* will not be examined. While *Sabotage* is considered one of Hitchcock’s British espionage thrillers, it was excluded in this research. Much can be said about the conflicting interests of human morality and civic duty, as seen with the protagonist, a Scotland Yard detective who falls in love with the wife of one of the terrorists, very little can be said of the political undertones of the film. It does not support the argument made throughout this paper. Donald Spoto argues that in *Sabotage* Hitchcock’s “concern is rather with the dark underside of human nature, the pervasive nature of iniquity and the suffering of innocents that inevitably attends acts of political terrorism,” and that “politics is not the issue, nor even the state of the nation.” Though it is a fascinating study of morality and human nature, it is devoid of a historical context that influences its story when compared to its predecessors and successors. See Spoto, 55, 61.

According to Hitchcock himself, the final scenes of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*—the shootout between the assassins in their home and the British police and military on the street—was based on the Siege of Sidney Street of 1911 in London, which involved Russian anarchists holed up in a house as the British police and military struggled to force them out.¹¹ This anecdote, though older than the film itself, falls in line well with Hitchcock biographer Patrick McGilligan’s attestations that daily newspapers were a major source of inspiration for Hitchcock and his screenwriters.¹² It also suggests the antagonists’ political ambiguities: ringleader Abbott (Peter Lorre) and his lackeys are definitely foreign, speaking English in thick (though not entirely discernable, let alone identified) accents, but there is no definite political affiliation. The timing of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*’s release suggests the antagonists are Germans, almost synonymous with Nazis or fascists, but they could also be anarchists or communists, other subversive groups who were seen as a threat to the post-Great War British Empire since the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the rise of the Soviet Union.¹³ Not even Ropa, the diplomat whom the antagonists intend to assassinate at a climatic concert at London’s Albert Hall, has an identifying nationality or political affiliation. These political ambiguities certainly play a role in Hitchcock’s determination to keep his

11. François Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, 2nd ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), 89. Winston Churchill (1874-1965) was the Home Secretary and supervised the operation. For more information on the Siege of Sidney Street, see “Murderers’ siege in London,” *The Guardian*, January 4, 1911.

12. McGilligan, 158.

13. Tony Shaw, “Early warnings of the Red Peril: A pre-history of Cold War British cinema, 1917-1939,” *Film History* 14, no. 3: 365.

movies more universal, where human morality, rather than political ideology, is put into question. Biographers and scholars alike have constantly noted that Hitchcock never took political stances, or at the very least, never made them public.¹⁴

Still, the English feared a revived, militaristic Germany, and so politics—no matter how purposely ambiguous they were—are a focal point in the film. At home in London, a member of the Foreign Office, Gibson (George Curzon), visits Bob and Jill and asks them to disclose the information that Bernard gave to the two of them, while also mentioning the conspiracy against Ropa. They refuse, fearing their daughter's harm should her kidnapers learn of the verbal transaction. When they question why they should care if a "foreign statesman that [they] never heard of were assassinated," Gibson replies, "In June 1914, had [they] ever heard of a place called Sarajevo . . . [or] a man called the Archduke Ferdinand? But in a month's time, because a man [they] never heard of killed another man [they] never heard of in a place [they] never heard of, [Britain] was at war."¹⁵ On a moral level, the Lawrences put their daughter's safety before the political infrastructure of Europe; Gibson, however, invokes the consequences of standing idly by. As parents, Bob and Jill decide to find their daughter on their own, without aid from Gibson, who represents the British government. But as citizens, they actively participate

14. McGilligan, 158.

15. *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1934; New York: The Criterion Collection, 2013), DVD.

in the politics of stopping the assassination of Ropa. Bob unravels the kidnappers' scheme and telephones Jill to intervene at Albert Hall.¹⁶

This relationship between citizenship and government continues to play out in the next Gaumont-British espionage thriller, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1935). Loosely based on Scottish spy novelist John Buchan's 1915 novel of the same name, the film follows Richard Hannay (Robert Donnat), a Canadian vacationing in London who is falsely accused of the murder of Annabella Smith (Lucie Mannheim), a spy who supplied Hannay with information on the mysterious enemy organization known as "Thirty-Nine Steps" hours before her murder. To both clear his name and fulfill Annabella's mission, Hannay escapes to and traverses across Scotland; later, a young woman, Pamela (Madeleine Carroll), unwillingly tags along with Hannay after her attempts to turn him into the police prove futile. *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, as the most popular and recognizable of Hitchcock's British films, has been lauded as his "first indisputable masterpiece," wherein he "establishes the terms of [his] style and the beginning of a consistent vision."¹⁷ Like a handful of Hitchcock's other films, the film adaptation of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* became more recognizable than the source novel. Unlike the Buchan novel, the movie contained a romantic subplot, and the character of Hannay became a Canadian. In addition, the novel was set during the Great War; the film's time period was moved to the contemporary 1930s. Still, the novel and its film adaptation struck the right chords for a

16. Ina Rae Hark, "Keep Your Amateur Standing: Audience Participation and Good Citizenship in Hitchcock's Political Films," *Cinema Journal* 29, no. 2 (1990): 17.

17. Spoto, 42.

spy thriller through its chase scenes, visually-stunning backgrounds (for mid-1930s film standards), and—most importantly—the topicality of Europe’s political tensions.¹⁸

Much like its predecessor, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* employs political ambiguity. Never is the counterspy, Annabella, or the titular enemy organization given a nationality or political affiliation.¹⁹ In the final scene of the movie, when Hannay compels the stage performer Mr. Memory (Wylie Watson) to reveal The Thirty-Nine Steps’ identity, the performer recites: “The Thirty-Nine Steps is an organization of spies, collecting information on behalf of the Foreign Office of—” A shot rings out, fatally injuring Mr. Memory before he can finish the statement.²⁰ Despite this ambiguity, however, one can assume that the enemy is Germany. Throughout 1934 and 1935, Hitler took several steps leading to Europe’s unrest. Among the many events, The Night of the Long Knives took place in June of 1934, where Hitler ordered the murders of his political enemies. Two months later, he became *Führer* of Germany. In early 1935, he announced various steps towards German remilitarization, such as the reinstatement of the *Luftwaffe* air force, directly violating stipulations in the Treaty of Versailles. In hindsight, these were steps to war. Is it purely coincidental that the secret information Mr. Memory reveals to Hannay, and the audience, as he slowly dies backstage of the London Palladium Theater concerns

18. Brett. F Woods, *Neutral Ground: A Political History of Espionage Fiction* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2008) 51.

19. Annabella’s actress, Lucie Mannheim, was a German actress who fled the country once Hitler came into power and found moderate success in British film. McGilligan, 172.

20. *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1939; Los Angeles: Delta Entertainment, 1998), DVD.

blueprints for a silent military aircraft?²¹ Germany might not be explicitly mentioned in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, but it is explicitly kept in the minds of the movie's British audience.

Citizenry is a focal point of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, but instead of an emphasis on duty to a country, the emphasis is on common folk working together. Middle-class people help Hannay as he escapes assassins and the police alike: a milkman lets him borrow his uniform to safely walk out of his apartment building, a Scottish crofter and his wife offer Hannay dinner and a room for the night as he hides from the police, and the wife helps Hannay escape when it appears her austere husband is about to turn their guest over to the police. Hannay thinks he can find some asylum with the affluent Professor Jordan (Godfrey Tearle), but the upstanding, wealthy citizen turns out to be the "man with a missing finger" treasonous spy whom Annabella warned Hannay about earlier. When Hannay first crosses paths with the middle-class Pamela, she turns him over to the police, but when they meet again, she eventually accepts his story and aids in his police-dodging. Prior to this, however, Hannay, once again on the run from the police, stumbles into a political rally, and everyone believes him to be one of the speakers. To stall his arrest as police file in, he starts telling the audience about how he imagines

a world where no nation plots against nation, a world where no neighbor plots against neighbor, where there's no persecution or hunting down, where everybody gets a square deal and a sporting chance, . . . a world from which suspicion, cruelty and fear have been forever banished.²²

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

Hannay's speech highlights an *esprit* of the common folk; his experience throughout the course of the film allows him to sound convincing to the political rally.²³ At the same time, Hannay's speech is not politically one-sided by any means—ironic, given that he speaks to a political rally. He wins the audience over with “non-ideological decency, the flip side to the negative notion of demagoguery.”²⁴ This rhetoric, as well as the rest of the film's common man theme, can be viewed as both political and moral. Politically, British common folk help Hannay, whether knowingly or not, to reveal the truth behind the enemy intelligence organization—a call to the British audience to band together for an inevitable war. Morally, common citizens help a down-on-his-luck foreigner—an acknowledgment to the common British citizen that he is appreciated.

The next espionage thriller, *Secret Agent* (1936), furthers the theme of citizenship during a tumultuous period. Based on short stories from W. Somerset Maugham's (1874-1965) spy novel *Ashenden: Or the British Agent* (1928), *Secret Agent* takes place during the Great War. Army Captain Edgar Brodie (John Gielgud) finds his obituary in the newspaper and is pulled into assuming a new identity and foiling a German agent's plot concerning the Middle East. Brodie refers to the character before his assignment; Ashenden is the spy. Sent to Switzerland, Ashenden is assigned a partner posing as his wife (Carroll once more), and an assassin pretending to be a Latino “General” (Lorre)

23. Maurice Yacowar, *Hitchcock's British Films* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 152.

24. Toby Miller, “39 Steps to ‘The Borders of the Possible’: Alfred Hitchcock, Amateur Observer and the New Cultural History,” in Richard Allen and Sam Ishii-Gonzales, eds., *Alfred Hitchcock: Centenary Essays* (London: The British Film Institute, 1999), 327.

accompanies them as they keep a look out for the enemy agent. The backdrop of World War I is easily recognizable at the beginning and the end of the story. The film prominently begins with the silhouettes of soldiers and the title card “May 10, 1916,” before Brodie, dressed in his military uniform, learns of his new role as a secret agent. Rather than shroud itself in the ambiguity of its predecessors, the film clearly presents the enemy as German.²⁵ At the movie’s end, after Ashenden’s mission is complete, footage of British successes in the Middle East and Allied victory, accompanied by exultant music, is imposed over the visual.²⁶ British audiences were thus reminded of their triumph over brutish Germany twenty years prior, and at a time when Hitler’s Germany continued to strengthen and threaten the rest of Europe, no less. In March 1936, German military forces entered into the Rhineland (the geographical area along the Middle and Lower Rhine Rivers), once again a violation of the Treaty of Versailles.

Despite this surface-value patriotism, Brodie/Ashenden’s personal morals frequently conflict with his duty to his country. “Do you love your country?” asks the mysterious agent, R (Charles Carson), who assigns him his new identity. “Well, I just died for it,” Brodie hesitantly replies.²⁷ He has been asked to kill a man, and even if this man is an enemy, Ashenden shows his reservations in doing so. He condemns Elsa, his fake wife, for finding their line of work “a thrill, excitement, a big risk, danger!” He

25. *Secret Agent*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1936; London: Desert Island Films, 2008), 1936.

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*

replies with, “It’s murder, and you call it fun.”²⁸ They believe that they have found the agent—a kindly old man living in the mountains with his German wife—whom the General eagerly kills, but soon enough it is revealed that the double agent was not the old man, but rather their suave American friend Marvin (Robert Young). Ashenden at this point feels betrayed and is willing to kill Marvin, but Elsa’s moral standpoint reverses: “It’s murder! I’d sooner see you dead than see you do this. What do I care about [the Germans] or [Marvin]? I’m not going to have this on our consciences!”²⁹ Elsa and Ashenden have a civic duty to their country, but their innate human morality questions if killing someone is necessary for the sake of their nation’s security.³⁰

After *Sabotage* and *Young and Innocent*, Hitchcock directed his penultimate British film—*The Lady Vanishes* (1938). Based on the 1936 novel *The Wheel Spins* by Ethel Lina White, the story follows an English tourist, Iris Henderson (Margaret Lockwood), in a fictional European country. She strikes a friendship with the elderly governess, Miss Froy (Dame May Whitty), while on a train returning to London. Later, however, Iris finds that Miss Froy has gone missing, and none of the other passengers claim to have seen her. Iris searches for her new friend with the help of a musician,

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Spoto, 52-53. Many Hitchcockian scholars have also taken notice of the General’s ability to kill without remorse and place it into the larger discussion of *Secret Agent*’s theme of human morality. Film scholar Maurice Yacowar writes that the General represents both a barbaric and “a necessary evil” of wartime while also serving as a foil to the “civilized” Ashenden and Elsa. This discussion is not elaborated on in the writing above because it delves too far into character analysis and moves away from the argument I present. However, it is an interesting examination that can be an entire study of its own. See Yacowar, 158-63.

Gilbert Redman (Michael Redgrave), and they learn that nearly the entire train is part of a plot to kidnap Miss Froy, who is revealed to be an English spy smuggling important intelligence regarding a secret peace treaty.

Miss Froy's espionage plot is a significant departure from the novel, but the film's release and setting came at an interesting time. The year 1938 marked Germany's steps towards invasion of Czechoslovakia and the infamous Munich Agreement, where Britain and France agreed to let Hitler annex the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia (the northern and western areas of Czechoslovakia with larger concentrations of German speakers), and British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain notoriously declared the decision as "peace for our time." Inasmuch, throughout 1937 and 1938, the British film industry enforced strict codes of neutrality concerning Germany and its continental expansion.³¹ Thus, the deliberately vague politics of *The Lady Vanishes*, just like its predecessors, also stem from film industry censorship. Despite this fact, the fictional country where most of the plot takes place resembles a central European country, akin to Czechoslovakia or Poland, with natives speaking in Eastern European accents and traditional decor. The film's setting can be a subtle message to support English intervention in the political and geographical disorder on the continent.³² In addition, one of the passengers involved in the scheme to dispose of Miss Froy is an Italian magician, perhaps alluding to fascist Italy's leader Benito Mussolini and his involvement in the quagmire of prewar European politics.

31. Spoto, 72.

32. Yacowar, 196.

Still, with this (albeit vague) political context surrounding it, *The Lady Vanishes* puts an emphasis on humanity and the importance of citizenship—or, in this case, community. The climatic shootout scene between Miss Froy’s captors and a handful of the passengers on the train who are not a part of her peculiar disappearance underlines a human commonality. Earlier, the other passengers—save for Gilbert—are too preoccupied with themselves to help Iris in proving that Miss Froy exists. Instead of helping Iris, a pair of vacationing lovers quarrel over whether they will divorce their respective spouses. The English gentleman Charters and Caldicott (Naunton Wayne and Basil Radford) care too much about an ongoing cricket match to pay attention to Iris.³³ However, they all come together when the dining car they all occupy is sabotaged and runs off the tracks. They must fight the enemy agents so that Miss Froy—hidden underneath bandages and resembling an injured patient in need of critical surgery—can escape. The passengers “rededicate themselves to their community responsibilities,” which “exhorts [the audience] to human involvement, to recover an international fraternity as personified by the protective Miss Froy.”³⁴ Here, community values are shown to not only invoke English intervention in the European turmoil, but also suggest that a community succeeds because its individuals work together. With Europe being pushed closer and closer to war, *The Lady Vanishes* was a subtle reflection of the time’s

33. Charters and Caldicott were a fictional duo appearing in a handful of British films. Their first appearance was in *The Lady Vanishes*, and their popularity led them to being used as supporting characters in a variety of other British films, such as *Night Train to Munich* (1940).

34. Yacowar, 195-96.

politics, as well as a gentle recommendation of English involvement as a result of a duty to the community.

The Lady Vanishes was the last of Hitchcock's British thrillers, as well as one of his most successful. Along with its predecessors, these films were popular and powerful modes of storytelling. They not only solidified Hitchcock's status as a director, but they also reflected an English citizen's responsibility to his or her country and how it affected the grander scheme of events—in this case, a seemingly inevitable war. Even so, they introduced larger questions of humanity and morality. Hitchcockian scholars agree that these movies set a precedent for Hitchcock's artistry and legacy, but his British espionage thrillers also established a theme that would exist in the subsequent spy thrillers of his career: international politics serve as background and merely catalyze the personal and emotional concerns of the human beings involved.³⁵

1940s: World War II America & the Early Hitchcock Period

War in Europe broke out when Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, but Hitchcock and his family had relocated to United States in March of the same year. David O'Selznick, the famed Hollywood producer most well-known for his production of *Gone with the Wind* (1939), signed Hitchcock to a seven-year contract. Hitchcock's first American film and psychological thriller, *Rebecca* (1940), was also the first movie from this seven-year collaboration.

35. Spoto, 38.

As war brewed in Europe, American foreign policy followed a plan of isolationism and non-interventionism, intent on staying out of European affairs as the American government tried to continue its focus on pressing domestic issues—namely, the Great Depression and its economic and social repercussions. The Lend-Lease policy of early 1941 was a decisive move away from this non-interventionist, neutral stance, as the United States supplied munitions and food to Britain and, in 1942, the Soviet Union.³⁶ However, despite, or perhaps in response to, the American government's indirect contributions to the European war, the American public divided on the issue of non-interventionism. Many wanted the United States to stay out of the conflict because it faced no direct threat from Germany. Many others wished that further action be taken, believing that the United States had to enter into the war because of the atrocities against the Allies being committed across the Atlantic.

American movies released prior to 1939 were largely apolitical (on the surface, at least). While dramas were being produced and released, “encroaching fascism as a dramatic subject for films was avoided as non-existent. . . . No major film company, without the sanction of national policy, was bold enough to treat the subject of dictatorships and their aggressive atrocities, or the growing expansion of their ideological adherents.”³⁷ A large reason for this was because of the infamous Hollywood Production Code, or the Hays Code, which operated as Hollywood film industry's primary set of

36. Lend-Lease was signed into effect in March 1941 and continued after the United States entered into the world conflict after the Pearl Harbor attacks on December 7, 1941. The policy continued throughout the war.

37. Lewis Jacobs, “World War II and American Film,” *Cinema Journal* 7 (1967): 1.

moral guidelines in film production from 1930 to 1968. The Hays Code prevented American filmmakers from creating movies with pressing and overt political and social themes.³⁸ Regardless of the growing concerns over fascism and Nazism in Europe, the Hays Code specifically targeted films about these topics.³⁹ It was not until the spring of 1939 when director Anatole Litvak's spy thriller *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* was released, months before war's outbreak in Europe, that the first-ever explicitly anti-Nazi American film was produced and released by a major film distributor, Warner Brothers.⁴⁰ Beginning shortly before the war, American movies became increasingly accusatory and outspoken against Nazism and fascism, all while still operating under the United States' official neutrality and complying with the Hays Code. The 1939-1941 period of American filmmaking saw an extra layer of politicization added to it. During the early development of American war propaganda, producers and directors could now include anti-fascist messages as attempts to convince the American public to support intervention in the European war.⁴¹

Whereas his five British espionage thrillers lend themselves to ambiguity, Hitchcock's Hollywood wartime espionage thrillers—made between 1940 and 1946—are decidedly less ambiguous than their English predecessors. Hitchcockian film scholars and historians typically agree that Hitchcock's indifference to political activism changed with

38. Leonard J. Leff, "The Breening of America," *PMLA* 106, no. 3 (May 1991): 442.

39. McGilligan, 244.

40. Jacobs, 2.

41. Spoto, 88.

World War II and his wartime movies advocated against Nazism and fascism.⁴² The first American espionage thriller Hitchcock made occurred when Selznick loaned Hitchcock to producer Walter Wagner to direct his second American movie, *Foreign Correspondent*, which follows American reporter Johnny Jones (Joel McCrea) as he relocates to Amsterdam in 1939, just before war breaks out, to report news to the United States. Jones, however, uncovers a secret plot that involves the kidnapping of a European diplomat who holds a secret treaty, all while Europe is led closer to the brink of war. Jones falls in love with the English reporter Carol Fisher (Laraine Day), whose father is Stephen Fisher (Herbert Marshall), an Englishman who serves as the leader of the Universal Peace Party in order to hide his defection to the enemy.

When *Foreign Correspondent* was released, it received critical acclaim and performed well at the domestic box office.⁴³ The film was also nominated in several categories at the Thirteenth Annual Academy Awards, including Best Picture.⁴⁴ In addition to its financial and critical success, *Foreign Correspondent* was widely regarded as a piece of wartime propaganda. Isolationists saw it as an attack on American non-interventionism and official neutrality, while interventionists viewed the movie as a call to support Great Britain in the fight against Germany and the Axis Powers.⁴⁵ Even Joseph

42. Hark, "Keep Your Amateur Standing," 333.

43. Sam P. Simone, *Hitchcock as Activist: Politics and the War Films*, Studies in Cinema Series (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Research Press, 1985), 55.

44. *Foreign Correspondent* lost the Best Picture Award to Hitchcock's first American film, *Rebecca* (1940). *Rebecca* is the only Hitchcock movie ever to win an Academy Award.

45. Simone., 56.

Goebbels, the Third Reich's propaganda minister, called it "a first class production, a criminological bang-up hit, which no doubt will make a certain impression upon the broad masses of the people in enemy [Allied] countries."⁴⁶ Hitchcock certainly employed propaganda-esque techniques to evoke an emotional response from the audience. One visual technique involves Jones as he attempts a rooftop escape of the Hotel Europe. As he crosses over from his room to Carol Fisher's, he accidentally bumps into the 'E' of the "HOTEL EUROPE" sign. The 'E' and 'L' flicker off, leaving the sign to read "HOT EUROPE."⁴⁷ This underscores the hotbed that was European politics on the eve of—and during—World War II.

The film's ending scene is often cited as a staunchly interventionist piece of propaganda. Jones is about to broadcast his report to the American public as the enemy conducts an air raid over London. As thunderous patriotic music plays, Jones begs his audience to listen closely and understand the depth of what is occurring in London, as well as the rest of Europe:

Hello America. I've been watching a part of the world being blown to pieces. A part of the world as nice as Vermont, Ohio, Virginia, California, and Illinois lies ripped up bleeding like a steer in a slaughterhouse And I [have] seen things that make the history of the savages read like Pollyanna legend. . . . All that noise you hear isn't static, it [is] death coming to London . . . You can hear the bombs falling on the streets and homes . . . It's too late now to do anything except stand in the dark and let [the enemy] come as if the lights are all out everywhere except in America. Keep those lights burning, cover them with steel, build

46. *Ibid.*, 55.

47. "Hasty Exit," *Foreign Correspondent*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1940; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2004), DVD.

them in with guns, build a canopy of battleships and
bombing planes around them and, hello America, hang onto
your lights. They're the only lights in the world.⁴⁸

The final scene was almost predictive of the London air raids. *Foreign Correspondent* was released on August 28, 1940. The first air raids occurred ten days later, on September 7, 1940.⁴⁹ Such timeliness added urgency and awareness to the American public's knowledge of wartime Europe.⁵⁰

Particularly interesting in itself is that Jones starts the film as largely inattentive to the crisis in Europe. At the beginning, when his employer asks Jones what he thinks of the political tension in Europe, he admits that he “[has not] given it much thought.”⁵¹ When Jones, the only American character aside from his employers at the American newspaper, arrives in Amsterdam and witnesses a staged assassination attempt, he becomes more involved with uncovering the plot to kidnap Dutch diplomat Van Meer (Albert Basserman) and revealing Stephen Fisher as a traitor to his country. As such, he grows sympathetic to the fight for liberty and democracy. When the American naval ship rescues the survivors' after the climatic airplane crash and the captain insists that Jones remains quiet about his findings in Europe (as a stand-in for the American government's official neutrality), Carol, a reporter herself, urges the publication of the story that incriminates her father. As members of the free, democratic press, it is Carol's and

48. “Hello, America,” *Foreign Correspondent*.

49. Simone, 55.

50. Jacobs, 6.

51. “A Correspondent is Born,” *Foreign Correspondent*.

Jones's duty to their allied countries and their shared cause to inform the American public of the situation in Europe.⁵² At the end, Jones urges his fellow Americans to pay attention as Europe—and the United States' principle ally, Great Britain—is destroyed. Jones begins isolated from the conflict but ends with a monologue ripe with interventionist rhetoric. Jones's final speech suggests how American radio would become an effective form of propaganda during the war, both domestically and internationally.⁵³

However, even with this propaganda at work, the dialogue never involves Germany, Hitler, or Nazism in the enemy's plot. A few scenes that set the background of Amsterdam and Europe in crisis feature newspapers with headlines pertaining to war with Germany, but Stephen Fisher's alliances are never directly linked to Germany. He is merely considered an enemy and a politician hiding in plain sight. He probes Van Meer for a clause in the secret treaty signed between the Netherlands and Belgium, but the audience never hears what that clause entails or how it would help Stephen Fisher's cause. Furthermore, and almost surprisingly, Stephen Fisher is given a sympathetic portrayal. Towards the end, with the climactic airplane crash over the Atlantic, he sacrifices himself for the other passengers, including his daughter and Jones. After the passengers' rescue, Jones comments, "I'm not going to throw [Carol's] father up for grabs. I don't care how he lived; he died like a hero to save her and the rest of us."⁵⁴

52. Ina Rae Hark, "'We Might Get in the Newsreels': The Press and Democracy in Hitchcock's World War II Anti-Fascist Films," in Richard Allen and Sam Ishii-Gonzales, eds., *Alfred Hitchcock: Centenary Essays* (London: The British Film Institute, 1999), 336.

53. Holly Cowan Shulman, "The Voices of America: Propaganda as Warfare," in Louise I. Gerdes, ed., *The 1940s America's Decades* (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2000), 133.

54. "Front-Page Phone Call," *Foreign Correspondent*.

Stephen Fisher's "redemption" does not submit to the rest of the film's propaganda; rather, despite his political leanings and status as "the enemy," he is first and foremost a man, a father, and a human being. In other words, *Foreign Correspondent* is a film that plays on headlines of the day and features political undertones, but, on a greater scale, gives humanity and morality significant emphasis.

Hitchcock directed two other movies after *Foreign Correspondent* before directing his next American wartime espionage thriller, *Saboteur* (1942). *Saboteur* was produced and released in 1942. With America's presence in World War II fresh and present, it would have been difficult to ignore the political and societal context surrounding its production. *Saboteur*—not to be confused with the earlier *Sabotage*—revolves around Barry Kane (Robert Cummings), an aircraft engineer in southern California, who is framed for the arson of the factory he works at, as well as the death of his best friend. From California to New York, Barry attempts to hide from the police while uncovering the truth behind the real saboteur, Fry (Norman Lloyd), and the organization for which he works. Halfway through the film, Barry is handcuffed to Patricia Martin (Priscilla Lane), who at first believes Barry to be the saboteur, but as the film progresses, comes to see his innocence. In the meanwhile, Barry and Patricia uncover the secret traitorous organization of spies who intend to undermine the nation's internal security during the war.

The most defining trait of the saboteur ring is their members' status in society. Just like *The Thirty-Nine Steps*' Professor Jordan, *Saboteur*'s Charles Tobin (Otto Kruger) is a wealthy, well-known, respected member of his community. The same

applies to the other members of the traitorous organization who later appear at a New York charity ball, hosted by a New York dowager and socialite also involved in the conspiracy. Tobin's secret loyalties are never divulged, but it is implicit that he supports Germany and other fascist regimes. "The competence of totalitarian nations is much higher than our [country's democracy]," Tobin explains at the charity ball. "They get things done."⁵⁵ Even Hitchcock himself, in his 1968 interview with French director François Truffaut, likens these hidden-in-plain-sight agents as pro-German "American Firsters."⁵⁶

Produced and released at a time when the United States was still a new player in the global war, *Saboteur*'s dialogue reflects pro-American, pro-democracy ideals. One of the most noticeable instances occurs when Barry, handcuffed and running from the police, stumbles across a cabin; the occupant, the blind Philip Martin (Oliver Blake) offers Barry a chance to warm up and eat a hot meal. Philip is Patricia's uncle, and when she arrives for a visit (after learning from several detectives about a saboteur on the loose), she questions Barry's presence as soon as she sees his handcuffs:

PATRICIA. But you've got to [turn him in]! He's a dangerous man!

PHILIP. Oh, Pat, come on! Mr. [Kane] may be many things, but he's certainly not dangerous. In fact, I'm not at all convinced that he's guilty.

PATRICIA. Uncle Philip, it's your duty as an American citizen!

55. "The Party Crashers," *Saboteur*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1942; Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 2000), DVD.

56. Truffaut, 146. Hitchcock refers to the American First Committee, a non-interventionist pressure group organized in 1940-1941 that was rumored to have Nazi agents infiltrated within its ranks.

PHILIP. It is my duty as an American citizen to believe a man innocent until he's been proven guilty.⁵⁷

Both the blind Philip and his niece Patricia emphasize American citizenship and duty. Patricia is unaware of Barry's innocence and wants to turn him in. By doing so, she would be serving her country. Philip, in contrast, detects innocence within Barry and also touts the ideal of presumption of innocence. Patricia reluctantly agrees to help Barry, but it is revealed in the next scene that she intends to turn him over to the police. While the audience is aware of Barry's innocence and grows frustrated that Patricia will not believe his story, she is still portrayed as an upright citizen only doing what is expected of her.

This democratic emphasis continues when Barry and Patricia, stranded on a highway after her car overheats, stowaway on passing circus caravans. When the police stop the traffic on the highway to search for Barry, the circus members cannot agree whether or not to turn the two stowaways in. Bones, "The Human Skeleton" (Pedro de Cordoba), suggests that they put the matter to a vote because "thank heavens [they are] still members of a democracy."⁵⁸ The dwarf, Major (Billy Curtis), disagrees and declares he is "against voting," to which Bones simply states in Major's direction, "Fascist."⁵⁹ Major opposes the democracy that Bones supports—the same democracy that votes for Barry and Patricia to stay in the caravan and not be turned over to the police, the same

57. "Patricia," *Saboteur*.

58. "The Circus Troupe," *Saboteur*.

59. *Ibid.*

democracy that comes to the Allies' aid.⁶⁰ The circus performers' vote highlights an ideal partnership in democracy and community—people come together for the fight for liberty. Barry's monologue to Tobin at the charity ball further accentuates this matter:

I've met guys like you, and I've met others—people that are helpful and eager to do the right thing, people that get a kick in helping each other fight the bad guys. Love and hate. The world is choosing of sides, and I know who I'm with. And there are a lot of people on my side, millions of us in every country. And we're not soft, we're plenty strong. And we'll fight, standing up on our two feet, and we'll win! . . . We'll win no matter what you guys do. We'll win if it takes from now to when the cows come home!⁶¹

Barry appeals to the American value of community during the beginning of the American Homefront's war effort: regular people mobilize in every aspect of quotidian life, through a “participatory democracy” to fight totalitarianism and advocate for liberty.⁶²

Still, with these themes relevant to the American audience of 1942, *Saboteur* adds a layer of universal human morality. At the end of the film, Barry and Fry, the real saboteur, fight on the Statue of Liberty's torch. Fry loses his balances and falls over the railing but manages to clutch to the statue's hand. In a moment of classic Hitchcockian suspense, Barry endangers himself as he attempts to pull Fry to safety—but he fails to do so, and Fry falls to his death.⁶³ The Statue of Liberty can be interpreted as an imposing

60. Simone, 71.

61. “The Party Crashers,” *Saboteur*.

62. Hark, “Keep Your Amateur Standing,” 12.

63. “The Statue of Liberty,” *Saboteur*.

visual representation of American's democratic values of liberty and freedom: Fry, as a saboteur, works to undermine those values, and he plummets to his fate. At the same time, though, Barry actively chooses to try to save Fry rather than let him fall. The audience can interpret that Fry's death is a good thing, that there is one less enemy to worry about, but the suspense leading up to his end also has the audience hope Barry, whom the audience recognizes as a good American, can rescue Fry. Perhaps it is Barry's patriotism that encourages him to show sympathy for an enemy, but in the end, it is his choice as a moral being that ends the film.

After *Saboteur*, Hitchcock directed several other films during the war—most notably, *Lifeboat* (1944).⁶⁴ However, his next return to espionage in film came in the form of two short films—*Bon Voyage* and *Aventure Malgache* (“Madagascan Adventure”)—both produced in 1944. These two little-known projects were propaganda pieces that the British Ministry of Information (MoI) commissioned Hitchcock to direct and were intended for a French audience in Nazi-occupied and Vichy France.⁶⁵

At twenty-six minutes long, *Bon Voyage* follows a Scottish Royal Air Force (RAF) pilot who flees a German prisoner-of-war (POW) camp and trudges across France

64. *Lifeboat* is an adaptation of the John Steinbeck novel about shipwreck survivors wondering what to do when they rescue one of the German U-boat crewmen who sunk their ship. Although politically-charged and relevant to the time period, *Lifeboat* was not included in this study because it does not involve matters of espionage.

65. Bret Wood, “Foreign Correspondence: The Rediscovered War Films of Alfred Hitchcock,” *Film Comment* 29, no. 4 (July 1993): 55. Throughout World War II, Charles de Gaulle operated the government-in-exile, Free France, out of London. Many French refugees lived in and around the city. As part of the war effort, the government even set up a French propaganda theater troupe known as the Molière Players; because Hitchcock's short films were meant for a French audience, the Molière Players were approached to star in these propaganda pieces.

with a Polish fellow escapee. Told in flashbacks, he relays his message to a Free French intelligence officer, but later, he learns that his companion is not a Polish POW, but an undercover Vichy spy. *Aventure Malgache*, thirty-one minutes long, also uses a flashback narrative structure and focuses on Clarousse (Paul Clarousse), a stage actor who tells his cast mates how he operated an underground railway in Madagascar in 1940.⁶⁶ The objectives of *Bon Voyage* and *Aventure Malgache* were to encourage the French Resistance to keep fighting for their country as Germans lost influence in various areas of France and to show that the rest of the Allies valued the Resistance's efforts.⁶⁷ Hitchcock viewed these two short films as his modest contribution to the war, signaling that he had an awareness of the war effort and a desire to help it in the best way he could.⁶⁸ However, only *Bon Voyage* received a limited release in France; *Aventure Malgache* was never released to the public until 1993, with *Bon Voyage* as a companion.⁶⁹

Bon Voyage feels like propaganda: a network of French patriots help the Scot and the "Pole" elude the Germans and escape to London, but a series of events leaves the Scot to believe his companion could no longer accompany him. At the end, after learning his companion was an imposter, he also hears (and the audience sees) that French Resistance fighters have captured the Vichy spy—all while the French national anthem,

66. *Aventure Malgache*, according to Hitchcock in his interview with Truffaut, "was a true story, and Clarousse told it himself." The opening credits also iterate this point. Truffaut, 161.

67. *Ibid.*, 160.

68. *Ibid.*, 159.

69. Wood, 54. After both sat on the shelves of the British Ministry of Information for fifty years, the British Film Institute paired with Piper-Heidseick Champagne and Milestone Film & Video to give the two short films both a theatrical and home release in 1993.

“La Marseillaise,” plays victoriously in the background.⁷⁰ The whole film envisages the pro-French goals that the MoI intended to convey—Resistance members who overcome their Vichy counterparts and their German oppressors. *Aventure Malgache*’s message, however, is more double-edged. Clarousse’s prime antagonist is Jean Michel (Paul Boniface), a Vichy official in Madagascar. Except Michel is not an ardent believer in the Vichy cause. When the British arrive in Madagascar in 1942, Michel changes the portrait in his office from Marshall Philippe Pétain, leader of Vichy France, to Queen Victoria, indicating his character supports whomever is in power for the sake of self-benefit. The short film also raises questions of Free France’s loyalties: according to Hitchcock, the Free French in London had their own conflicts amongst themselves.⁷¹ Clarousse’s fellow Resistance fighters argue over a decision to ally with the British, who some think will help only “by sending troops to seize and hold the island. . . . [They] might become [the] new masters.”⁷²

According to film scholar Bret Wood, both movies were meant to have releases in Britain and the United States to rally support for the French, but the projects were shelved, most likely because of this subversive and “cynical” outlook, one with more than a one-sided political message that “did not present an image of the French that

70. “Disconnected,” *Alfred Hitchcock’s Bon Voyage & Aventure Malgache*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1944; Chatsworth, CA: Image Entertainment, 1998), DVD.

71. Truffaut, 161.

72. “United in One Cause,” *Bon Voyage & Aventure Malgache*.

would have been effective in rallying support in Allied countries.”⁷³ Still, as the famed 1940s and 1950s film critic and theorist André Bazin similarly put it, the theme of oppressor and resistor is universal, and audiences appreciate thrills and activity that endangers protagonists.⁷⁴ Even with a political agenda in mind, Hitchcock intended these two movies to appeal to a broader sense of human morality.

After his brief stint with propaganda short films, Hitchcock returned to Hollywood to direct another psychological romance, *Spellbound* (1945). Immediately following was his final espionage film of the 1940s, produced and released after the Allied victory in 1945. However, the plot of *Notorious* (1946) was still tied to the just-ended war, as was American society as men returned to their families and jobs, and international politics attempted to deal with the repercussions of Nazi Germany’s crimes in the midst of the early Cold War. *Notorious* stars Ingrid Bergman in her second consecutive Hitchcock role as the German-American Alicia Huberman, whose father was recently convicted as a traitor to the United States during the war. Shortly after his trial, FBI agent Devlin (Cary Grant, also in his second Hitchcock role) recruits Alicia to spy on her father’s German friends who relocated to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, after the war. The head of the undercover spy group, Alexander Sebastian (Claude Rains), has harbored an unrequited attraction for Alicia since when they first met in Washington, D.C., four years prior. A love triangle forms between Devlin, Alicia, and Sebastian which serves to

73. Wood, 58. Another possibility that Wood cites is that during the 1930s and 1940s, foreign-language movies released in Great Britain and the United States were shown in arthouse cinemas; only very limited audiences in major cities would have seen a movie meant to provoke the masses.

74. Ibid.

complicate matters when Alicia agrees to marry Sebastian while also continuing to serve as an American agent.

Most of *Notorious*'s political and ideological elements appear in the first thirty minutes of its duration. The film opens with the trial of Alicia's father and his sentence of imprisonment.⁷⁵ The opening scene can be seen as an American substitution of the then-ongoing Nuremberg Trials in Germany, which tried Nazi officials for their crimes and atrocities before and during the war, and were publicized to the world. Soon after the case, Devlin approaches Alicia, who has turned to alcohol to cope, with an offer:

DEVLIN. My chief thinks the daughter of a...

ALICIA. Of a traitor?

DEVLIN. Well, they think she'd be valuable in the work.
They might sort of trust you. And you can make up
for your daddy's peculiarities.

ALICIA. Why should I?

DEVLIN. Patriotism.

ALICIA. No thank you. That word gives me headaches. I
don't go for patriotism, or patriots.⁷⁶

To convince the hungover and bitter Alicia otherwise, Devlin proceeds to play a recording of a conversation between Alicia and her father, which the government had gathered while tapping her home during their suspicion of Alicia's father, prior to the film's start. As her father tries to convince her to join him, Alicia replies:

75. "3:26 pm, April 24, 1946," *Notorious*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1946; Chicago: Home Vision Entertainment, 2001), DVD.

76. "Daughter of a Traitor," *Notorious*.

My mother was born here [in the United States]. We have American citizenship. . . . I know what you stand for. You and your murdering swine. I've hated you ever since I found out. . . . I hate you all—and I love this country. Do you understand that? I'll see you all hang before I raise a finger against it.⁷⁷

For both Devlin and Alicia, pride in one's country is a form of empowerment. Alicia's sentiments in the recording with her father stress how she puts her American citizenship before her German heritage. She identifies as an American more than a German-American. Devlin also implies that Alicia can alleviate, maybe even erase, the shame she feels for her father's treason should she work for her country. With war still fresh in Americans' memories, this particular "call to arms" can also be interpreted as an allusion to women who were encouraged to join the wartime workforce and send materials to their husbands, sons, and brothers overseas. Uncle Sam reaches out to the women, and because of it, Alicia's self-esteem and confidence soar when she accepts Devlin's offer.⁷⁸

Alicia's confidence plummets, however, when she arrives in Rio and learns what exactly her assignment is: to "land" Nazi-ringleader Sebastian and "find out what's going on inside his house, what the group around him is up to."⁷⁹ Scarcely thirty minutes into the film, and the political intrigue becomes background information to a story concerning human emotions and interaction, particularly romance and betrayal. Alicia agrees to the job, but not because she still holds a zeal for her duty as an American citizen. Her actions

77. Ibid.

78. Nora Gilbert, "'She Makes Love for the Papers': Love, Sex, and Exploitation in Hitchcock's Mata Hari Films," *Film & History* 41, no. 2 (2011): 9.

79. "Mata Hari," *Notorious*.

are to spite Devlin, who will not disclose his love for her, even though she confesses that she loves him. Later in the film, the enemy Sebastian recognizes the attraction between Devlin and Alicia, which they deny. To have her prove that Devlin means nothing to her, Sebastian asks Alicia to marry him. Alicia approaches her employers over whether or not she should go so far for the operation, but, in actuality, she wants Devlin to prevent her from doing so. Unsurprisingly, he does not.⁸⁰

While *Notorious* is far more interested in the romance between Alicia and Devlin and how Sebastian threatens it, its politics still filters throughout. Devlin's inability to admit his love for Alicia drives her to Sebastian and his overbearing mother, who are clearly marked as the antagonists. In his wine cellar, he holds the key to German reconfiguration and remilitarization: uranium ore, one of the primary ingredients of the atomic bomb, whose fateful drop on Hiroshima in August 1945 reminded *Notorious*'s audience of "the reality of the atomic bomb and the devastation it caused Japan [at the same time] audiences were also aware of the scientific prowess of the Nazi Germans."⁸¹ *Notorious* could even be a critical look of postwar American sentiments regarding patriotism and civilian duty. Film scholar Sam P. Simone believes that *Notorious* is Hitchcock's appraisal of American democracy and how the institution will maintain peace in the postwar global society.⁸² However, Simone fails to recognize the contempt Alicia and Devlin develop for "a calloused American government that pimps its female

80. "Win. Place. Show," and "First, Last, and Always Not a Lady," *Notorious*.

81. Simone, 159-60.

82. *Ibid.*, 166.

citizens for political gain,” as film historian Nora Gilbert disputes.⁸³ The American government values Alicia’s sexuality as a tool to accomplish its infiltration. The consequence is the ultimate conflict between Alicia and Devlin as they are torn from each other while battling their own demons.⁸⁴

Notorious finishes off Hitchcock’s wartime espionage thrillers, which are among his least politically ambiguous films. From these movies, an American civilian’s duty is perceived as upholding democracy and liberty while the world fights against totalitarianism. The protagonists are Americans, while their enemies are never explicitly Nazis, but German nonetheless. As a whole, the threat against freedom and democracy serves as the primary instigator of suspense within these films.⁸⁵ And yet, although the protagonists prevail, the antagonists are shown moments of humanity and sympathy. One evil represents all evil. Just as the war affected American society and its cultural perceptions in media before, during, and after, its consequences would do the same for the next two decades. Hitchcock’s films would fictionalize them just as they did before and during World War II.

1950s and 1960s: Hitchcock’s Prime and Legacy in Cold War America

With one enemy eliminated (fascism), the postwar democratic world witnessed the rise of another—communism. Despite regional, “proxy” wars in Korea (1950-1953)

83. Gilbert, 6.

84. *Ibid.*, 10.

85. Simon, 169.

and Vietnam (1965-1975), among others, the larger Cold War was not one of military mobilization, but rather a war of words, diplomacy, and competition. For over forty years, the democratic/capitalist United States and its allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) battled the communist Soviet Union, as well as, North Korea, Cuba (in 1959), and the People's Republic of China. The first full decade of the Cold War, the 1950s, was characterized by the foreign policy of containment—the curbing of an enemy's expansion into further territory—in addition to domestic paranoia over national security and communist infiltration. The closest the US and the USSR ever came to warfare was the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, when the Soviets placed offensive missiles in Cuba and President John F. Kennedy managed their removal.

For Hitchcock's career, the 1950s marked an opulent Golden Age. Though he already earned a status as a popular and influential director in Hollywood, movies such as *Strangers on a Train* (1951), *Rear Window* (1954), *To Catch a Thief* (1955), and *Vertigo* (1957) became some of his most well-known and studied films. But after *Notorious*, the Master of Suspense would not revisit the espionage thriller genre until a decade later with his own 1956 remake of 1934's *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. The same plot more or less follows in this better-known version, although the married couple are the Americans Ben and Jo McKenna (James Stewart and Doris Day) vacationing in Morocco, not Switzerland, and their kidnapped child is a young boy named Hank (Christopher Olsen). Unlike the original, the kidnapers are the British Mr. and Mrs. Drayton (Bernard Miles and Brenda de Banzie), but they remain involved in the plot to assassinate a European diplomat.

Even with espionage at the helm of the story, the remake of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* is one of the least politicized spy thrillers Hitchcock directed. The politics surrounding the death of Louis Bernard (Daniel Gélin), the spy whom the McKennas meet in Morocco and subsequently dies in Ben's arms, are vague. In fact, most of the plot focuses on the marriage between Ben and Jo, and how they interact before and after their son is kidnapped.⁸⁶ This exploration of their marriage begins when Ben, a medical doctor, asks Jo to take some sedatives before he tells her that Hank has been kidnapped.⁸⁷ And just like Bob and Jill in the original version, once they arrive in London, Ben and Jo are not interested in helping an English intelligence official, fearing that harm will come to Hank.⁸⁸

Nevertheless, just as the original was made when "the world was living in the dread of Hitler, the remake looked to the Cold War for its drama."⁸⁹ Communism is never outwardly mentioned, and the allusions are either too subtle to decipher, or not within the plot at all. Despite this, the Cold War's influence on American thought is easily recognizable, especially in the first act when the McKennas meet Louis Bernard. Ben warms up to the stranger immediately, but Jo remains skeptical. She warns Ben to not be so open about their lives to a man they hardly know. "I have nothing to hide," Ben says.

86. Spoto, 242.

87. "The Awful Truth," *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1956; Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 2000), DVD.

88. "London," *The Man Who Knew Too Much*.

89. McGilligan, 521-22.

“I think Mr. Bernard has,” Jo coolly answers.⁹⁰ When they approach their hotel, Jo whispers her concern that the McKennas are being watched.⁹¹ Several minutes later, before the couple head out to dinner with Bernard, Jo interrogates Bernard over who he is and what he does for a living—Bernard supplies equivocal answers.⁹² Ben finds Jo ridiculous for being so paranoid while on vacation, but as they (and the audience) learn, she has every right to be: after a knifed Bernard whispers something in Ben’s ear at the market, they deduce that he must be a spy, and their son is subsequently kidnapped. Jo’s paranoia serves to validate the paranoia that Americans felt. Just two years prior to the remake’s release, Senator Joseph McCarthy headed a series of publicized, anti-communist hearings about the United States Army, building on fear of communist spies in domestic American life. Though the film indicates that Bernard a “good” spy working against the assassination of a foreign diplomat, Jo and the audience are made aware that something is “off” about him. In addition, the Draytons, Hank’s kidnappers, are English rather than ambiguously foreign. Their target is referred to as “our Prime Minister,” and they report to an Englishman high up in the English government, thus suggesting an internal threat in the government. Stemming from all these concerns, the remake of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* is just one example of how American fears of communism and the foreign and domestic affairs of the time filtered “through the media of

90. “The Bus to Marrakech,” *The Man Who Knew Too Much*.

91. Ibid.

92. “Bernard’s Business,” *The Man Who Knew Too Much*.

performance as it pertained to the quotidian life of . . . prosperous middle-class America at its most economically and politically expansionist moment.”⁹³

Hitchcock’s next Cold War espionage thriller is also one of his most lavish and recognizable films of his career: *North by Northwest*. Largely comedic in addition to being a thriller, the film follows advertising executive Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant once more), whom enemy agent Phillip Vandamm (James Mason) mistakes for an American agent named George Kaplan. The real George Kaplan, however, does not exist—he is an imagined decoy that American counterintelligence officials invented to distract Vandamm while the real agent operates within his closest proximity: Eve Kendall (Eva Marie Saint) masquerades as Vandamm’s mistress for the American government. Thornhill’s involvement in the matter sends him from New York to Chicago to Mount Rushmore in an attempt to clear his name for crimes he did not commit, while also saving Eve from Vandamm.

As the most famous of Hitchcock’s spy-chase thrillers, *North by Northwest* is also one of the most politically vague, yet doubles as one of the most scathing towards the American government. One can assume that Vandamm and his lackeys work for the Soviet Union given the time period, but like its predecessors, the film never says a word about political affiliations. However, it does directly involve itself in the larger scale of global politics. Thornhill learns from an unnamed counterintelligence officer and professor (Leo G. Carroll) about Eve’s true nature as a spy. If Thornhill agrees to play the

93. Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 297.

role of Kaplan and meet with Vandamm, the Professor claims Eve will be free from Vandamm and her position as a spy. Thornhill concedes and stages an elaborate scheme to meet with Eve later. Eve, however, reveals that she must fly out of the country with Vandamm to continue her mission for the American government, and Thornhill condemns the professor's lies from earlier. "War is hell, Mr. Thornhill, even when it's a cold one," the professor replies without pity.⁹⁴ Like Alicia in *Notorious*, Eve's commodification of her sexuality and body is her form of patriotism.⁹⁵ She remarks that when the professor and his colleagues approached Eve with the proposal to spy on Vandamm, she considered it "the first time anyone asked [her] to do anything worthwhile"—she was reminded of duty and citizenship.⁹⁶ Thornhill thus decides he must save Eve not only from Vandamm, but from her duty to the American government. During a period of relatively reduced Cold War tension, *North by Northwest*'s lack of a one-sided political agenda "calmly locates treachery equally on 'our side' as on 'theirs,'" ⁹⁷ which is what makes it so timeless and memorable for modern audiences.

Where the remake of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* and *North by Northwest* incorporate ambiguity, Hitchcock's last two espionage thrillers of the Cold War, as well as of his career, immerse themselves in the heightening political intrigue of the 1960s. In

94. "Meeting in Woods," *North by Northwest*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1959; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2000), DVD.

95. Gilbert, 10.

96. "Meeting in Woods," *North by Northwest*.

97. Spoto, 301.

1961, the Berlin Wall was constructed, separating the free city of West Berlin from communist East Berlin and East Germany to prevent East Germans' emigration and defection. *Torn Curtain* (1966) is Hitchcock's penultimate espionage thriller and his fiftieth feature film, starring Paul Newman as American physicist Michael Armstrong, who pretends to defect to East Germany so he can learn a secret formula regarding anti-missile technology from an East German physicist. His assistant and fiancée Sarah Sherman (Julie Andrews), unaware of the truth, follows him behind the Berlin Wall, but Michael keeps her in the dark until his operation is put into jeopardy after he murders a man who discovers his true intentions.

Torn Curtain makes it very clear that East Germany—and, by proxy, communism—are the villains of the story. American popular culture, particularly television shows, intertwined with the Cold War tensions of the 1960s and presented communism as the villain and democracy as the hero; American actions are justified because they are in the name of democracy.⁹⁸ The film sympathizes with Michael when he murders Gromek (Wolfgang Kieling), an East German security officer assigned to watching Michael, because Gromek learns that Michael is a double agent, so Michael must protect himself.⁹⁹ Some film scholars argue that *Torn Curtain* is a piece of Cold War propaganda, suggesting that “the Soviet Bloc is a police state . . . in which its citizens are fearful and regretful, yet whose scientists may be ahead of the West in

98. Mitchell K. Hall, *Crossroads: American Popular Culture and the Vietnam Generation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 95.

99. “A Hard Man to Kill,” *Torn Curtain*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1966; Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 2000), DVD.

develop of anti-missile technology (indicating, therefore, that the West cannot relax or soften its position).”¹⁰⁰

That may very well be the case, but like all other Hitchcock spy thrillers, *Torn Curtain* puts more emphasis on human relationships and emotion than on the politics. Sarah is confused as to why Michael has “defected,” but she is willing to be with him regardless of his loyalties. Michael, in contrast, does not tell Sarah of his operation because it would put her in danger. He tells the truth only after Gromek’s murder, and because both of them will be in jeopardy when his body is found. The audience roots for them to escape, but their escape does not mount to a victory for the West. The Berlin Wall as a physical and metaphorical separation between democracy and communism adds relevancy to the film, but *Torn Curtain* was largely a critical failure and has become one of Hitchcock’s lesser-known films.

The troubled production, as well as the lack of critical and financial success, continued into Hitchcock’s last espionage thriller and the antepenultimate film of his career, *Topaz* (1969), based on the 1967 Leon Uris novel of the same name. Uris’s novel is said to have been based on real-life events known as the “Sapphire Affair,” where twelve Soviet spies infiltrated French bureaucracy under President Charles de Gaulle, an operation codenamed “Sapphire.”¹⁰¹ Set in 1962 during the rising tensions leading up to

100. Oliver Boyd-Barrett, David Herrera, and Jim Baumann, *Hollywood and the CIA: Cinema, Defense, and Subversion* (New York: Rutledge, 2011), 46.

101. Jeffrey T. Richelson, *A Century of Spies: Intelligence in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 288; McGilligan, 683. Very little is known about the Sapphire Affair, but there are a few documented sources. For more information, see Boyd-Barrett, Herrera, and Baumann, 42; Philippe Thyraud de Vosjoli, “The French Spy Scandal,” *Life Magazine*, April 26, 1968, 31-39.

the Cuban missile crisis, *Topaz* follows pro-U.S. French intelligence officer André Devereaux (Frederick Stafford) and his involvement with American espionage efforts. As the Cuban missile crisis unravels, Devereaux learns of a communist spy ring, known as “Topaz,” in the highest ranks of the French government. While travel often appears in its predecessors, *Topaz* is the most globetrotting of Hitchcock’s spy thrillers. The story moves from Amsterdam to Washington to New York to Cuba, and ends in Paris, suggesting how the Cold War affected the turmoil of international politics; Americans, Soviets, Cubans, and French are all involved in some capacity.

Similarly to *Torn Curtain*, scholars of Cold War media think of *Topaz* as a form of pro-U.S. Cold War propaganda. They argue that, along with *Torn Curtain*, Hitchcock supports “nuclear equilibrium, . . . the importance of information—intelligence—as an instrument of American hegemony and conflict resolution, and the attractiveness and superiority of the American model of power.”¹⁰² *Topaz*’s Cuban communists are portrayed as murderous brutes, savages, and Fidel Castro-lookalikes, or brave but inept counterrevolutionaries. In contrast, the French, American, and even Soviet spies are stylish and civilized. This could be a reflection of a 1960s elitist sentiment that viewed superpower rivalry as a balance between the nuclear powers, but radical upstarts, like in Cuba, as disrupters of the balance that had been delicately established.¹⁰³ At same time, however, *Torn Curtain* and *Topaz* are both critical of the Soviet Union and do not show a

102. Boyd-Barrett, Herrera, and Baumann, 42.

103. Ibid.

desire to subscribe to the emerging foreign policy that dominated the second half of the Cold War, *détente*—the relaxing of political tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union.¹⁰⁴

Despite these worthy analyses, however, *Topaz*—like Hitchcock’s espionage thrillers before it—is not confined to one political ideology. According to biographer Patrick McGilligan, Hitchcock had originally asked for Uris to adapt his novel for the screen, and wished for Uris to write both the intelligence agents and the revolutionaries as human beings rather than caricatures of their respective politics. Uris refused, and was subsequently dropped from the script writing.¹⁰⁵ The most telling of Hitchcock’s universality of human morality comes from one of the three alternate endings that *Topaz* featured in its release. In this ending, the headline of “Cuban Missile Crisis Over” is superimposed over a montage of individuals who died while caught up in the petty power-play of the superpowers. Cuban counterrevolutionaries lie tortured and dead in a jail cell, a French double agent with a bullet in his head lies draped over his car (staged to look like a suicide attempt), the leader of the Cuban counterrevolution is murdered out of jealousy because she was not only the Cuban official’s mistress, but Deveraux’s as well.¹⁰⁶ Rather than total Cold War propaganda, *Topaz* is more a testament to

104. *Ibid.*, 46.

105. McGilligan, 686. According to McGilligan, Uris’s trouble with Hitchcock stemmed from more than just a disagreement with the screenplay; he cites that Uris and Hitchcock had differing personalities and vastly opposing views on how espionage worked (supposedly, Uris found Hitchcock’s ideas outdated).

106. “The Suicide,” *Topaz*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1969; Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 2000), DVD.

Hitchcock’s “moral cynicism, his deep distrust of politics, and his contempt for international big business,” as Spoto argues.¹⁰⁷ The film speaks more about the humanity involved in Cold War politics rather than the politics themselves.

Ending with *Topaz*, Hitchcock’s four Cold War espionage films were more fractured in their themes than his espionage thrillers of prewar England or World War II America. The differing themes largely have to do with time between them: the remake of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* and *North by Northwest* were released in the 1950s during a period of paranoia and fears of internal threats undermining national security. *Torn Curtain* and *Topaz*, in contrast, are stories of international intrigue with characters featured as cogs in the machine of a political rivalry between global superpowers. Whereas the former two are lighter and filled with moments of comedy, the latter two are darker in tone and story, most likely a result of fear of nuclear war and annihilation, as well as the late 1960s’ “chaotic social conditions” and the tumultuous domestic and international politics layered on top of American society.¹⁰⁸ Still, as a whole, the last four espionage thrillers show more preoccupation with the personal relationships and human emotions than with a dominant political creed.

Conclusion

After the failure of *Topaz*, Hitchcock would direct two more movies—*Frenzy* (1972) and *Family Plot* (1976)—and begin production on another: *The Short Night*,

107. Spoto, 369.

108. Hall, 174.

which was planned to be another romance-espionage thriller. Hitchcock's declining health halted production, however, and in 1980, at the age of eighty, the Master of Suspense succumbed to kidney failure. The legacy that Hitchcock left is one that continues well into the twenty-first century, over thirty years after his death. His films—and his life—remain the subject of careful analysis, while also enigmatic.

Hitchcock's espionage thrillers accounted for over a quarter of his entire filmography. Yet so few of them are as popular as *Rear Window* or *Psycho*, perhaps because the spy thrillers reflect too many of the sentiments and fears of their times. In the espionage thrillers of the 1930s, the enemies are ambiguous foreigners who plot against the United Kingdom, while citizenship and one's relationship with government and community is frequently called into question. The thrillers of the 1940s are less ambiguous than their English predecessors and feature a definite emphasis on the expectations of civilians in a democratic society, with optimistic, pro-American themes prevalent throughout to instill hope in the American people. The espionage thrillers of the 1950s and 1960s suggest internal but vague threats, a clear parallel to fears of internal communist threats in the United States, as well as external threats, with prominent historical events used to convey and add timely relevance.

In all of these espionage thrillers, though, personal relationships are emphasized more than the politics that expose and drive the plots. With the politics of his espionage thrillers, Hitchcock most likely recognized his audiences and intended to play upon their knowledge of the headlines, but the politics became fodder for examinations on universal themes of morality and human interaction that can be viewed in all of Hitchcock's films.

Whether Nazi or communist, the enemies are never so outwardly wicked that they must be condemned; many of the antagonists even receive sympathy from the audience, or moments that indicate they are more than agents of their politics, that they are human beings with their own motivations. For Hitchcock, an espionage thriller that incorporated the politics of the day was just one method of creating suspense and telling a story about the humans involved.

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