

The Man Who Knew Too Much (1956) Hitchcock

P Michell, 2020

Synopsis:

An American physician and his wife take matters into their own hands after assassins planning to execute a foreign Prime Minister kidnap their son. Can they save their son and stop an assassination?

Creative Talent:

Director/Producer: Alfred Hitchcock

Associate Producer: Herbert Coleman

Screenplay: John Michael Hayes based on the screenplay by Charles Bennett and D.B. Wyndham-Lewis

Cinematography: Robert Burks

Art Direction: Henry Bumstead, Hal Pereira

Music: Bernard Herrmann

Editing: George Tomasini

Cast: James Stewart (Dr. Ben McKenna), Doris Day (Jo McKenna), Brenda De Banzie (Lucy Drayton), Bernard Miles (Edward Drayton), Ralph Truman (Buchanan), Daniel Gelin (Louis Bernard)

C-120 min. Letterboxed.

Hitchcock's remake of his TMWKTM earlier 1934 British film. In rich (restored) Technicolor and widescreen - VistaVision. His comment to Francois Truffaut in 1967: *Let's say the first version is the work of a talented amateur and the second was made by a professional.*

Hitchcock is justly famous as 'the master of cinema suspense'. This film explores this, arguably in greater detail. Building layer upon layer. Using the Hitchcock theme of putting ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances. (This film capitalises by using Doris Day and James Stewart to this end. Hitchcock knew that audiences would carry 'the baggage' of what was known about their other films into this.) Not to be forgotten is 'McGuffins'. Plot devices used to move the story along then completely abandoned.

Hitchcock described a MacGuffin thus – two travellers on a training in Scotland. One is carrying a cage. When asked what's its for –

Catching lions.

But there's no lions in Scotland.

Precisely. There's no MacGuffins.

(Paul's paraphrasing.)

TMWKTM once considered a 'lesser' Hitchcock, it has been reassessed. Partly due to the understanding collaborative efforts of the cinematographer and writer. Of course there is James Stewart and Doris Day, main stars, who carry the film. The cinematography is no considered one of Burk's best efforts. He was Hitch's chosen cinematographer. Rich in colour and meaning.

An example of this is the analysis of Ambrose Chapel:

http://www.labyrinth.net.au/~muffin/ambrose_chapel.html

[Suggest your read this AFTER watching the move as it gives away a plot device.]

Film is justly well known for many sequences especially the last 12 mins at Royal Albert Hall with Bernard Hermann conducting London Symphony Orchestra.
The song *Que Sera, Sera* sung by Doris Day became a huge hit.

Try and find the director early in the film!

Hitchcock became his own producer from 1955. Meant he could source own actors and creative team.

John Michael Hayes – Scriptwriter. (30 films) (Based on story D B Wyndham-Lewis)
Screenwriter [John Michael Hayes](#) was hired on the condition that he would not watch the early version or read its script, with all of the plot details coming from a briefing with Sir [Alfred Hitchcock](#).

In 1953 Hayes was handpicked by Alfred Hitchcock to adapt Cornell Woolrich's short story, *Rear Window*. The collaboration would be an important turning point for both. For Hitchcock, it marked the beginning of his most successful period, critically and commercially. For Hayes, it lifted him into the world of A-list directors, stars, and budgets, and began his long association with Paramount Pictures. Despite Hitchcock's reputation as a martinet, Hayes was given tremendous creative freedom, and together they created one of the most enduring works of the cinema.

Both he and Hitchcock earned Academy Award nominations for their work on *Rear Window*. Neither went home with Oscars, but Hayes did receive an Edgar award from the Mystery Writers of America for his screenplay. Their styles and temperaments meshed and Hayes went on to write Hitchcock's next three films-*To Catch a Thief*, *The Trouble with Harry*, and *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. But when Hayes successfully challenged Hitchcock over a credit dispute, the relationship came to an abrupt end.

Music – Bernard Herrmann (86 films)

The man behind the low woodwinds that open [Citizen Kane](#) (1941), the shrieking violins of [Psycho](#) (1960), and the plaintive saxophone of [Taxi Driver](#) (1976) was one of the most original and distinctive composers ever to work in film. He started early, winning a composition prize at the age of 13 and founding his own orchestra at the age of 20.

Cinematography – Robert Burks (46 films)

Worked on 12 Hitchcock films.

Famous other films include: *Arsenic and Old Lace* (1944), *Key Largo* (1948), *The Fountainhead* (1949), *The Glass Menagerie* (1950), *Patch of Blue* (1965).

Academy Award for Hitchcock's *To Catch a Thief*. Nominated for *Strangers on a Train*, *Rear Window* and *A Patch of Blue*. Though with lesser directors (and less creativity) some of his work not at par. An innovator of telephoto and wide angle shots.

Sadly Burks and wife died in a house fire, supposedly caused by a cigarette he was smoking in bed in 1968, aged 58. Much talk that had he lived there'd be more greater Hitch films. (Though they had a falling out after *Marnie* (1964). Perhaps that could have been solved.) IMDB contributor lists Burks as the 12th most important cinematographer. The genius behind *Citizen Kane* and many others was Gregg Toland and he's rated at #18.

<https://www.imdb.com/list/ls026034621/>

George Tomasisini - Film Editing (23 films)

Edited nine of Hitch movies. On a 2012 listing of the 75 best edited films of all time, compiled by the [Motion Picture Editors Guild](#) based on a survey of its members, four films edited by Tomasinini for Hitchcock appear. No other editor appeared more than three times on this listing. The listed films were *Psycho*, *Vertigo*, *Rear Window*, and *North by Northwest*.^[2] Was nominated for the [Academy Award for Best Film Editing](#) for *North by Northwest*, but *Ben-Hur*'s editors won the award that year.

Other films he photographed and added to their unique 'style' inc: Time Machine (1960), In Harm's Way (1965) [his last film], Cape Fear (1962) [very, very scary], Stalag 17 (1953) [justly famous], Elephant Walk (1954).

Greta Gerwig – a current significant creative force in cinema made this comment:

In film, you can establish rhythm from editing, but in theatre, you can only establish rhythm through language, so I think I still have that sense of wanting it to sound correct. I know it when I hear it, and when it's wrong, it's like someone I don't know is touching my belly button.

Note: Her collaborative effort with partner Noah Baumbach, *Francis Ha* is on SBS On Demand. Its in B&W about a ditzy 28 y.o. in New York. Shades of Woody Allen's Manhattan and other films. Definitely worth a look. Stars her, Adam Driver and Michael Zegan (Marvelous Mrs Maisel).

Archived Hitch Notes:

On the U3A Darebin Website are my notes for these Hitch films:

Vertigo 2015 **

North by Northwest 2014 **

Psycho 2010 *

<https://u3acinema.weebly.com/archive.html>

Trivia:

When I was studying Cinema in late 1970s – this was a 'lost film'. (We studied poor quality pirate copy.) One of 5 films not released again until 1984, due to copyright. Others were: Rear Window, Trouble with Harry, Vertigo and Rope.

Doris Day began her lifelong interest with animal welfare because of way they were treated in the film.

At first [Doris Day](#) refused to record "Que Sera, Sera" as a popular song release, dismissing it as "a forgettable children's song". It not only went on to win an Academy Award, but also became the biggest hit of her recording career and her signature song.

The movie was originally to be produced by Paramount Pictures and Patron, a company to be jointly owned by [James Stewart](#), [Doris Day](#), and Sir [Alfred Hitchcock](#). When the movie finally went before the cameras, the production company was Filwite Productions, Inc., co-owned by Hitchcock and Stewart. The reason Day was not included in the final production deal has not been publicly disclosed. However, it may have had something to do with Day's husband and manager at the time, [Martin Melcher](#), a man absolutely despised and considered shady by many in Hollywood. (There was good reason for this. Ms. Day eventually learned that she was all but penniless as a result of his management.)

Very successful. Budget of US\$1.29 took US\$11.3 in the US. Add that again for international sales. Thus around 20x original cost. Note above that Stewart and Hitchcock were the production company. Thus they profited.

Some Links on Hitchcock:

<http://sensesofcinema.com/2012/feature-articles/boy-meets-girl-architectonics-of-a-hitchcockian-shot/>

<http://sensesofcinema.com/2005/great-directors/hitchcock/>

Ken Mogg (above) is a significant contributor to the understanding of Hitchcock and his universe.

He established this website.

<http://www.labyrinth.net.au/~muffin/>

(Oh ... he was my Hitchcock tutor at RMIT!)

Author of 'Alfred Hitchcock Story' (1999, 2008.)

Mark Cousin's Analysis from 'Story of Film':

Described as most important image maker of 20th century – more so than Picasso. Crash of Cymbals / Overhead shots are his way of focusing into the mind.

Hitch's Belief in 'Pure Cinema'. TMWKTM very good example.

Some reasons for his genius:

1. Point of view. Camera is often 'eye of character'.
2. Cinema is about proving the unprovable. Eg belief in god. His films have 'other worldly' logic. People move from scene to scene with little logic.
3. Ordinary every day life is often not shown in his films. Despite being set in here and now.
4. Understanding nature of fear. Exists in ordinary places. Different from shock. Example in Saboteur we are shown many times the armed bomb before it explodes on the bus. It is this prelude with child carrying the bomb that is creates fear. Naturally we are still shocked with the bus explosion.
5. Hitcock's films are very female.
6. Brilliant use of the closeup. Often used to highlight a theme. (eg: hands in 39 Steps, bomb in Saboteur, key in Notorious).
Hitch quote: "Close-ups are like clashes of cymbals."
7. His films often start without traditional long establishing shot. Hitch moves straight and quickly into the story. (use of closeups in 39 Steps – instead of establishing vaudeville theatre from outside. We saw ticket being bought, etc.)
Hitch Quote: "Films have to engage the viewer in the first seven minutes."

8. As Hitch began making films during the pre-sound he is very astute in the use of silence. Often not using music just natural sound to create tension. (eg: in Saboteur atop the Statue of Liberty).
- 9 Use of editing of shots high, then under to create tension. He calls the high shot – a ‘tremolo’.
- 10 Whilst Hitch is famous for putting an ordinary person into extraordinary circumstances. He does so with well known (in fact famous) screen actors – Cary Grant, James Stewart, Ingrid Bergman, etc. Sometimes playing amplifying type (eg Vertigo).
- 11 The mother character – dominant, over bearing, powerful,

Quote: *The audience screams and cannot bear the agony is some of my films. That gives me great pleasure: I am interested less in stories than in the manner of telling them.*
(Paul’s editorial.)

Sadoul – Dictionary of Film Makers (1972) pp117

- Claimed to have said making a film was boring as he’d already made it in his head.
- Gave his editors not much room to cut. Thus films have mostly come out as he intended.
- Incredibly prolific and successful film maker.
- Sanity vs Insanity theme
- Hitchcock as a Catholic – his wife converted for him.
- Use of ‘obvious’ artifice – often uses back projection in an obvious way.
- Police (authority) is ambivalent to the point of menacing. That which serves to protect can be at worst that that causes our paranoia. Often unable to assist when needed.
- Use of humour. Often before climatic scenes. Note end dialogue in TMWKTM.

Comparing both versions:

The Man Who Knew Too Much: 1934 Original and 1956 Remake

Brian Welk, 2011. Brianwelk.com

People perhaps scoff at the idea of a remake today, even if it’s a director redoing his own film. But Alfred Hitchcock is not George Lucas, and when he chooses to remake “The Man Who Knew Too Much” and both versions are equally great, that’s the sign of a master director.

Hitchcock said in an interview with Francois Truffaut that the original 1934 version of “The Man Who Knew Too Much” was the work of an amateur whereas the 1956 remake was the work of a professional.

That seems believable, as there are only so many liberties Hitchcock takes in tweaking the story between versions. Each is about a family who has befriended a man who has just been killed. In his dying words, he reveals to them a need to deliver precious information regarding a diplomatic assassination attempt to the British consulate. But before they talk, each family is informed that if they say a word, they will never see their child again.

The newer, American version starring James Stewart and Doris Day is certainly a more polished film, making use of bold color cinematography and elaborate travelogue sets in Morocco and Britain. But Hitch was hardly an amateur when he made this in 1934. He was already building a reputation as a great auteur of the silent screen now breaking out into sound, and he would even make his first masterpiece, "The 39 Steps," a year later. That said, the quality shows in the original as well, and Hitch actually preferred the original because of its rough edges. It's an unpolished gem rather than a processed studio thriller.

And while both films are arguably equally good, the battle will rage on deciding which is best and which history will remember more.

Superficially, the original is 45 minutes shorter than the remake and is in so many ways a more immediate, instantly gratifying thriller. The remake on the other hand has star power on its side, a big budget and the inclusion of the Oscar winning song "Que Sera Sera.

If you ask me why Hitchcock chose to remake his film, the climax of the original is a messy, long and loud shootout. If you want a more elegant conclusion to your thriller, it doesn't get much more elegant than the staple song by Doris Day. When the song first appears in the movie, it struck me as a throwaway number, a write-off moment to get Doris Day singing.

But Hitchcock is not so lazy, and as is true of both films, his masterful construction of details comes into play in the climax. As soon as Day sits down at the piano and begins singing "Que Sera Sera," you can bet that the little boy will whistle as loud as he can to let her know he's there.

Even the ending I just complained about in the original has its clever quirks. The first comes when the kidnapped girl is being chased on the roof of a house by the assassin, and her mother (Edna Best), a pro marksman, snakes the killing shot in to the assassin without harming her daughter. Her skill is such a miniscule plot detail established at the start of the film, and the fact that I had forgotten about it is a testament to Hitch's charms as a storyteller.

The other involves the villain Abbott's (Peter Lorre) signature calling card. We first know who the kidnapper is based on Abbott's chiming pocket watch. It's a cute little signifier, and the fact that it comes back time and again to build suspense and lead to his demise is priceless.

Hearing that noise, I began to think how perfectly Hitchcock had adapted to the use of sound. Watching "The Man Who Knew Too Much," it would almost seem as if there were no learning curve between silent and talkies for Hitch. He can now use sound to build tension or even cue a witty gag. Take a scene in which the hero Bob Lawrence (Leslie Banks) makes a trip to a dentist's office to find his child. At first we hear painful screaming from inside the room and realize it's just a toothache, but we're soon chilled by the amount of power that dentist holds.

And the way in which Hitchcock then silences that dentist shows why he was such a strong silent director. The shot placement and silent execution seems very much of the era. Even

glimpses of Peter Lorre's face as he's smoking a cigarette could've been some of the finest, most iconic images of the silent era had it belonged to it.

Peter Lorre is also the standout from both films. Even though this was his first English speaking film and he had to learn many of his lines phonetically, Lorre proves to be one of Hitchcock's best villains, leaps and bounds better than the 1956 version's Edward Drayton. He's so wonderfully devilish in the part, and I feel as if Hitchcock should've considered recasting him.

I really have praised the original a lot. At a brisk 75 minutes, there's no waiting for great juicy suspense, even if it minimizes on plot development. This is not so in the '56 version, but there is much to admire about the remake and value over the original.

Hitch really allows his characters breathing room in the remake, and he peppers in a lot of humor into the film. There's a short sequence where Stewart struggles to sit properly on a small sofa in a Moroccan restaurant, or in the magnificent orchestra scene inside the Albert Hall, Hitchcock plays up the importance of the symbols as a cue, and he even throws in a visual gag when we see the musician's music that reads nothing but a big crash at the end.

This scene lasts nearly 12 silent minutes in the remake, and he truly expands on all his set pieces, even if they seemed perfect and tight in the original. The original shows the performance from the perspective of Mrs. Lawrence as she begins to go delusional and lose focus knowing what is about to happen. From this we get a wonderful fade into the barrel of the gun, and although this isn't recreated in the remake, both scenes are epic, and the remake even offers a greater payoff with the death of the assassin.

The remake likewise has stealthy precision in the church scene, and we can see how much the camera is a tool of the suspense. The one added scene is when Stewart's character goes on a wild goose chase looking for the man he feels may have kidnapped their son. It turns out he should've been looking for a building rather than a man, and this little game plays to the remake's feeling of psychological uncertainty.

Whereas the original merely asks if someone is willing to choose the life of their daughter over another World War, the remake deals more with Hitchcock's standard trope of the innocent man in a sticky situation. He seems to say, "Now that you have this secret information and you already had suspicions, how does that affect your insecurities?" It's a much more psychologically deep story that has ramifications beyond whether or not they actually get their child back.

The sad and perhaps ironically terrific thing is, just about neither of these movies could even crack Hitchcock's top 10 greatest films. What other director is great enough to be able to make the same great film twice and still come up short of his masterpieces?

Reviews:

Most Under-rated Hitchcock Movie

Joe Carlton (ex TCM.com)

- 14/05/17

For various reasons, both the critics and much of the Hitch fan base does not seem to rate this movie much above average. However, for this movie fan who has seen nearly all of the Hitch repertoire, this is one of his stand-out best productions. Many critics often proclaim the first version of this movie which Hitch directed while residing in England in the 1930s as the better of the two; again, I disagree. Though the first version (which begins at a European ski resort instead of mysterious Morocco as was the setting in the second version) has its taut moments, the movie is lacking the grand scale found in the 1956 version. The first time I saw this movie about 16 years ago, my then 8 year old son watched it with me. Surprisingly, he was riveted by the movie, perhaps because the kidnapped victim was a young boy like himself. (In the first version, the kidnap victim is a young girl.) Most young people have no interest in old movies, but my son became an exception when he saw this one with me. I think one reason modern viewers don't rate this movie all that great is that the notion of a large gathering of people to hear a symphony orchestra perform seems quaint; most people under the age of 50 would prefer a rock concert or hip-hop party for the back-drop setting, much to my chagrin. Over the last 16 years, I have seen this movie several times, and I put it in the top 1% of the greatest movies ever...and among Hitchcock movies, I would put it right up there just behind *North by Northwest*, *Rear Window*, *Strangers on a Train*, and *Vertigo*...and slightly ahead of such great Hitch classics as *Psycho*, *the Birds*, *Dial M for Murder*, *the 39 Steps* and *Notorious*. By the way, two other under-rated Hitch movies I would recommend are *Saboteur* (1942) and *Marnie* (1964). *Saboteur* seems ahead of its time in its focus on foreign enemies plotting the destruction of US infrastructure. *Marnie* is a psychological thriller as good or better than the Best Picture winner *Rebecca*.

Bob Aulert – Culture Vulture

The 1956 version of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* has a unique place in the Alfred Hitchcock filmography. It's his only remake, produced 22 years after its initial version, and it's his only film to feature a musical number (the Oscar-winning "Que Sera, Sera"). It's part of Hitchcock's body of work from the 1950s; a period when he became renowned as "the master of suspense." Along with [Rear Window](#), [The Trouble With Harry](#), [Rope](#) and [Vertigo](#), it's one of the celebrated "Five Lost Hitchcocks" that were unavailable for decades because their rights were bought back by Hitchcock and willed to his daughter. The five were eventually re-released in theaters in the mid-1980s.

By the mid-1950s, Alfred Hitchcock had long been established in Hollywood. A recent hit TV series ; [Alfred Hitchcock Presents](#); had given him the opportunity to do densely crafted half-hour mystery thrillers for weekly television. His theatrical features became freer to use stories focused on darker issues, emotions and psychological factors. *The Man Who Knew Too Much* shows this assuredness.

By today's standards the film develops at a tedious pace; it's fully 45 minutes before the complete problem scenario is known. In Morocco, American tourists Dr. Ben McKenna

(James Stewart) and his wife Jo (Doris Day) are witness to the street killing of a Frenchman (Daniel Gelin) they've recently met. Before expiring, the victim whispers some amazing information to McKenna – a political assassination will soon take place in London. But McKenna is unable to tell the police 150150; conspirators have kidnapped his son to insure his silence. Even after English authorities deduce that something's afoot, the McKennas must act alone.

As a snowdrift grows from individual gently falling flakes, suspense is built slowly as Hitchcock parcels out information with an eyedropper. There's a minimum of dialog – facts are revealed by glances, tics, and omissions. There are many false starts and dead ends along the way, containing some of Hitchcock's most notable and suspenseful set pieces, including a murder attempt in Albert Hall and a false lead in a taxidermy shop that switches from chilling to hilarious in an instant. His use of scene blackouts and comic relief (especially the last line of the film) rank with his most distinctive.

The Albert Hall concert finale is a classic example of Hitchcock's use of music. It's also a reiteration of one of his standard themes: things begin in perfect order before degenerating into total chaos. Music is always an important component of any Hitchcock picture, but this film contains perhaps the pinnacle of his long-time collaboration with composer Bernard Hermann. Even the work being performed, "The Storm Cloud Cantata" represents the intrusion of nature's chaos into man's purportedly ordered world. Hitchcock sets this theme up visually by using a series of triads demonstrating the order before the chaos: first, he shows us the conductor (a Hermann cameo), the chorus, and orchestra. Next we see another group of three: the cymbalist (whose climactic cymbal crash will mask the assassin's gunshot), the assassin, and an accomplice. Then, three innocents: Dr. McKenna, Jo McKenna and the assassination target. Then events begin in parallel to disrupt order – the cymbalist picks up his instrument with his right hand, the assassin picks up his weapon with his right hand. It's a masterful 12-minute, 124-shot sequence that contains not one single word of spoken dialog; communicating solely through images and music, the editing building in tempo in time with the music.

Compared to its 1934 predecessor, this version is more technically accomplished and suspenseful than the action-oriented original. It's also an example of a change in female movie images from the 1930s to the 1950s. In the original, the heroine is a skilled shot who takes a high-profile role in the final rescue. Here, Doris Day represents a more stereotypical Cold War wife; she may be more observant than her husband, but is also more dependent on him to take action. There are still a few plot holes, particularly being asked to believe that an assassin firing at someone from over a hundred feet away would use a handgun, but these are minor. Or as Hitchcock himself once stated, "A critic who talks to me about plausibility is a dull fellow."