When the critics of Cahiers du cinéma began to outline their ideas about the director of a film as its ‘author’ with a ‘personal vision’ they chose certain established directors as examples.

One of the outcomes of the critical debate was the recognition that Hollywood directors working within the studio system could still be seen as creating something ‘personal’. Directors could bring their own sensibilities to films they were contractually obliged to ‘deliver’ and personalise them through stylistic features and/or by emphasising specific elements of the generic repertoires on which they were expecting to draw. Film critics began to recognise that films were interesting because of the individual and collective inputs of creative personnel – i.e. rather than because of the ‘content’ of the film.

The directors whose work was studied because of their skill in developing mise en scène elements in their films included Nicholas Ray, Otto Preminger and, later, Douglas Sirk. These directors also tended to work within genres or with certain kinds of narrative material which allowed their personal expression. Alfred Hitchcock did not necessarily develop a particular style of mise en scène. Instead it was his overall approach to creating film narratives and his development of a form of ‘romance thriller’ that led to the use of ‘Hitchcockian’ as an adjective – the ultimate accolade for a director with a personal vision.

Hitchcock attracted the attention of three of the five major critics-turned-directors at Cahiers. François Truffaut interviewed Hitchcock over several days in 1962 and published his interview material in 1967. Claude Chabrol and Eric Rohmer had already published a detailed study of ‘the first forty-four films of Alfred Hitchcock’ in 1958 (i.e. up to and including The Wrong Man in 1957). There are several reasons why Hitchcock so attracted the attention of this trio:

- the majority of Hitchcock films (certainly in the sound period) were ‘thrillers’ with romance elements – several others were melodramas;
- Hitchcock professed his determination to make ‘pure cinema’ – the primacy of ‘showing’ rather than relying on dialogue;
- Hitchcock’s own biography seemed to inform his treatment of selected material – i.e. his childhood fears, his Catholicism, his attitudes towards women and sexuality;
- a background in ‘silent cinema’ and particularly exposure to German expressionism was evident in his later films;
- Hitchcock ‘personalised’ his films via cameo appearances and through his promotional activities (including his TV series in the 1950s, Alfred Hitchcock presents);
- in relation to Hollywood as a studio system, Hitchcock was in an almost unique position, having arrived in the US under contract to the independent producer David O. Selznik and later operating with a large degree of autonomy and control as head of his own production unit on the studio lots of the majors on short-term contracts.

These features of Hitchcock’s work make it possible to argue strongly for Hitchcock as a producer-director of ‘personal projects’ during his Hollywood career (less so perhaps in the UK up to 1939). Even so, the auteurist argument is still undermined by the fact that anything labelled ‘Hitchcockian’ in the films of Alfred Hitchcock must also be considered in terms of Hitchcock’s regular collaborators including such influential figures as his wife Alma Reville as script editor, Bernard Herrmann as composer, Robert Burks as cinematographer and a number of key actors such as Cary Grant and James Stewart. Hitchcock’s projects were carefully selected.
but they were often adaptations, so rather than originating film narratives, Hitchcock could be said to have developed and presented them in his own style and with his own highly personal vision.

**Vertigo**
Hitchcock’s 1958 release of *Vertigo* was not at first particularly successful and its recent promotion to the top of the *Sight and Sound*’s critics’ list is the result of growing interest in the film as an inspiration for artists of various kinds since the 1990s.

*Vertigo* is an adaptation of a 1954 novella by two French writers Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac. They were known mainly for the novel which was adapted for *Les diaboliques* (France 1955), a successful thriller directed by Henri-Georges Clouzot – sometimes called ‘the French Hitchcock’. Clouzot purchased the rights to the novel which became *Les diaboliques* before Hitchcock could acquire them. This perhaps explains why Hitchcock turned to the third book by the pair (who were aware of his interest).

The novel *D'entre les morts* (*Among the dead*) – Hitchcock’s title came to him later – was set in Paris during the early months of the Second World War but Hitchcock quickly decided to shift the location to San Francisco and to rework the story, making significant changes to the ending and adding an important secondary character. According to Donald Spoto (1983: 387) Hitchcock’s eventual (third) writer Samuel Taylor was instructed not to read the original novel. Hitchcock had already visualised the set pieces and his interest was in the two central characters – he just needed the writer to supply dialogue and the vestige of a story.

The casting of the two leads was crucial and Hitchcock turned to James Stewart, managed by the agent Lew Wasserman (who worked closely with Hitchcock) and who had already appeared in three earlier Hitchcock productions, *Rope* in 1948, *Rear Window* in 1954 and the remake of *The ManWhoKnewTooMuch* in 1956. Stewart was one of the top male box office stars of the mid 1950s. In *Rear Window* he had been cast opposite Grace Kelly, Hitchcock’s ideal leading lady. But Kelly left the film industry after her marriage to Prince Rainier of Monaco and Hitchcock was searching for a replacement. His chosen candidate was Vera Miles, who he had cast opposite Henry Fonda in *TheWrongMan* (1957).

Hitchcock was furious when Miles turned down the chance to star in *Vertigo* because of her pregnancy for her third child. Later he would ‘punish’ her by offering her the secondary female role in *Psycho* behind Janet Leigh. The recent feature *Hitchcock* (US/UK 2012) dramatises these exchanges between Hitchcock and Miles. Some commentators have used stories like this to begin an argument that *Vertigo* is the ‘most personal’ of Hitchcock’s films.

**The Hitchcock blonde**
Any quick scan across Hitchcock’s career as a director since the early 1930s will quickly throw up the recurring presence of the typical Hitchcock ‘leading lady’. His early favourite was Madeleine Carroll then later Joan Fontaine and Grace Kelly. After Kelly, Doris Day, Vera Miles, Eva Marie Saint and Janet Leigh were leads before the final and, some would argue, problematic casting of Tippi Hedren in *Marnie*. Other female stars have appeared in Hitchcock’s films, including Ingrid Bergman and Marlene Dietrich, but it was those who were cast as ‘ice blondes’ who have attracted most attention.

One of the writers who has explored Hitchcock’s ‘Victorian’ attitudes towards men, women and sexuality is Paula Marantz Cohen in her 1995 book *Alfred Hitchcock:* The
Legacy of Victorianism. (Hitchcock was literally a Victorian baby, born in 1899.) Cohen suggests that in their different ways the two films that Hitchcock made in 1956/7 marked a transition in his work. *The Wrong Man* (first released in December 1956) is at first glance like a neo-realist study of a man who is falsely accused of a crime. The more he co-ordinates with the police, the more deeply he seems to be implicated in criminal activity and his family life begins to suffer. In fact, of course, the film is artfully constructed to give the impression of realism and Cohen argues that Hitchcock is using this pretence of realism to disguise the fact that he has changed his representation of the central male and female protagonists.

In his films up to this point, Cohen argues that the couple will be seen to draw together. When the man ‘acts’ in the face of adversity the woman will respond with a confident gaze/look that ‘saves’ the couple in various different ways. Cohen calls this the ‘daughter’s effect’ as if the relationship was based on a kind of family love. But this gaze does not materialise in *The Wrong Man* and the couple is broken up.

*Vertigo* is a film that appears to be the direct opposite of *The Wrong Man* as a dreamlike story about obsession, self-deception and idealised love. But it suggests the same lack of faith in the couple. What has gone is the sense of the strong male character and the confident female character who will work with him. Instead the male figure has almost disappeared as an action figure, his ability to act taken away by his fear of vertigo (acrophobia). Instead he is driven by an obsessive interest in a mysterious and idealised female figure who he will eventually attempt to construct as a vision to satisfy his own desire (which is essentially about looking rather than engaging with a ‘real’ woman).

This particular analysis may not necessarily be shared by audiences of the film but many critics have commented on Hitchcock’s casting of actors and his presentations of characters and gender relationships. His preference was always for actors who could portray elegant women – who he argued could be ‘brought down’ in the narrative, whereas “an actress without elegance, no matter how competent she might be, can never go up the scale…” (Gottlieb 95: 1995)

Similarly the male actors Hitchcock cast successfully tended to be those who could convey vulnerability, weakness or bemusement like James Stewart or Cary Grant. It’s hard to imagine Hitchcock casting John Wayne – but Sean Connery is actually very effective in *Marnie* (1964).

Hitchcock’s attempts to control actors and to make them conform to his ideas is another aspect of *Vertigo*’s production. Kim Novak was, according to Spoto, manipulated by Hitchcock. A play on Hitchcock’s treatment of Novak can be seen in *The Girl*, the BBC TV film from 2012 about the making of *The Birds* with Tippi Hedren in 1961. Hedren is shown in a first meeting with Hitchcock much as Spoto describes the first meeting with Novak.

Kim Novak was suggested to Hitchcock by Lew Wasserman who negotiated a loan from Columbia. James Stewart was loaned by Paramount for a future Columbia production. Novak was very much a ‘constructed’ star and Hitchcock used her appearance and, some critics have argued, her restricted range of performance, to good effect in representing the woman who has first to impersonate ‘Madeleine’ and then to be refashioned to resemble her.

Spoto argues that it is in *Vertigo* that Hitchcock reveals most about himself both in his direction of James Stewart who acts as his
alter ego and in his treatment/presentation of Kim Novak.

Vertigo as art work
Vertigo’s reputation as a film that has inspired other filmmakers and artists has grown since the 1990s. The film itself has been the inspiration for scenes in many films since 1958. The most obvious example is Brian De Palma’s Obsession in 1976. A more intriguing example is Suzhou River, a film set in Shanghai and made by the ‘Sixth Generation’ Chinese filmmaker Lou Ye in 2000. This film and a scene in Run Lola Run (Germany 1998) which clearly references a painting in Vertigo, were two of several indicators that Vertigo had an appeal for younger filmmakers in the 1990s.

A historical note
Part of Vertigo’s appeal in the UK is based on its lack of availability for several years in the 1970s and early 1980s. Legal disputes over rights issues meant that four of Hitchcock’s films, including Vertigo, could not be shown in the UK (and at that time the films didn’t exist on videotapes for sale). The subsequent re-release of the films attracted considerable attention.

The presentation
In the talk before the screening I’ll focus on four ways to conceive of Alfred Hitchcock as a filmmaker:

✦ ‘Alfie’ and ‘Hitch’ the boy from East London
✦ Alfred Hitchcock, the showman and self-publicist
✦ ‘Alfred Hitchcock’ the professional filmmaker working as an independent within the Hollywood studio system
✦ ‘Hitchcockian’ – the identity ascribed to the body of work created by Alfred Hitchcock

I’ll also introduce the production of Vertigo and use extracts from The Girl, Rear Window and other Hitchcock films to prepare students for the experience of watching the film.

Sources

The following pieces by Guardian writers focus on Hitchcock’s treatment of women in his films. There are numerous comments attached which help to present a long-standing debate about Hitchcock’s sexuality and presumed misogyny:

http://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2013/jan/15/hitchcock-women-fashion-designers

This (difficult) piece by John Conomos explores the range of intellectual activity around Vertigo at the time of two art exhibitions:


Roy Stafford 7/3/2014