

Nobody matched the master's wit

By Michael Blouen
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— Alfred Hitchcock never cracked a smile.

Yet, the element that separated him from countless other merchants of the macabre was his dry sense of humor. While other directors, such as William Castle ("The House on Haunted Hill"), Brian DePalma ("The Fury") and John Carpenter ("Halloween"), were able to imitate Hitchcock's editing style and camera techniques, they have never been able to capture the master's extraordinary wit. Hitchcock included comic scenes in his films not for relief, but to increase the tension. And he never lost the ability to make fun of himself.

He used his wit to scare the collective wits out of six decades of movie-goers. He'd never tell the kind of joke you'd hear at a men's club meeting. His humor was an iconoclastic concoction of Luis Bunuel's black, surreal sensibility and Evelyn Waugh's aristocratic satire — all washed down with a glass of vintage port.

Hitchcock realized that laughter is born in anxiety. After a preview showing of "Shadow of a Doubt," (1943) the composer of the score, Dimitri

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Tiomkin, was upset that people giggled in places, but Hitchcock was pleased. He knew that he had hit home — the audience's uncomfortable laughter was an expression of their terror.

The concept of cutting from a scene of excruciating suspense to one of genuine humor was a key to keeping viewers enthralled. In "Psycho," Hitchcock did it with dialogue. After Norman (Anthony Perkins) displays his stuffed owls to Marion (Janet Leigh) in the eerie darkness of the motel, they sit down for a sandwich. "You eat like a bird," says Norman. Marion, gazing up at his feathered friends, replies, "You'd know of course." And no one knew

better than Hitchcock the effect of this foreshadowing on the audience.

When parent's groups criticized his television show, "Alfred Hitchcock Presents," he replied that he was performing a public service by bringing "murder back into the home where it belongs" and fine-tuned his own sense of decorum by adding that "nothing offends my sense of decency more than the underworld thug who is able to murder anyone — even people to whom he has not been properly introduced."

Hitchcock introduced audiences to a man who stuffed his mother with sawdust; birds who attacked humans; and an advertising executive who is almost killed on Mount Rushmore because of mistaken identity. Yet, all of these horrifying incidents are also Hitchcock's fascination with the absurd.

Hitchcock must have taken great delight in the notion that the shower scene in "Psycho" kept people on the edge of their seats and out of the shower for years. "They believed that it might happen to them," he said. "Even though they knew it was only a movie."

"The movies are nothing but a way to tell a story to a child," he said. "You want to keep their attention without frightening them to death. If you stop to examine any of my plots, they're all ridiculous."

Sometimes Hitchcock was not above ridiculing himself. His cameo appearances became a visual trademark that peaked when he wore a bowler upside down on his head in "Frenzy." "It was one of the few times that I ever had an obscene shot in a film," he said. "The inverted hat reminded me of an egg cup and the egg cup reminded me of eggs and there's nothing more obscene among God's creations than an egg."

This film also marked Hitchcock's transformation from the understated humor of "North by Northwest," where the sexual relationship between Cary Grant and Eva Marie Saint is suggested by the final Freudian scene of a train entering a tunnel, to the overstated gruesomeness of this 1975 release. Hitchcock cuts from the killer breaking the fingers of his victim to retrieve incriminating evidence to the detective breaking a bread stick over dinner. The sound is identical and the humor grotesque.

But his self-deprecating humor remained dignified. He defined a good movie as one in which the "babysitter and dinner were worth it" and characterized his own reputation as a genius of the cinema as "a press agent's dream and my nightmare."

He could even joke about death.

"They say that when a man drowns, his entire life flashes before his eyes," Hitchcock told the audience, including Princess Grace of Monaco, at the Film Society of Lincoln Center tribute to him in 1974. "I've had the same experience tonight without getting my feet wet."