



Blackmail

Director: Alfred Hitchcock
Production Company:
British International Pictures
Assistant Director: Frank Mills
Adaptation: Alfred Hitchcock
Based on the play by: Charles Bennett
Director of Photography: Jack Cox
Editor: Emile de Ruelle
Art Director: W.C. Arnold
Studio: Elstree Studios
uncredited
Producer: John Maxwell
Camera Assistant: Derick Williams
Clapper Boy: Ronald Neame
Camera Assistant: Alfred Roome
Stills: Michael Powell

Cast:

Anny Ondra (*Alice White*)
Sara Allgood (*Mrs White*)
Charles Paton (*Mr White*)
John Longden (*Frank Webber*)
Donald Calthrop (*Tracy*)
Cyril Ritchard (*Crewe, the artist*)
Hannah Jones (*the landlady*)
Sam Livesey (*the chief inspector*)
uncredited
Percy Parsons (*arrested man*)
Johnny Butt (*doorman*)
Phyllis Konstam (*gossiping neighbour*)
Ex. Det. Sgt. Bishop (*the detective sergeant*)

UK 1929
76 mins
Digital

With live piano accompaniment by
Costas Fotopoulos

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BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Blackmail

+ intro by Bryony Dixon, BFI National Archive Curator (Wednesday 25 October)

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Hitchcock's first (part-)talkie, about a detective's fiancée who finds herself in deep trouble after an encounter with a predatory painter, is renowned for its expressionist use of sound and a climactic chase that makes imaginative use of the British Museum. Michael Powell, officially stills photographer, claimed to have worked on the script and come up with the idea for the famous finale.

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Thirty-year-old Alfred Hitchcock was in a good position as British cinemas wired for sound in 1929. He had nine solo features under his belt, but he was keen to maintain his prime status as sound film developed. To this end he pulled off a master stroke, directing both a clever sound and a brilliant silent version of the same film. The whole project looks like a calling card for the attention of the top studios.

In *Blackmail*, he selected a taut thriller, a genre about to become a fixture in 1930s Hollywood. The first seven minutes is a tour de force of silent film editing, showing the ruthless hunting down, integration and imprisonment of a felon by the London police. This sets the tone for the main plot concerning a case of date-rape, murder and blackmail – all of which concludes with a classic Hitchcock chase over the roof of the British Museum.

Bryony Dixon

Alfred Hitchcock: 'My Own Method'

Many people think a film director does all his work in the studio, drilling the actors, making them do what he wants. That is not at all true of my own methods, and I can write only of my own methods. I like to have a film complete in my mind before I go on the floor. Sometimes the first idea one has of a film is of a vague pattern, a sort of haze with a certain shape. There is possibly a colourful opening developing into something more intimate; then, perhaps in the middle, a progression to a chase or some other adventure; and sometimes at the end the big shape of a climax, or maybe some twist or surprise. You see this hazy pattern, and then you have to find a narrative idea to suit it. Or a story may give you an idea first and you have to develop it into a pattern.

Imagine an example of a standard plot – let us say a conflict between love and duty. This idea was the origin of my first talkie, *Blackmail*. The hazy pattern one saw beforehand was duty – love – love versus duty – and finally either duty or love, one or the other. The whole middle section was built up on the theme of love versus duty, after duty and love had been introduced separately in turn. So I had first to put on the screen an episode expressing duty.

I showed the arrest of a criminal by Scotland Yard detectives, and tried to make it as concrete and detailed as I could. You even saw the detectives take the man to the lavatory to wash his hands – nothing exciting, just the routine of duty.

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Blackmail

Wed 25 Oct 18:30 (+ intro by Bryony Dixon, BFI National Archive Curator); Sun 5 Nov 12:00

Black Orpheus

Thu 26 Oct 20:35; Wed 15 Nov 18:00 (+ intro by journalist and broadcaster Kevin Le Gendre)

Wings of Desire

Der Himmel über Berlin
Fri 27 Oct 18:00; Tue 21 Nov 14:30; Sat 25 Nov 20:25

Do the Right Thing

Sat 28 Oct 20:40; Fri 17 Nov 18:10

The Queen of Spades

Sun 29 Oct 12:20; Tue 31 Oct 14:40; Wed 8 Nov 18:20 (+ intro by Josephine Botting, BFI National Archive Curator); Thu 16 Nov 20:40

Casablanca

Mon 30 Oct 14:30; Sat 18 Nov 11:40

French Cancan

Wed 1 Nov 14:30; Thu 9 Nov 20:30

Blood and Sand

Wed 1 Nov 18:10 (+ intro); Sat 18 Nov 20:30

Orlando

Thu 2 Nov 20:50; Fri 10 Nov 14:30; Wed 29 Nov 18:20 (+ intro by writer, curator and researcher Jenny Chamarette)

The Grand Budapest Hotel

Fri 3 Nov 20:50; Sat 11 Nov 20:40; Fri 24 Nov 18:15

The Age of Innocence

Sat 4 Nov 14:20; Mon 13 Nov 17:50; Tue 28 Nov 20:20

The Private Life of Henry VIII

Tue 7 Nov 20:50; Mon 27 Nov 14:40

Phantom Thread

Fri 10 Nov 10:30; Thu 23 Nov 20:30

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Sun 12 Nov 12:00

La Ronde

Tue 14 Nov 20:45; Sun 19 Nov 12:00; Thu 30 Nov 18:20

The Tempest

Sat 18 Nov 13:00; Wed 22 Nov 18:20 (+ intro by Claire Smith, BFI National Archive Senior Curator)

Pandora and the Flying Dutchman

Mon 20 Nov 20:30

An American in Paris

Thu 23 Nov 18:00; Sun 26 Nov 11:30

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Then the young detective says he's going out that evening with his girl, and the sequence ends, pointing on from duty to love. Then you start showing the relationship between the detective and his girl: they are middle-class people. The love theme doesn't run smoothly; there is a quarrel and the girl goes off by herself, just because the young man has kept her waiting a few minutes. So your story starts; the girl falls in with the villain – he tries to seduce her and she kills him. Now you've got your problem prepared.

Next morning, as soon as the detective is put on to the murder case, you have your conflict – love versus duty. The audience know that he will be trying to track down his own girl, who has done the murder, so you sustain their interest: they wonder what will happen next.

The blackmailer was really a subsidiary theme. I wanted him to go through and expose the girl. That was my idea of how the story ought to end. I wanted the pursuit to be after the girl, not after the blackmailer. That would have brought the conflict on to a climax, with the young detective, ahead of the others, trying to push the girl out through a window to get her away, and the girl turning round and saying: 'You can't do that – I must give myself up.' Then the rest of the police arrive, misinterpret what he is doing, and say, 'Good man, you've got her,' not knowing the relationship between them.

Now the reason for the opening comes to light. You repeat every shot used first to illustrate the duty theme, only now it is the girl who is the criminal. The young man is there ostensibly as a detective, but of course the audience know he is in love with the girl. The girl is locked up in her cell and the two detectives walk away, and the older one says, 'Going out with your girl to-night?' The younger one shakes his head. 'No. Not to-night.'

That was the ending I wanted for *Blackmail*, but I had to change it for commercial reasons. The girl couldn't be left to face her fate. And that shows you how the films suffer from their own power of appealing to millions. They could often be subtler than they are, but their own popularity won't let them.

But to get back to the early work on a film. With the help of my wife, who does the technical continuity, I plan out a script very carefully, hoping to follow it exactly, all the way through, when shooting starts. In fact, this working on the script is the real making of the film, for me. When I've done it, the film is finished already in my mind. Usually, too, I don't find it necessary to do more than supervise the editing myself.

Alfred Hitchcock, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1937