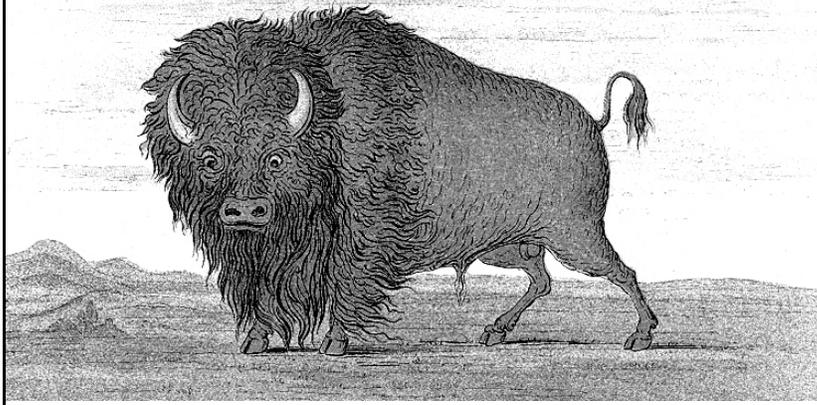


The Buffalo Film Seminars



Conversations about great films
with Diane Christian & Bruce Jackson

ALFRED HITCHCOCK (13 August 1899, London—29 April 1980, Los Angeles, liver failure and heart problems) was nominated for 5 best director Academy Awards (*Psycho* 1960, *Rear Window* 1954, *Spellbound* 1945, *Lifeboat* 1944, *Rebecca* 1940) and one best picture Academy Award (*Suspicion* 1941) but the only one he ever got was the Thalberg Award in 1980. That was a very good year for him: he also received a Legion of Honor from the French government and a knighthood from the queen. Directors Eric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol wrote of him, “Hitchcock is one of the greatest inventors of form in the history of cinema. Perhaps the only filmmakers who can be compared with him in this respect are Murnau and Eisenstein. . . . Here, form does not merely embellish content, but actually creates it.” François Truffaut wrote that Hitchcock had “a unique ability to film the thoughts of his characters and make them perceptible without resorting to dialogue,” and that he was “almost unique in being able to film directly, that is, without resorting to explanatory dialogue, such intimate emotions as suspicion, jealousy, desire, and envy.” Critic Andrew Sarris wrote, “What has been most disturbing in Hitchcock’s films—the perverse ironies, the unresolved ambiguities, the switched protagonists—now marks him as a pioneer in the modern idiom in which nothing is what it seems on the surface.” Hitchcock left nothing to chance, not even that famous image of him as the plump solemn joker with a taste for the macabre: that was the product of a PR company he set up in the 1930s. Hitchcock began in film as a title designer and art director and he claimed he storyboarded (made scene and motion sketches) for every shot in every one of his 62 films. Some of his other films are *Frenzy* 1972, *The Birds* 1963, *North by Northwest* 1959, *Vertigo* 1958, *The Man Who Knew Too Much* 1956, *To Catch a Thief* 1955, *Dial M for Murder* 1954, *Rope* 1948, *Notorious* 1946, *The Lady Vanishes* 1938, *The Man Who Knew Too Much* 1934 *Blackmail* 1930 (the first British talkie), and *The Lodger* 1926.

ROBERT DONAT (18 March 1905, Withington, Manchester, England—9 June 1958, London, England chronic asthma attack) appeared in 20 films, the best known of which was *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* 1939, for which he won a best actor Oscar. Some of the others are *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness* 1958, *The Citadel* 1938, *The Ghost Goes West* 1935, *The Count of Monte Cristo* 1934, *The Private Life of Henry VIII* 1933, and *That Night in London* 1932.

MADELEINE CARROLL (26 February 1906, West Bromwich, West Midlands, England—2 October 1987, Marbella, Spain, pancreatic cancer) acted in 43 films, including *My Favorite Blonde* 1942, *Virginia* 1941, *North West Mounted Police* 1940, *My Son, My Son* 1940, *Cafe Society* 1939, *The Prisoner of Zenda* 1937, *The General Died at Dawn* 1936, *Secret Agent* 1936, *I Was a Spy* 1933, *French Leave* 1930, *School for Scandal* 1930, and *What Money Can Buy* 1928. After her sister was killed in a German air raid in WWII, she abandoned her film career, with three exceptions: *Lady Windemere’s Fan* 1949, *An Innocent Affair* 1948 and *White Cradle Inn* 1947.



THE 39 STEPS (1935). 86 min
Directed by Alfred Hitchcock
Based on the novel by John Buchan
Adaptation by Charles Bennett
Dialogue by Ian Hay
Produced by Michael Balcon and Ivor Montagu
Cinematography by Bernard Knowles
Film Editing by Derek N. Twist

Robert Donat...Richard Hannay/Mr. Hammond/
Capt. Fraser/Henry Hopkinson
Madeleine Carroll...Pamela/Mrs. Henry Hopkinson
Lucie Mannheim...Miss Annabella Smith
Godfrey Tearle...Professor Jordan
Peggy Ashcroft...Margaret, crofter's wife
John Laurie...John, crofter
Helen Haye...Mrs. Louisa Jordan
Frank Cellier...Sheriff Watson
Wylie Watson...Mr. Memory
Alfred Hitchcock...Littering man near music hall

PEGGY ASHCROFT (22 December 1907, Croydon, Surrey, England—14 June 1991, London, England, stroke) was primarily a stage actress, but she also acted in 35 films and tv miniseries, including *Madame Sousatzka* 1988, "A Perfect Spy" 1987, "The Jewel in the Crown" 1984, *A Passage to India* 1984, "Edward & Mrs. Simpson" 1978, *Joseph Andrews* 1977, *Sunday Bloody Sunday* 1971, *The Nun's Story* 1959, *The Tempest* 1939 (TV), *Rhodes of Africa* 1936, and *The Wandering Jew* 1933. She won an Oscar for best actress in a supporting role for *A Passage to India*. Queen Elizabeth made her Dame of the British Empire in 1956.

**Conversation with Hitchcock in *Who The Devil Made It?*,
Peter Bogdanovich. Ballantine Books NY 1997**

In The 39 Steps, as in all your chase films, you have the hero fleeing from both the police and the real criminals.

One of the reasons is a structural one. The audience must be in tremendous sympathy with the man on the run. But the basic reason is that the audience will wonder, "Why doesn't he go for the police?" Well, the police are after him, so he can't go to them, can he?

Isn't it [Robert] Donat's sense of guilt that makes him so fervent?

Well, yes, to some degree. In *The 39 Steps*, maybe he feels guilt because the woman was so desperate at the beginning and he didn't protect her enough—he was careless and she got killed.

Is it one of your favorite films? I think it's the best of the British pictures.

Yes. Pretty much. What I liked about it were the sudden switches and the jumping from one situation to another with such rapidity. Donat leaping out of the window of the police station with half a handcuff on, and immediately walking into a Salvation Army Band, darting down an alleyway and into a room. "Thank God you've come, Mr. So-and-so," they say. And put him onto a platform. A girl comes along with two men, takes him in a car to the police station, but not really to the police station—they are two spies. The rapidity of the switches, that's the great thing about it. If I did *The 39 Steps* again, I would stick to that formula, but it really takes a lot of work. You have to use one idea after another, and with such rapidity.

As you did in North by Northwest.

Yes, that's sort of the American *39 Steps*.

Saboteur [1942] was a pretty good stab at it too.

Yes. But I remember the opening of *The 39 Steps*: The leading critic on London's *Observer*—I think it was Caroline [C.A.] Lejeune—was sitting next to the *Daily Express* reviewer. They're watching the scene at the inn where Madeleine Carroll at last releases one handcuff from Robert Donat. They're lying on the bed together and she gets up and looks at him and then lays the blanket over him very sentimentally. And this *Express* critic turned to the *Observer* woman and said, "Oh God, here we go again—love's young dream!" And then I had Madeleine Carroll lie down on the sofa, and after a minute, she shivered and leaned over and pulled the blanket back off him and put it over herself.

Did your famous MacGuffin theory originate on this film?

I suppose back to any of the earliest spy stories—certainly in *The 39 Steps* and *The Man Who Knew Too Much*—because, you know, a spy is always *after* something. And what is he after? I remember in that picture the chase went to Scotland, and we were going to have underground aerodromes in the sides of mountains, and it ended up with Mr. Memory talking a lot of gibberish, which was supposed to be some kind of formula about something. But you see, a MacGuffin is something that the *characters* worry about but

the audience does *not*. You've got to have it in a spy story, but it really doesn't matter. In *North by Northwest*, I sort of bleached it out to its minimum. Cary Grant says, "What's this man up to?" And Leo G. Carroll answers, "Well, let's say he's an importer and an exporter." "What of?" "Government secrets." That was enough. But a lot of people think the MacGuffin is the most vital thing in a picture—and it's the least important.

Where did the MacGuffin get its name?

I forget who coined it—I think it was a scenario editor called Angus MacPhail back in the old Gaumont-British days. It comes from a story: There are two men sitting in a train going to Scotland and one man says to the other, "Excuse me, sir, but what is that strange parcel you have on the luggage rack above you?" "Oh," says the other, "that's a MacGuffin." "Well," says the first man, "what's a MacGuffin?" The other answers "It's an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands." "But," says the first man, "there *are* no lions in the Scottish Highlands." "Well," says the other, "then that's no MacGuffin." Which, you see, reduces it to the absurd.

**Hitchcock, Sir Alfred (Joseph) from *World Film Directors V. I.*
Ed. John Wakeman. The H.W. Wilson Co., NY 1987. Entry by
Philip Kemp**

He was the third and youngest child of William Hitchcock, a greengrocer and poulterer, and his wife Emma (born Whalen). Hitchcock's father seems to have been a stern, rather distant figure; his mother he recalled as a placid woman, "shaped like a cottage loaf." Both his parents were Catholics, and he grew up in what he later depicted as a somewhat stifling atmosphere of working-class respectability and strict Catholic morality...Hitchcock's preoccupation with guilt may have been further developed by his education, from 1908 onwards, at St. Ignatius College, Stamford Hill, where the Jesuit fathers dispensed corporal punishment with pious rigor. "It wasn't casually done, you know. It was rather like the execution of a sentence....You spent the whole day waiting for the sentence to be carried out."

When Hitchcock was fourteen his father died....He was sent to the London School of Engineering and Navigation, where he studied mechanics, electricity, acoustics, and navigation. His training completed, he took a job with the W.T. Henley Telegraph Company as a technical clerk, and stayed there throughout the First World War. (He was turned down for active service on medical grounds, being then, as he would always remain, considerably overweight.) After some years of boredom checking estimates, his graphic skills got him transferred to the company's advertising department, where the work was a good deal more interesting....His chance came in 1919, when he heard that Famous Players-Lasky (later to become Paramount) were opening a studio in Islington in North London. ...

Over the next two years Hitchcock designed title-cards for a dozen features produced at the Islington studios, while also serving the informal apprenticeship in every aspect of filmmaking

that formed the basis of his formidable technique. Nearly all the other personnel, and the working arrangements, were American—giving him, he always said, a professional head start over most of his compatriots. “All my early training was American, which was far superior to the British.”

Hitchcock took every opportunity to watch Murnau at work when filming *The Blackguard* (1925) in Germany. “*The Last Laugh* was almost the perfect film. It told its story . . . entirely by the use of imagery, and that had a tremendous influence on me. . . . My models were forever after the German filmmakers of 1924 and 1925. They were trying very hard to express ideas in purely visual terms.”

The Man Who Knew Too Much was warmly acclaimed by the critics ...[and] Balcon was happy for Hitchcock to proceed with his next project, an adaptation of John Buchan’s classic thriller *The 39 Steps* (1935). Working again with Reville and Bennett, and with a larger budget and bigger stars (Robert Donat and Madeleine Carroll), Hitchcock threw out large chunks of the novel and threw in a good deal more, but retained Buchan’s essential framework of a man suspected of murder and hounded across country by the police and by the spy ring responsible for the killing.

The most significant addition provided the fugitive with a female companion, to whom he spends much of the time handcuffed. Manacles, from *The Lodger* onwards, are something of a Hitchcock specialty, a vivid symbol of the humiliating process of the law; but in *The 39 Steps* they serve mainly as a source of humor and teasing sexual innuendo, as when Carroll, the first of Hitchcock’s long line of maltreated cool blondes, tries to remove her stockings while keeping Donat’s hand off her thighs. The film also marks the first appearance of the McGuffin, Hitchcock’s term (borrowed from Angus MacPhail) for a thriller’s nominal motivating factor—secret plans, miracle ingredient, priceless jewelry; in short something that matters vitally to the protagonists and not at all to the audience.

Drama, Hitchcock once suggested, is life “with the dull bits cut out,” a definition that certainly holds good for *The 39 Steps*. The action buckets along from incident to incident with infectious gusto, maintaining a constant level of high-spirited excitement and never giving the viewer a second to reflect on the rampant non sequiturs. It was around this time, François Truffaut observed, that Hitchcock “began...to sacrifice plausibility in favour of pure emotion.” Audiences evidently found the tradeoff highly acceptable; the film scored a huge success not only in Britain, where it was voted best Film of the Year, but also in America. Hollywood, always on the alert for poachable European talent, started to put out feelers.

Hitchcock was famous in the movie industry for the meticulous care with which he pre-planned his films, sketching out each shot and camera movement in detail and editing in camera. As he once remarked, not without satisfaction: “I used to shoot...in such a way that no one else could put the pieces together properly; the only way they could be edited was to follow exactly what I had in mind.” This goddam jigsaw cutting” (as Selznick termed it) resulted in amazingly economic shooting ratios....

As a result of Hitchcock’s systematic approach, the actual shooting and editing of a picture held (or so he claimed) little interest for him. “Creative work in the cutting is, for me, nonexistent, because it is designed ahead of time—pre-cut, which it should be.... I wish I didn’t have to shoot the picture. When I’ve

gone through the script and created the piece on paper, for me the creative work is done and the rest is just a bore.” André Bazin, visiting the set of *To Catch a Thief*, was disconcerted to find the great director slumped comatose in his chair during a shot, inattentive, or perhaps even asleep. (Asked once why he didn’t simply delegate the shooting to someone else, Hitchcock responded, “They might screw it up.”)

One of Hitchcock’s virtually single-handed achievements was to raise the cinematic status of the thriller to parity with the other main movie genres. At the outset of his Hollywood career, thrillers, no matter how stylishly executed, were by definition B-Movie fodder, with players and budget ranked accordingly, and a major star like Gary Cooper could still turn down *Foreign Correspondent* (1940) as a “mere thriller,” unworthy of his consideration. Hitchcock had to settle for Joel McCrea, whom he found “too easy-going,” and Laraine Day as co-star.

“One of the main essentials in constructing a story,” Hitchcock always insisted, “is to make sure that ...your villain doesn’t behave like one or even look like one...He has to be charming, attractive. If he weren’t, he’d never get near one of his victims.”

“Hitchcock’s view of the world, according to Thomas Hemmeter, is “a volatile duality of order and chaos, where the forces of order are but a frail hedge against arbitrary eruptions of disorder from nature, society, or from within the mind, The criminal, the psychotic and the demonic intrude with brutal violence into the lives of law-abiding, normal people; they are either destroyed or learn to see the world and themselves as Hitchcock does: as an anxious mixture of normal and abnormal, innocence and guilt, public and private, whose apparent duality is more a conventional illusion than a reality.” This Manichean schema, adduced by some writers as evidence of Hitchcock the stern Catholic moralist, stands out clearly in *Shadow of a Doubt*, where heroine and villain are namesakes, two sides of a single nature.

By now [mid-fifties]. Hitchcock was probably the best-known film director in the world, rivaled only (barring actor-directors like Chaplin) by Cecil. B. DeMille; one of the few whose name on a poster could attract an audience irrespective of the actors involved. But he was about to become even better known, as the first major Hollywood director to concern himself wholeheartedly with television. In October 1955, the first *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* was transmitted by CBS, produced by his old associate Joan Harrison. The series, and its successor *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour*, ran continuously until 1965; of the 350-odd episodes, Hitchcock himself directed twenty. Much of their huge success derived from the famous prologues and epilogues, scripted by James Allardice and invariably delivered by Hitchcock himself straight to camera in characteristic deadpan style. These lugubrious performances, preceded by his caricature self-portrait and bouncily sinister signature tune (Gounod’s “Funeral March of a Marionette”) made him a national figure, better known than most movie stars. The Hitchcock publicity machine soon developed into a whole industry; spinoffs from TV shows included short-story anthologies (*Stories They Wouldn’t Let Me Do on TV*, and so forth), magazines, records, games, toys, and even an Alfred Hitchcock Fan club.

At the same time, Hitchcock’s reputation was also receiving a boost on a more elevated intellectual plane. Serious critical

opinion had largely tended to ignore him or dismiss him as a provider of skilled but trivial entertainments. In the 1950s, though, Hitchcock became, with Hawks, one of the chief beneficiaries of the *Cahiers* school of criticism. A mass of articles, culminating in Rohmer and Chabrol's controversial study and Truffaut's book-length interview, confirmed Hitchcock's status as one of the great cinema *auteurs* and a fit subject for critical exegesis. This evidently afforded him huge delight. To his numerous interviewers he was invariably polite and forthcoming, rarely venturing the discourtesy of straight disagreement; at most he would evade the issue or deflect the question into one of his many well-polished anecdotes.

If during the first half of his long cinematic career Alfred Hitchcock received less than his critical due, that situation has been amply remedied; he has now been more extensively written about, his work analyzed in greater detail, than any other film director. The flood of books and articles continues, and still the great Hitchcock debate shows no sign of subsiding. Joseph Sgammato neatly summarized the two main camps: "On the one hand are those who think that since Hitchcock's films have nothing to say, he is not a major artist, while on the other are those who think that since Hitchcock is a major artist, his films must be saying something." This may be oversimplifying matters a little. That Hitchcock is a great director is probably no longer in dispute; the point at issue is, just *how* great?

Hitchcock's status as an *auteur*—despite his having worked exclusively within the distorting pressures of the commercial Anglo-American cinema—is as secure as any director in the world; no one could deny his films a consistent stylistic and thematic vision. His technical expertise is immense. Yet when his admirers number him among "the world's greatest filmmakers" (Maurice Yacowar) or even among "the greatest living artists" (Jacques Leduc), doubts begin to surface. "The greatest" is playing for high stakes—line Hitchcock up alongside Renoir, Satyajit Ray, Ophuls, or Mizoguchi (to name only moviemakers), and at once a whole missing dimension becomes evident. (It must be admitted, though, that any one of those four would have made a fairly appalling hash of *North by Northwest*.) The famed control, the pre-meditated, pre-edited exactitude of his working method, preclude something to which the creative imperfection of less rigorous directors grants access—something which Robin Wood defined (apropos Renoir) as "the sense of superfluous life."

At its bluntest, the anti-Hitchcockian position was stated by Lindsay Anderson in *Sequence* (Autumn 1949): "Hitchcock has never been a serious director. His films are interesting neither for their ideas nor for their characters." Similarly, if more sympathetically, Hollis Alpert wrote that "he is not more serious because it is impossible for him to be serious. He has tried to be, on occasion, but it hasn't worked well....Try to sum up his films in terms of their content, and you will discover at best an enigma, a worst a vacuum....Throughout his long and successful career he has entertained and surprised, but he has said nothing."

Adverse criticism of Hitchcock has often focused on his characters, whom he regarded, according to one of his screenwriters, John Michael Hayes, "not as people, but as means to an end.

Against this, Hitchcock's advocates would maintain that such critics confuse lucidity with superficiality. Truffaut observed that "the director who, through the simplicity and the clarity of his work, is the most accessible to a universal audience is also the director who excels at filming the most complex and subtle

relationships between human beings....Hitchcock belongs ...among such artists of anxiety as Kafka, Dostoevsky, and Poe." From this angle, the mass appeal of Hitchcock's films derives not from cynical commercialism but from the universality of his concerns. "This guilt which he is so skillful in bringing to the surface," according to Rohmer and Chabrol, "is...part of our nature, the heritage of original sin." Or, as Andrew Sarris put it (*Village Voice*, May 12, 1980), in less theological terms: "Paradoxically, Hitchcock produced works of great and enduring artistry because he was fortunate enough to come upon the one medium for which his limited range of experience could be profoundly expressive of a universal malaise....He imprisoned himself within certain genre conventions, and then liberated himself by an unusual mixture of formal premeditation and artful digression."

The perennial interest of Hitchcock's films to critics (as to audiences) is understandable enough. The dazzling surface—the visual and structural arabesques, the technical bravura, the sardonically sophisticated interplay posited between spectator and spectacle—offers a virtually inexhaustible field for critical analysis, material to dissect and refract from an infinity of angles.

Other directors plumb depths which his films rarely even approach and never equal; whole vast areas of human experience lie far outside the scope of his vision. Yet he defined and dominated his chosen genre as no other filmmaker in any other genre has ever done. Truffaut wrote in 1966 that when a director "sets out to make a thriller or a suspense picture, you may be certain that in his heart of hearts he is hoping to live up to one of Hitchcock's masterpieces."

Andrew Sarris: "What has been most disturbing in Hitchcock's films—the perverse ironies, the unresolved ambiguities, the switched protagonists—now marks him as a pioneer in the modern idiom in which nothing is what it seems on the surface."

Eric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol from *Hitchcock*

Hitchcock is one of the greatest inventors of form in the history of cinema. Perhaps the only filmmakers who can be compared with him in this respect are Murnau and Eisenstein. . . . Here, form does not merely embellish content, but actually creates it.

Truffaut: ...a unique ability to film the thoughts of his characters and make them perceptible without resorting to dialogue—to my way of thinking this makes him a realistic director.

The rule of counterpoint between dialogue and image achieves a dramatic effect by purely visual means. Hitchcock is almost unique in being able to film directly, that is, without resorting to explanatory dialogue, such intimate emotions as suspicion, jealousy, desire, and envy.

Hitchcock belongs—and why classify him at all?—among such artists of anxiety as Kafka, Dostoevsky and Poe.

AH said:

"Cinema is the orchestration of shots."

"I don't believe in mystifying an audience. I believe in giving them all the information and then making them sweat."

"I'm not interested in content. It disturbs me when people criticize my films because of their content. It's like looking at a still life and saying 'I wonder whether those apples are sweet or sour.' Cinema is form."

About showing detail: "If you free the spectator to choose, you're making theater, not cinema."

"I'd compare myself to an abstract painter. My favorite painter is Klee."

"Staircases are very photogenic."

About the cigarette put out in eggs— "to show my utter dislike of eggs."

"You know, people say that you can cut a film and make it go fast. I don't believe that. Speed is preoccupation. In *The 39 Steps* there was no dead footage, so the audience's absorption creates the impression of speed."

"I didn't walk into this business without proper knowledge of it. I've been a technician; I've been an editor; I've been an art director; I've been a writer. I have a feeling for all these people. I fill my responsibility to myself by the manner in which I make films."

"We've substituted the language of the camera for dialogue."

"The more successful the villain, the more successful the picture."

"Some films are slices of life. Mine are slices of cake."

**John Buchan, *The Thirty Nine Steps*,
Chapter 1 The Man who Died**

I RETURNED from the City about three o'clock on that May afternoon pretty well disgusted with life. I had been three months in the Old Country, and was fed up with it. If anyone had told me a year ago that I would have been feeling like that I should have laughed at him; but there was the fact. The weather made me liverish, the talk of the ordinary Englishman made me sick, I couldn't get enough exercise, and the amusements of London seemed as flat as soda-water that has been standing in the sun. 'Richard Hannay,' I kept telling myself, 'you have got into the wrong ditch, my friend, and you had better climb out.'

It made me bite my lips to think of the plans I had been building up those last years in Bulawayo. I had got my pile—not one of the big ones, but good enough for me; and I had figured out all kinds of ways of enjoying myself. My father had brought me out from Scotland at the age of six, and I had never been home since; so England was a sort of Arabian Nights to me, and I counted on stopping there for the rest of my days.

But from the first I was disappointed with it. In about a week I was tired of seeing sights, and in less than a month I had had enough of restaurants and theatres and race-meetings. I had no real pal to go about with, which probably explains things. Plenty of people invited me to their houses, but they didn't seem much interested in me. They would fling me a question or two about South Africa, and then get on their own affairs. A lot of Imperialist ladies asked me to tea to meet schoolmasters from New Zealand and editors from Vancouver, and that was the dismallest business of all. Here was I, thirty-seven years old, sound in wind and limb, with enough money to have a good time, yawning my head off all day. I had just about settled to clear out and get back to the veld, for I was the best bored man in the United Kingdom.

That afternoon I had been worrying my brokers about investments to give my mind something to work on, and on my way home I turned into my club—rather a pot-house, which took
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COMING UP IN THE BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS:

- February 1 Howard Hawks, *His Girl Friday* 1940
- February 8 Henri-Georges Clouzot *Le Corbeau* 1943
- February 15 John Huston, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* 1948
- February 22 Vincente Minelli *An American in Paris* 1951
- March 1 Ingmar Bergman *Wild Strawberries* 1957
- March 8 Andrzej Wajda *Ashes and Diamonds* 1958
- March 22 David Lean *Lawrence of Arabia* 1962
- March 29 John Frankenheimer *The Manchurian Candidate* 1962
- April 5 Sergio Leone *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* 1966
- April 12 Robert Bresson *Lancelot of the Lake* 1974
- April 19 Larissa Shepitko *The Ascent* 1976
- April 26 Akira Kurosawa *Ran* 1985

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