

CULTURE

50 Years On: Alfred Hitchcock's Troubled 'Marnie'

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Anyone who's delved into his oeuvre even a little bit knows that Alfred Hitchcock had some odd fixations and disturbing tendencies both as a director and as a man. Of course, these macabre idiosyncrasies are what made so many of his films shocking and riveting and re-watchable, fodder for endless analysis (both cinematic and psychological). But even so, "Marnie," which was released fifty years ago today, on July 22, 1964, is a special case. It's far down the list of most-mentioned Hitchcock works, but what a confounding film! Is it awful or brilliant? Empowering or misogynistic? Insightful and probing or facile and offensive? All of the above, perhaps?

For anyone who hasn't seen it, here's the basic plotline: A methodical, manipulative woman (Tippi Hedren) with major mommy issues charms male employers in order to steal from them, then gets blackmailed into marriage by a mark (Sean Connery, whose character is actually named "Mark") who finds her frostiness and thieving so intoxicating that he's fallen in love with her despite the fact that she recoils from any man's touch. Their relationship is, shall we say, *complicated*. Oscar-nominated screenwriter Jay Presson Allen ("Cabaret," "[The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie](#)") adapted the 1961 novel by prolific British author Winston Graham, whose work also inspired the crime dramas "She Played With Fire" (1957), "Carnival of Crime" (1962) and "The Walking Stick" (1970) as well as the mega-popular '70s BBC series "Poldark" (which gets a reboot next year). "Marnie" came right at the end of Hitchcock's most indelible run -- "Vertigo," "North by Northwest," "Psycho," and "The Birds" preceded it -- and the movie represents the end of an era, since much of the director's regular crew moved on afterward and he never used the "Hitchcock blonde" in the same way again.

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The Art of Hitchcock

by Donald S

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We may be living in the golden age of the anti-hero, but building a twisted melodrama around two extremely unlikable characters -- and Connery's predatory businessman is arguably more unsettling than Marnie -- was unusual at best in 1964. Hitchcock's personal obsessions were apparently getting the best of him at the same time; the director had discovered Hedren, a model, for "The Birds" and relentlessly tried to control her life and career. Adding a *frisson* to the film is the sexual tension behind the scenes, with Hedren later claiming that Hitchcock became increasingly possessive, vindictive, and sexually demanding during filming, to the point where they finally only spoke through an intermediary. (A fictionalized account of the relationship is depicted in the controversial 2012 HBO movie "The Girl," which was based on Donald Spoto's [Spellbound By Beauty: Alfred Hitchcock And His Leading Ladies](#).) As a result, the onscreen story is fraught with a corrosive meta subtext that ultimately signaled Hitchcock's decline.

Later on, debate about "Marnie" centered on whether her character's "frigidity" and deep distrust of men owed to her being a lesbian, a fact that could never be made explicit anyway in an era when the restrictive Hays Code forbid "any inference of sex perversion." As it turns out, the late reveal of Marnie's defining childhood trauma is more than enough to explain her loathing of men (and sexuality in general) without her being homosexual. But many have pointed to some coy imagery and a few lines of pointed dialogue to make their case that she is gay -- Her: "I am not like other people. You know what I am." Him: "Whatever you are, I love you." Her: "It's horrible."

Along with the "[The Children's Hour](#)" (1961), "[All About Eve](#)" (1950) and Hitchcock's own Best Picture-winning "[Rebecca](#)" (1940), adapted from the classic [Daphne du Maurier novel](#), "Marnie" has become one of the touchstones of mid-century Hollywood's treatment of homosexuality, however circumspect or imagined. The truth is, we don't have anywhere near the amount of space necessary here to trudge down all of the shadowy psychosexual alleys present in "Marnie," but that's precisely what's so fascinating about Hitchcock's work -- it's so rich with dark fetishes and weird insights and disconcerting real-world subtext that we can't stop talking about it. He was not like other people. We know what he is and love him anyway. And it's horrible.

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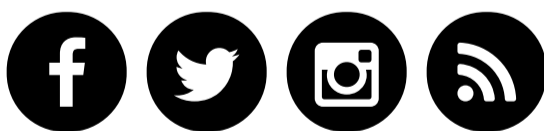
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