

## Alfred Hitchcock: A Master of Suspense

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**Abstract:** Alfred Hitchcock is widely recognized as an auteur filmmaker, primarily due to his distinctive approach to filmmaking. His vision and creative goals are consistently reflected throughout his body of work, indicating a strong authorial presence. This paper aims to analyze Hitchcock's personal style of creating suspense through form, content, themes, as well as narration strategies and stylistic features that make him an "auteur" filmmaker.

**Key words:** Alfred Hitchcock, Auteur, Suspense

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The first recurring strategy Hitchcock uses is providing the audience with more information than the characters have themselves. For example, the audience is forewarned that a crime is about to occur, often without the protagonist's awareness. This is evident at the beginning of *Dial M for Murder*, as the audience learns how a husband orchestrates a murder-for-hire while the heroine is kept in the dark. In *North by Northwest*, Hitchcock creates suspense by revealing the villain's plan to the audience before the protagonist is aware of anything. The audience sees the character of Phillip Vandamm discussing the killing of the decoy character, George Kaplan, while the protagonist, Roger Thornhill, is mistakenly chased, unaware of the situation. This intensifies the audience's anxiety and creates a sense of suspense over the characters.

Another common Hitchcockian tactic for creating suspense is the deliberate inclusion of irrelevant information and the use of contradictory information to confuse the viewer. For instance, in *Suspicion*, Hitchcock leads the audience to believe that a husband is about to kill his wife. Tension is built especially at the film's end when the husband carries a glass of milk up the stairs for his wife. However, in the end, it is revealed that the husband is trying to kill himself. In *The Lodger*, Hitchcock intentionally uses a masked protagonist to scare the landlady, and later zooms in on the protagonist's face when the husband falls and daughter giggles, hinting at his sensitivity to young women's voices and creating suspicion among the audience about his potential as the serial killer.

The final point is that Hitchcock had a knack for creating suspense in his films by manipulating time. In *Psycho*, he orchestrates a stare-down between the protagonist and the boss as the heroine drives away, designed to make viewers' hearts jump. The scene where Norman pushes a car into the swamp and the car suddenly jams, followed by a flash of unease on Norman's face, provokes audience's nervousness for him, despite being the killer. In *Vertigo*, the slow pacing, haunting score, and use of long takes as Scottie follows Madeleine around San Francisco builds a sense of tension and anticipation. Hitchcock uses flashbacks and dream sequences to blur the lines between reality and illusion, adding to the overall sense of suspense and unease. Through these techniques, Hitchcock's skillful manipulation of time helps keep the viewers on the edge of their seats to create suspense and excitement.

Alfred Hitchcock's film style, which is often associated with German Expressionism, is characterized by strong visual effects and use of distorted, exaggerated forms and shapes to express emotions and ideas. In *Vertigo* (Fig.1), Hitchcock's use of staircases as a visual motif to demonstrate characters' psychological ascension or descent into a chaotic state of mind, conveying a sense of disturbance or disorientation in their lives. In *Strangers on a Train*, the murder scene (Fig.2) is reflected in glasses that have fallen to the floor, creating a clever visual metaphor for the shattered sense of reality experienced by the protagonist after the murder of his wife.



Fig 1: Staircase in Vertigo



Fig 2: The murder scene in glasses

One of the primary ways in which Hitchcock's work reflects the influence of German Expressionism is through his use of shadow and light. *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, which is considered as one of the most influential German Expressionist films, clearly influenced Hitchcock's use of dark lighting and deep shadows to order to create a sense of psychological tension and unease to create horror and suspense.(Fig. 3-5)



Fig 3: Image from *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (Left)



Fig 4: Image from *The Lodger* (Right)



Fig 5: Image from Shadow of a Doubt

In addition to the masterful use of shadows and light, Hitchcock's camera and editing techniques are iconic and have contributed to his reputation as an auteur. For example, a range of techniques are employed to capture psychological tension in his films, such as long takes and distinct camera movements in *The Birds* and *Rope*, and innovative point-of-view shots in *North by Northwest*, *Rear Window*, and *Strangers on a Train* (Fig.6). In *Psycho*, editing skills are used to great effect by employing rapidly shot clips in the iconic shower scene (Fig.7) to create suspense, tension, and visceral terror. All of these techniques and processes combine to define the distinctive style of Hitchcock's films.



Fig 6 The POV shot in Strangers on a Train



Fig 7: Iconic shower scene in Psycho

In addition to 'man on the run' and 'women in peril', Hitchcock's films also have other recurring themes. Hitchcock had a talent for illustrating power dynamics and imbalances within society. He recurrently wrote protagonists who are falsely accused or punished for other peoples' mistakes. For example, the protagonists in *The Wrong Man* and *North by Northwest* are in trouble after being deceived and manipulated. This approach not only keeps the audience emotionally invested in the film but also creates tension and generates sympathy for the protagonists, as many viewers get to see them as victims of society's moral decadence or, in some cases, relate them to their own lives.

Hitchcock's ability to capture the sociopolitical contexts of his time in his films is a testament to his keen observation skills and political awareness. Such as *North by Northwest* and *The Birds*, reflected the fears and anxieties of the Cold War era and the sociopolitical upheavals of the 1960s. By infusing his works with deeper meanings and themes, Hitchcock engaged with the social and political issues

of his time. His politically informed filmmaking serves as a reminder of the power of cinema to reflect and shape cultural attitudes and values. Overall, Hitchcock's commitment to intellectually stimulating and socially relevant filmmaking has secured his place as a master of the art form.

Furthermore, Hitchcock tapped into the social and cultural attitudes surrounding gender and sexuality at the time. While he was depicting what society thought about women and gender roles in general at this time, many contemporary filmmakers have accused him of overly objectifying women in his work. In *Vertigo*, Hitchcock's depiction of women and his handling of the female characters can be easily characterized as misogynistic. The film's protagonist, Scottie, is depicted as a flawed person who cannot see beyond the beauty of Madeleine to appreciate her as a sophisticated human being with feelings. In the film, Scottie sees Madeleine as the perfect replacement for Judy, whom he had greatly loved. In *Rope*, Hitchcock's depictions of the homoerotic relationship between two male characters, Brandon and Philip, stretch acceptable societal norms of the time. Thus, Hitchcock was very explorative with respect to his films' social appeal.

Collaborations with other talented filmmakers were crucial in Hitchcock's filmmaking career. Joseph Stefano's introduction of crucial themes in *Psycho*, such as carnal desires and mental illness, added depth to the film's identity and success. Similarly, Ernest Lehman's recurring theme of mistaken identity in *North by Northwest* resonated with viewers' emotions and societal issues. Hitchcock's ability to work with writers who shared his artistic vision allowed him to craft stories that were both intellectually stimulating and emotionally engaging. Despite his reputation as a dominant filmmaker, he never collaborated with writers whose views he disagreed with. By doing so, he was able to produce films that resonated with audiences and tackled complex sociopolitical issues. Therefore, Hitchcock's success in cinematography was a result of his collaborative efforts with other talented filmmakers, allowing him to expand his creative process and produce compelling stories.

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