

How does alfred
hitchcock develop
tension and shock in
psycho and the birds



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Alfred Hitchcock was born in 1899 in Leytonstone, East London. He enjoyed reading novels by Dickens, G K Chesterton and Edgar Allan Poe. He was fascinated in crime and would go to see murder trials. He left school when he was 14.

He married Alma Reville in 1926 and they were married for over 50 years. Alma often assisted Alfred Hitchcock to make his films. In 1927, he directed a film called “ The Lodger” which was a silent film. “ Blackmail” (1929) was his first film with sound and was very successful.

His brilliant films of the 1930s were all thrillers and included “ The Thirty-Nine Steps” (1935) and “ The Lady Vanishes” (1938). The two films that I am going to analyse are “ Psycho” and “ The Birds”. He was considered a ‘ Master of Suspense’ because he achieved the element of suspense in almost all of his films, including “ Psycho”. Hitchcock was a great innovator in making his films fresh even as he used common themes. Hitchcock was very specific about the use of sound effects as a means of creating suspense. Music director Bernard Herrmann was most closely linked with Alfred Hitchcock.

He wrote the scores for every Hitchcock film from “ The Trouble with Harry” (1955) to “ Marnie” (1964), a period which included “ Vertigo”, “ Psycho” and “ North by Northwest”. Along with Herrmann, they directed the sound design in “ The Birds” (1963), although there was no real music in the film.

Hitchcock understood the importance of storyboarding and was able to see the entire movie in his head. Hitchcock also understood that from his days working in Black and White movies, that the camera can tell the story very

effectively when positioned correctly. Hitchcock's storylines can be misleading in order to keep the audience guessing and build suspense and tension. He also uses different camera angles, for example: extreme close up, point of view to create tension so that the audience can become more involved in the story.

"Psycho" and "The Birds" both open with a romance scene. The films both contain Alfred Hitchcock's favourite element called Voyeurism (this means that it is a practice in which an individual derives sexual pleasure from observing other people being naked or wearing underwear). He also uses calm periods to combine periods where moments of suspense are building up in a film. He does this because he wanted to attract more audience in his films by the use of adding more tension and suspense.

He used a limited number of shock scenes in "Psycho" to keep the audience anticipating and on edge. The three main moments of suspense in "Psycho" are: Arbogast climbing the stairs in the mansion besides the Bates' Motel, Marion's sister discovering the mother's skeleton in the cellar followed by Norman arriving with the knife dressed as his mother and thirdly Lila in Norman's mother's room. When Arbogast is climbing the stairs to investigate the Bates' Mansion, the music starts to rise. Tension is increased here by the music.

Once he reached the top, the audience got a jolt (the "mother" kills him and he falls back from the stairs). I will now take a detailed look at the famous shower scene shot by shot in "Psycho" which is a very good example of how Hitchcock creates tension and suspense: The first shot is a slightly high

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medium close up which focuses the camera behind Marion Crane. She can't see the audience and we can't see her. She looks smaller when we look closely at her. The second shot resembles the earlier shot, but the camera position moves slightly, and now focuses directly on her and we can see her face. She seems pretty relaxed in the shower.

In the next shot which is a point of view shot with a low angle and we have a close up of the shower head. This apparently strange shot creates a feeling of tension, as if something bad is going to happen. The fourth shot, a eye-level medium shot, shows her hair is dry because she is rubbing her arm with soap, and she's still enjoying the shower. We again anticipate that something bad is going to happen. The fifth shot is an eye-level medium shot again but this time, the camera position has moved.

The shower curtain is now visible in front of Marion because someone is coming towards her. The following shot shows a mysterious, unknown attacker coming straight for Marion in the shower. It's in a low angle medium close-up and we are able to see the attacker more clearly. The attacker's expression is not seen but the audience is sure that he/she is a frightening figure.

As the curtain is wrenched back chilling screeching violin strokes are introduced to suggest stabbing movements. The next shot is a slightly high angle close up. The shower is still running when Marion finds out that she was not alone and with her eyes closed, she screamed. The closed eyes of Marion suggested that she was crying for help. The eighth shot is a slightly high angle extreme close up; this was where the mouth of Marion Crane fills

the screen, the emotional impact is frightening and the music creates more tension around here. The following shot is an extreme low angle medium shot, this time it is focusing on a shadow.

We are looking at the unknown attacker who is attacking Marion Crane in the shower. Next shot we see is a high angle medium shot and we see the body of Marion Crane inside the shower, the expression is that she was still being stabbed by the unknown attacker. The twelfth shot in the series is an eye level close up of the hand of Marion Crane, she had been stabbed. She is on the floor, but her hand seemed to get a grip in standing up from the floor, but it can't. The next shot, which is the slight high angle medium close up, indicated that the hand, after trying to stand up, crashes to the floor.

The following shot is an extreme high angle medium shot, the feeling created after the stabbing was horrific. The water gets washed down the drain with the blood of Marion Crane flowing with it. The fifteenth shot is an extreme high angle extreme close up; the effect was still horrific to see from the plug to eye. The final shot is an eye level extreme close up; the effect of the dead eye filling the screen is very disturbing. Now, I am going to talk about another famous scene of "The Birds", which is the petrol station sequence. The first shot is a long shot, which is when birds start to attack innocent people.

This creates the starting point of suspense and shock. Suspense because the audience is starting to wonder whether the innocent people might survive the attack of the birds. There were also noises of people screaming and bird noises. The main character of the film, Melanie, goes inside the telephone

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booth for safety. The second shot is a medium shot which shows Melanie getting attacked by the birds. The audience also feels frightened for Melanie.

The following medium close-up shot is a Point of View shot. Melanie crouches down as the birds continue attacking Melanie and smashing the windows of the phone booth. We also feel frightened because we are very close to her at this point. The next shot is an extreme high angle medium shot of the phone booth which gives us a claustrophobic feel.

Melanie still feels scared and the birds are still attacking her. The birds are also creating chaos both outside and inside the phone booth. The close-up shot gives an emotional impact. Melanie's facial expression is scared as she tries to duck the attacks of the birds. The long shot outside the phone booth depicts the birds developing chaos. The audience gets to see the explosion with birds closing in for more chaos.

The close-up shot shows the vulnerable hands of Melanie indicating that she is still being attacked by the birds. More birds swirl in the background. Then comes a high angle close-up for claustrophobic feel, Melanie's facial expression clearly depicts her being scared, her hand being helpless as she tries to get out of the phone booth. The Eye level close-up shows Melanie seeing the birds developing more commotion.

A medium long shot shows the rest of the town getting attacked by the birds. Buildings being smashed and innocent people trying to take cover shocks the audience. The close-up shows a Point of View shot focusing on more birds smashing the phone booth in where Melanie was taking cover. The final shot is a medium long shot which shows that Melanie finally gets out of the <https://assignbuster.com/how-does-alfred-hitchcock-develop-tension-and-shock-in-psycho-and-the-birds/>

phone and runs into the cafe for more safety in case more birds attack.

Alfred Hitchcock uses many cinematic techniques to create suspense and shock in “ Psycho” and “ The Birds”.

These techniques include Voyeurism, careful manipulation of the camera and brilliant balancing of calm and tense moments. All of these combined to make the films memorable. His impressive uses of cinematic techniques make his films classic, and have earned him the title, Master of Suspense. One of the differences of these films is that one of them is black and white and one of them is colour. “ Psycho” is black and white because it was made quite early. “ The Birds” is colour because it came much later than Psycho when colour effect on television and film had been invented.

Another key difference is that “ Psycho” uses a limited number of shocks. The reason for it was that Hitchcock wanted to keep up the tension and suspense for the audience before the shock. However, in “ The Birds”, the director kept on giving shocks, to keep the film fast paced. I preferred “ The Birds” as my enjoyable film of Alfred Hitchcock because it is livelier and more interesting than “ Psycho”. It is fast paced and doesn’t keep much tension and suspense as it gets the film going by giving it a lot of action.