

Alfred hitchcock – the master of suspense essay sample



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Alfred Hitchcock was a British film director who was regarded as the most important director during the 1950s. He was called “ the master of suspense” for his pioneering technique in creating suspense in his movie. Therefore, understanding Hitchcock’s style of suspense is an important step in studying his films. This essay will introduce some of the films he had made and relationship between suspense and those films. Then, it will look into one of his most renowned films Vertigo, focusing on the main theme discussed and the suspense throughout the film. Finally, it will analyze one of the most remarkable senses in Vertigo, discussing how and why suspense is created, and the possible relationship between the main theme and suspense.

General Session

Alfred Hitchcock was born in London in 1899. He entered the film industry to work as a film title-writer in Paramount’s Famous Players-Lasky at Islington in 1920. Within thirteen years in his early film-making career, he made twenty-four films. The film *The Lodger* was Hitchcock’s first solely directed film. Later in 1929, he created the first British sound film called *Blackmail*. Other films he made in Britain includes: *Thirty Nine Steps* (1935), *The Secret Agent* (1936), *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), etc. His films are in the visual style of European art cinema, which means German expressionism and Soviet Montage. (Richard and Sam, 1999: 6) After success in Britain, he moved to America. However, at first he was only regarded as one of the immigrant directors over the period. In that space of ten years he made relatively minor films. Most important ones include: *Rebecca* (1940), *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) and *Spellbound* (1945). From 1948 -1963, Hitchcock’s name

recognition and popularity with the general public rose by a large extent. That was the time when he made the most popular films like Rear Window (1954), The Wrong Man (1956), Vertigo (1958), North by Northwest(1959), Psycho(1960) and The Birds(1963). Most of Hitchcock's films contain suspense plot. So what is suspense? ' Suspense relies upon the audience's strong sense of uncertainty about how events will play out'.

(Deborah and George, 1999: 108) Hitchcock's films share a lot of common themes containing uncertainties in in which suspense takes place. The first one is the unpredictable world faced by the individual, in addition to individual's powerlessness to influence events. For example, characters are under the lethal attack from tremendous amount of birds out of nowhere in The Birds. In The Lady Vanishes, Iris notices the missing of an old lady but most people in the train ignore that, accusing her of mental illness.

(Raymond, 1974: 143) In North by Northwest, advertising executive Roger is mistaken as an F. B. I. agent and get into series of trouble and danger. In The Wrong Man, the powerlessness of Nanny when he is caught for robbery is emphasized. Suspense takes place when the audience is anxious to know the safety of the characters. Another uncertainty is the characters' identity - they are often mistaken or confusing. For example, In Vertigo, Scotty was asked to investigate and protect a " possessed lady" who turns out to be deceiving him. In Psycho, audience is never shown Norman's mother in person and has no idea about the combined identities of Norman and her. In Spellbound, Constance falls in love with the new asylum's director Dr. Edwards but then find out he is not whom he claims he is. (Raymond, 1974: 193)

When characters search for other's identity, it creates great tension and suspense. Hitchcock excelled at creating different kinds of cataphors. What is a cataphor? Hans J. Wulff suggests that the experience of suspense relies on the spectator's recognition of specific future-directed narrative cues called 'cataphor'. (Deborah and George, 1999: 108) For example, the \$40000 Marion steals in Psycho is an object cataphor, directing the audience to imagine what will happen to Marion after she has stolen the money. Other examples include the opened windows of the apartment opposite to where Jeff lives in Rear Window. Moreover, the 'vertigo' of Scotty as in Vertigo, which is the haunting downward-looking illusion in his eyes, can be also called as a cataphor, a stylistic one. This kind of illusion appears in the film for few times and everything after it appears, it changes Scotty's life by a large extent, e. g., formation of guilt, formation of obsession, etc. (Deborah and George, 1999: 109)

It direct audience's way of imagination what is going to happen next. Not only the themes which contain uncertainties help creating suspense, the stylistic characteristics in the film do so too. Hitchcock used moving and silent camera to indicate buildup of suspense (e. g. silent camera showing Lisa intrude the apartment of Mr. Thorwald on her own as in Rear Window). Also, some of his films contain full-face images which look dangerously beautiful (e. g. close up of Madeleine as in Vertigo) so that audience will feel that there is something wrong with the characters. These are some of the technique which makes the audience alienate themselves with the characters so that they will be curious to know what will happen next, suspense is then created.

Focus Session

In this essay, *Vertigo* is chosen to be discussed. It is about a resigned police name Scotty who has acrophobia being asked to investigate and protect a “ possessed lady”. The key theme of the film, as regarded by many, is love, domination and obsession. Scotty is appealed by Madeleine for her beautiful looks, elegance and mysterious feeling. After he witnesses her death of Madeleine, the love and guilt become obsession. He tries to remake the Judy into Madeleine for forcing her to adapt every habit and characteristic of Madeleine. When Judy comes back after having her hair dyed blond, Scotty is disappointed because she hasn't put her hair up in a bun. He then insists Judy to do so. Hitchcock made a close-up shot of Scotty's face when he is waiting outside the bathroom. The look of Scotty is full of desire, as if something wonderful is going to be out. That shows Scotty in getting ready to ' love' Madeleine. After he realizes that Judy is in fact Madeleine, he does not seem happy and forgiving as he is bound by the past. Hitchcock does this to show that Scotty is not in fact in love with Judy or Madeleine for what they have been through, but the divine and perfect image that capture in his mind.

Hitchcock even described that Scotty is ' indulging in a form of necrophilia' (Francois, 1986: 186) Now let us look at how suspense is created in the plot. In the first half of the story, the uncertainty is about “ Madeleine”, whom Gavin claimed to be his wife believing she is the reincarnation of her great great grandmother. The audience receives the same information as Scotty does. Even though Gavin is the real villain, the film doesn't show anything suspicious about him. That makes the audience totally ' follow' Scotty in the

investigation. They were questioning about the same thing: ' is Madeleine really the reincarnation of her great great grandmother, or is she just mentally ill?', ' How can I (Scotty) save her?' There is one more uncertainty in audience's mind apart from what Scotty is worrying about, is the dubious relationship between Scotty and Madeleine. Scotty seems to be enchanted by Madeleine and she doesn't show sense of rejection, despite the fact that she is the wife of Scotty's old school friend Gavin. That makes the audience curious about how their relationship will go too. Until there, the film is like an ordinary detective story, where the hero is trying to save the heroine, in the audience's mind. The second part of the story comes with many " twists".

Madeleine hurries to climb to the mission tower to see if the set in her dream still exists, after their first kiss. Scotty tries to stop her but ' struggling weakly through his vertigo, he mounts its staircase at a crawl, only to see her plunge to her death.' (Raymond, 1974: 279) Gavin shows deep sorrow but he is not angry with Scotty and decided the leave the county for good. At that point, all uncertainties in the first part seem to end without being resolved, to both the audience and Scotty. However, later Scotty meets Judy who is exactly like Madeleine expect for the way she dresses and talks. To Scotty, uncertainty rise as he eager to know the relationship between Madeleine and Judy, but not to the audience. It is because the audience was revealed the truth very soon that it is all a deception to let Gavin kill his real wife. Starting from that moment, they audience is curious not about the identity of Judy, but how their relationship will ends. The reason for doing so will be discussed in the analysis session.

Here, suspense is created by making audience curious about what will happen next, make prediction which is later rejected by the twists. From above, we can see what most of the uncertainties concern about and the thing that leads the development of the story, which is 'Madeleine'. It is the cataphor of the film. In the story, 'Madeleine' is not Judy, but the object of Scottie's obsession. Here, 'Madeleine' directs audience imagination of how the story will go. The flow of the story is from Scottie trying to investigate Madeleine, to him falling in love with, to him trying to remake Madeleine out of Judy even though he thinks Madeleine has died. That successfully created uncertainties that audience is curious to know, and the narrative structure is complete. After looking at the major theme and the creation of suspense in this film, you may be curious: Is there any relationship between them? This will be discussed in the analysis section.

Analysis

After the 'death' of Madeleine, Scottie lives in a life full of guilt. Then he met a brunette girl called Judy, and very soon Judy's identity is disclosed but only to the viewer. One may question: 'Why Hitchcock didn't kept that in secret until the end of the story, just like the original novel does? Hitchcock answered by contrasting the difference between Surprise and Suspense. (Francois, 1986: 185) That is, the revelation done at the end, without the audience having the same information as the characters, will only lead to surprise or shock. However, letting the audience know more about the characters will create suspense, the feeling of uncertainty and anxiety about the outcome of a situation. That is Hitchcock's famous way to create suspense, which is letting audience play god. It's because they know what

fate, in most cases, something undesirable and tragic, is facing the characters. For example, In Rear Window, Lisa solely intrudes the room of Mr. Thorwald, looking for evidence. Audience is clearly informed that Mr. Thorwald is slowly coming home, but Lisa doesn't. Instead of a sudden back then attack by Mr. Thorwald, the audience emotion is even triggered by a larger extent, terrifying of what might happen if he sees Lisa. Hitchcock asserted that revealing the true identity of Judy long before the end of the story creates suspense.

However, one may argue that even revealing it at the last, it can still create suspense where audience is anxious to know what the relationship of Judy and Madeleine is. However, that is exactly the thing Hitchcock wanted to prevent. As discussed in the Focus Session, the main theme of the film is love, domination and obsession. By revealing the truth earlier to the audience but not Scotty, it can draw audience attention to the process of Scotty remaking Judy, not worrying about Judy's identity. Also, now the uncertainty to audience goes to ' what Scotty will do if he finds out the truth', which is the key line of the story too. Form above, we can see, the creation of suspense, but directing the audience to the right way of guessing, actually helps expressing the main message and highlighting the main focus of the story. The revelation of the truth is also linked with the tragic and ironic structure of the plot. Recreating a person's image out of someone who is original that person and loving a non-existing person is sad and ironic. When audience has time to consciously witness all that but not reminded at the end, feeling will even be enhanced.

It shows to the audience that Scotty is loving “ in the wrong way” and is being control by his obsession. Also, audience will also understand the emotion and feelings of Judy more. The love and guilt to Scotty makes Judy willing to transform herself into someone else’s image. At the same time, she is afraid of the truth being known by Scotty. The audience is shown the complicated feeling of Judy more clearly once they know that she is Madeleine. Through this, the audience starts to have sympathy towards Judy. And when Judy falls down ‘ again’, it will trigger audience emotion in a large extent. The revelation of information to audience not only creates suspense, but also let audience watch and expect the tragic fate facing the characters. ‘ To understand Hitchcockian Suspense, we must recognize what Hitchcock recognized: the power of a narrative dramaturgy unrelentingly developed through cataphors.’, (Deborah and George, 1999: 108) that is, method of creating suspense.

Conclusion

This essay has looked at the films of Alfred Hitchcock, especially, from an angle of suspense. It has introduced some of the renown and influencing film he made, both British and American, from the time when he was ordinary foreign director, to the time when he was regarded as the most important director in Hollywood in that period. Firstly in the general section, It has looked at some common theme in Hitchcock’s films and related it with suspense, with Hans J. Wulff’s theory of suspense cataphor being used. After that, in focus section, it has looked into Vertigo, discussing the major key theme in the film, which is love, domination and obsession. Also, it looked in to the suspense throughout the film. Finally, it has discussed the revelation

of the truth in the middle of the story, finding the reason of it and how suspense is created, and also to explore the relationship between narrations. Hitchcock has demonstrated many skills in creating suspense. The 'playing god technique' is believed to be influencing. Rather than the sudden shock which bring the feeling terror and emotional tension, the information received by the audience help the feeling of anxious to sustain for a long time. To Hitchcock, not only suspense is made for mood making, it also helps to tell a story and to express the message within by guiding audience what to think. This strong narrative skill definitely make Alfred Hitchcock deserves his title, ' the master of suspense'.

Bibliography

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