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Film studies

Dossiers

Hitchcock: the primacy of visual over verbal (Part 1)

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"Let's face it, he was a voyeur ... Yes, the man was a voyeur, but aren't we all voyeurs?"
Alfred Hitchcock"

1. Introduction

When we think of Hitchcock's movies, we immediately recall images*: the well-known "shower scene" in* Psycho*, the birds' nightmare in* The birds*, Kim Novak's different faces in* Vertigo *... All movies are obviously made of moving pictures, but in Hitchcock's case images have such a power as to be permanently engraved in viewers' minds beyond the story they belong to. And such images go hand-in-hand with equally strong emotions: they have forever fixed our minds on what we felt when we first saw them. The power to conjure up emotions mainly through images, rather than through other elements of a movie, is probably the most salient feature of Hitchcock's work.*

2. A naturally visual talent

This specific visual non-verbal *ability manifested itself very early in the director's life. As a young man, and while he was working for a telegraph company, he attended art courses at the University of London, to learn drawing techniques; soon he was transferred to the advertising department of the firm, where he was given a chance to draw; and he got his first job in the cinema industry at Paramount's Famous Players-Lasky London branch, when he showed them the drawings he had made to illustrate the "titles" which served as dialogues in a silent film. Later on he became head of the "title" department.*

It is crucial to remember that Hitchcock's career started in the era of silent cinema. Between 1925 and 1929 the director made nine silent movies, and even his first "talkie" (or sound film), Blackmail *(1929), was produced in two versions, silent and sound. At the end of the '20s silent cinema had already reached high levels of sophistication: since it could not rely on dialogues and soundtrack, silent cinema necessarily developed very efficient visual techniques, so much so that many directors (including Hitchcock) thought that the addition of sound was not necessary and that, on the contrary, cinema would suffer from it.*

Unlike other directors, Hitchcock wanted to have a very clear picture in his mind of how a film sequence would be shot, so that, at the time of shooting, every element of mise-en-scène and every camera movement would already be established: it was as if he shot the sequence in his mind and the actual shooting was nothing but the concrete realizations of this "vision". This is why he used to say that his movies were finished before shooting began, and his actors had the impression that he had already seen all the film in his mind (Note 1). To this end, Hitchcock himself used to draw (or had someone draw) storyboards*, i.e. illustrations of the sequences with precise instructions of what would happen and how it would be filmed. In the following video, which shows the shower sequence in* Psycho*, compare the storyboard drawn by Saul Bass (one of the most famous drawer of film titles) with the actual shots, and notice the close correspondence between the two.*

Psycho (1960)

"I don't like literature that is flowery and where the main attraction is the turn of the phrase." Hitchcock said. "My mind is strictly visual, and when I read an elaborate description of a city street or of the countryside, I'm impatient with it. I'd rather show it myself with a camera" (Note 2, p. 487; all quotations refer to Hitchcock's statements, unless marked otherwise).

3. A three-way game

The mastery of imagery is an essential component of Hitchcock's idea of cinema. As François Truffaut wrote, in the Introduction to the famous long interview he had with Hitchcock in 1962 - which we will often refer to in this Dossier (Note 2) - "The art of creating suspense is also the art of involving the audience, so that the viewer is actually a participant in the film. In this area of the spectacle, film-making is not a dual interplay between the director and his picture, but a three-way game in which the audience, too, is required to play" (Note 2, p. 7). In other words, in Hitchcock's movies, viewers somehow build their own movie as they watch it, by reacting with their thoughts, and mostly with their emotions, to what they see on the screen. This "three-way game" is obviously managed in a masterly way by the director, who chooses not just what he wants us to see (or not to see), but also, and foremost, how to regulate this constant exchange between the screen and our reactions as viewers, by occasionally moving the story's point of view so that the viewer identifies with the character. In this way the director lets the viewers "do their job" by setting their own imagination in motion, and, in this sense, Hitchcock's cinema is in a way "subjective". In the following video, Hitchcock himself clearly explains how his playing with images interacts with the viewer's mind.

Alfred Hitchcock explains the element of suspense (by Eyes on Cinema) - Subtitles available

Notorious (1946)

In this sequence from Notorious, the kiss between Cary Grant and Ingrid Bergman lasts during the whole sequence, i.e. for more than three minutes, and is not interrupted by either dialogue or even a phone call. "I felt it was indispensable that they should not separate, and I also felt that the public, represented by the camera, was the third party in this embrace. The public was being given the great privilege of embracing Cary Grant and Ingrid Bergman together. It was a kind of temporary ménage à trois*" (Note 2, p. 400).*

Hitchcock's magical touch consists in manipulating the viewer and her/his expectations in a constant, but subtle and almost imperceptible, way ("It was rather exciting to use the camera to deceive the audience" (Note 2, p. 427). "The public always likes to be one jump ahead of the story;

they like to feel they know what's coming next. So you deliberately play upon this fact to control their thoughts ... One intriguing aspect is the way [Psycho] makes the viewer constantly switch loyalties.

Psycho (1960)

The murder is very shocking, but as soon as Perkins wipes away the traces of the killing, we begin to side with him, to hope that he won't be found out. Later on, when we learn from the sheriff that Perkins' mother has been dead for eight years, we again change sides and are against Perkins, but this time, it's sheer curiosity ... (Truffaut: This brings us back to the emotions of Peeping Tom audiences ...") *When Perkins is looking at the car sinking in the pond, even though he's burying a body, when the car stops sinking for a moment, the public is thinking, "I hope it goes all the way down!" It's a natural instinct" (p. 416-421). "I don't care about the subject matter; I don't care about the acting; but I do care about the pieces of film and the photography and the sound track and all of the technical ingredients that made the audience scream. I feel it's tremendously satisfying for us to be able to use the cinematic art to achieve something of a mass emotion" (p. 434).*

4. Images "talk"

The Lodger: A story of the London fog (1926)

Hitchcock's mastery of the visual component allows him to start a story by providing all the necessary context as well as the important events so that the audience is immediately caught into the plot. This is even more evident in Hitchcock's silent movies, as in the first sequences of The lodger, *which introduce the story of a serial killer wandering around London. We see in a series of very short shots: a blonde girl screaming; an electric sign advertising a musical play (Tonight, Golden curls), flickering four times, a terrified woman; a policeman, then a journalist, taking notes; people watching with curiosity; the woman pointing to the body of the girl; a note found on her ("The avenger"); the crowd thronging; the policeman taking the woman to a pub to offer her something strong; a journalist running to a telephone to report the news to his paper; the woman, once again, giving a description of the murderer (the title says: "Tall he was - and his face all wrapped up"); a man covering his face, pretending to be the murderer, thus making the woman even more frightened (a touch of humour!); the journalist again, then the newspaper's office; the news typed out on the wire-service machine; the frantic work in the office; papers being printed and distributed (with the title saying, "Murder - Wet from the press" - again, a play with words, since the girl drowned); people talking about the murder ("Always happens Tuesdays - that's my lucky day"), the news broadcast over the radio; and while we once again see the flickering advertisement ("Tonight, Golden curls"), we also see the girls in their changing room reading the paper and starting to worry about the colour of their hair, given that the serial killeer's victims are all blonde ...*

As you can see, a very lenghtly paragraph has been necessary to describe in words what we see in a sequence lasting 5 minutes and 45 seconds. Quick cuts add a piece of further information each time and the frightening mechanism is set in motion.

Another clear example of how Hitchcock introduces a story and its context without using words is the starting sequence of Rear window.

Rear window (1954)

At the start, the camera shows a window opening onto a courtyard. As soon as the opening titles end, the camera (and us, the viewers) goes out of this window to pan around the courtyard. With just one cut, we make a complete tour of the courtyard and come back through the same window, only to discover a big close-up of a man, sleeping in his sweat. The next shot shows us a thermometer, reading well above 90 degrees Fahrenheit (well over 30 degrees Celsius). From the thermometer, the camera takes us out of the room again. The following images show that it's early morning: a man is shaving, a couple wakes up after sleeping outside on the balcony; a young girl making coffee while stretching her legs; a street, which we can only barely see in the background, where a tank truck is spraying water on the sidewalks; somebody shaking the bedsheets out of the window ... until we come back to the close-up of our man, still sleeping. We find out that he has a leg in plaster and is sitting in a wheelchair. The camera moves on in the room: now it shows a broken camera, then a few photographs of a car crash, other photos, the cover of a magazine and other cameras - Fade - We see our man again, now shaving, then making a phone call, although his attention is drawn by a pair of young girls preparing to sunbathe on their terrace, and even more by the young girl dancing in the flat opposite his ...

With the camera panning around we already have a clear idea of the setting (a backyard, with a variety of tenants) and the character, who, as we easily deduce, is a photographer/reporter who has had an accident and is now confined to his room, with his leg in plaster - which, however, does not prevent him from appreciating young pretty girls ... "When we tell a story in cinema, we should resort to dialogue only when it's impossible to do otherwise. I always try first to tell a story in the cinematic way, through a succession of shots and bits of film in between" (p. 73).

5. "Pure cinema"

Hitchcock defined most movies as "photographs of people talking", juxtaposing his vision of "pure cinema", made up of the expressive means peculiar to the cinematic art: camera movements, sound design and the art of editing (or "montage"). The main reason why he didn't like dialogues was that they take responsibility for story narration and thus stand for a "lazy" way of communicating information. The following video (from Jurassic World*, by Colin Trevorrow, USA 2015) shows, by contrast, another way of building the tension of a dramatic event, just by using dialogues. As a matter of fact, dialogue and images work together in Hitchcock's movies - the former present the text and the latter the sub-text; or, in other words, what is* said *(on the surface) can clash with what is* shown *(the characters' thoughts, intentions, emotions, which are hidden but can be deduced by closely observing their non-verbal behaviour, particularly their eyes). The formal, purely cinematic means that Hitchcock uses to do this are basically the* eye line*, the* shot size *and the* shot duration*. In the video such concepts are discussed and exemplified also thanks to the cooperation of such directors as Peter Bogdanovich and Martin Scorsese.*

Alfred Hitchcock: Dialogue versus Pure Cinema (by Kristian Ramsden) - Subtitles available

Truffaut, too, had expressed most clearly the relationship between dialogue and images: "Dialogue serves to express the thoughts of the characters, but we know that in real life things are different ... If we observe any [social] gathering, it is clear that the words exchanged between the guests are superficial formalities and quite meaningless, whereas the essential is elsewhere; it is by studying

their eyes that we can find out what is truly on their minds ... [In] such scenes ... the rule of counterpoint between dialogue and image achieves a dramatic effect by purely visual means (Note 1, p. 9).

In the following sequence from Sabotage *we have another example of an almost complete absence of dialogue, replaced by thoughts and emotions conveyed through images. Verloc's wife has found out that her husband is a terrorist and that he has caused the death of her little brother, whom he had instructed to deliver a packet containing a time-bomb. Shocked by this discovery, the woman is going to have dinner with her husband.*

Sabotage (1936)

Close-ups of the woman alternate with close-ups of her gestures: as she is handling a knife, suddenly she lets it drop on the table. And while her husband is complaining about the meal, she looks at an empty chair - this is obviously her little brother's seat. Once again, she starts handling the knife and fork, and again she can't help letting them drop on the table. The close link between the woman's emotions and her looking at the knife clearly show what she is thinking. With two big close-ups of the characters, and with the woman's hand touching the knife for a second, we realize that her husband has understood it all. Let's read what Hitchcock himself said about this particular moment in the sequence: "The suspense between the two protagonists has been established, and the knife lies there, between them. Thanks to the camera, the public is now actually living the scene, and if that camera should suddenly become distant and objective, the tension that's been created would be destroyed. Verloc stands up and walks around the table, moving straight toward the camera, so that the spectator in the theater gets the feeling that he must recoil to make way for him. Instinctively, the viewer should be pushing back slightly in his seat to allow Verloc to pass by. Afterward, the camera glides back toward [the wife], and then it focuses once more on the central object, that knife. And the scene culminates ... with the killing ... Our primary function is to create an emotion and our second job is to sustain that emotion" (. 152).

"Dialogue should simply be a sound among other sounds, just something that comes out of the mouths of people whose eyes tell the story in visual terms" (p. 332). And yet, Hitchcock was a master in managing dialogues as well, or rather, in integrating them tightly with the images. Let's consider the following sequence from Blackmail*: a girl, Alice, has killed with a knife a painter who was trying to rape her. We see her at home the next day, as she comes down the stairs to reach the dining room.*

Blackmail (1929)

We then see her sitting down to breakfast with her parents, while one of her father's customers (the shop is visible in the background) keeps talking about the murder, mentioning the infamous knife again and again. We can see Alice's reactions on her face, thanks to close-ups which get bigger and bigger. When her father asks her to cut the bread, the girl takes the knife in her hand but immediately throws ii in the air ... The customer is still speaking, but her voice is becoming weaker and weaker, except for the word "knife" which sounds very clear to our ears (as well as to Alice's). The repetition of the word has a great impact on the scene, coupled with the close-ups of Alice's face.

4. The art of looking

> Hitchcock's films present the act of looking as a filter or perspective through which to see, and at times not see, events as they unfold around the characters. It's about the differences between looking with good intentions and looking with bad intentions and how the line between those two perspectives is more often than not unclear and askew. (Note 3)

The subjective point of view *is an essential component of Hitchcock's theory of "pure cinema": a close-up of a person shows that she/he is looking at something, the next shot shows what she/he is looking at, and we get back to the person's close-up, which now shows her/his reactions to what she/he has seen. In the following video, Hitchcock himself explains the power of this image editing to convey thoughts and emotions.*

Hitchcock demonstrates montage (by Mcglue) - Subtitles available

Thus, the act of looking is a focal point in Hitchcock's cinematography, to the point that he has been" fascinated with voyeurism from the very beginning of his career" (Note 4). Through his passion, or rather obsession, he changes the viewers into his accomplices, since what a character (or rather, the camera) is looking at, is also offered to the audience's view: perhaps the clearest and most efficient way of setting up the "three-way game" we mentioned above.

One of the most powerful examples of this process at work in a movie is the following famous sequence from Psycho *(on the left - compare it with same sequence from Gus Van Sant's remake of* Psycho *on the right).*

Psycho (1960) Psycho (by *Gus Van Sant, USA 1999)*

Viewers have probably already realized that Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) has a disturbed personality, but now we see him moving a picture on the wall, which conceals a hole, towards which Norman moves his eye. The light from the outside falls on Norman's eye looking through the hole. Cut to Marion (Janet Leigh)undressing in her room: thus we, *through Norman, are looking at the woman, and as if to reaffirm this, the next shot shows a big close-up of Norman's eye. In Gus Van Sant's remake, which follows to the letter the original movie, we can see Norman (Vince Vaughn) looking at Marion several times - obviously, the times have changed and we get to see more of Marion's naked body, in addition to Norman clearly masturbating in the meantime.*

"The viewer of the picture is of two minds, and this Hitchcock establishes with a relentless exploitation of audience identification through point of view" (Note 5). "The viewers are both forced to identify with and to look upon the actions taking place: they see the action happening and, at the same time, are implicated in the voyeuristic gaze that Norman implies" (Note 6). In other words, Hitchcock is a master in making us feel as if we were watched (increasing our fears for the character being watched) and, at the same time, to make us feel as if we were voyeurs ourselves.

Rear window *is another very clear example of this strategy of Hitchcock's. We can see (and also hear) everything through the journalist (James Stewart) sitting in a wheelchair with his leg in plaster.*

Rear window (1954)

Stewart's eye, and then his telephoto lens which he later uses to have a better view, limits and defines the frames, i.e. the portions of space and time which we, as viewers, are obliged to watch. We realize that we are spying on other people's private lives, which means that we are doing something reprehensible, something taboo, but we cannot help it, and we almost feel guilty about it. And not just that - - the distance between us and what we see, and our identification with Stewart who cannot move, make us feel impotent in the face of what we see. Thus the suspense created by Hitchcock is more than a generic anxiety: it is a terrifying mix of voyeurism, sense of guilt and impotence.

During the night when the (first presumed, then established) murder takes place, a pouring rain acts as the background to the dramatic action. Stewart is partly awake, when he almost automatically looks out of the window, and partly asleep. Several fade-ins and fade-outs signal the passing or time. At the start of the sequence, we hear a scream and the noise of something breaking and falling to the ground. Then, among the scenes we are shown through Stewart's gaze, we can see a man going out with a large suitcase under the torrential rain, then we see him coming back carrying the same suicase ... perhaps this happens twice or even three times, since, like Stewart, we are not allowed to see everything all the time ... but what we see is enough for us to imagine that something horrible is taking place ...

An elaborate game of multiple gazes is shown in this sequence from Vertigo.

Vertigo (1958)

Policeman John (Scottie) Ferguson (James Stewart) has been asked by an old friend of his to keep watch on his wife Madeleine (Kim Novak) who seems to be acting strangely. As he shadows her, Scottie follows her into a museum. The sequence of the gazes follows this sophisticated order:
- Scottie looks at Madeleine, who is sitting in front of a picture and intently staring at it;
- Scottie looks at the bouquet that she is holding in her hand - close-up of the flowers;
- the camera moves upwards from this close-up to the picture on the wall, and with a zoom we are shown the same kind of bouquet that the woman in the picture is holding;
- Scottie looks again at Madeleine, and the zoom shot shows her knotted hair, then, once again, the camera moves upwards to the picture, zoomin in on the woman's hair, which is knotted in the same way as Madeleine's;
- Scottie looks upwards again, towards the picture, then again towards Madeleine, who is always sitting in front of the picture.

The directions of the gazes is firmly established and follows a precise movement, which links our gaze, Scottie's gaze and what he sees: from a panoramic view of the musuem room to Madeleine's figure to the details of the flowers and her hair. We as viewers have no choice: we witness, together with Scottie, the strange, disturbing similarities between Madeleine and the woman in the picture.

Hitchcock's mastery of the act of looking obviously refers to both what he lets us see and what he conceals from our view, or what he conceals from his characters' view (but not necessarily from our own). We have a masterly example in the following sequence from Young and innocent, *one of the last movies shot in England, before Hitchcock finally moved to Hollywood.*

Young and innocent (1937)

In this movie, a girl helps a boy find the real person who has committed a murder of which the boy is unjustly accused. What is known about the murderer is that he often blinks his eyes. The girl and an old tramp (now smartly dressed), who would be able to recognize the murderer, are searching for him in a crowded dancehall. This final sequence contains "what has been claimed by Rohmer and Chabrol to be the most beautiful "dolly up shot" in the history of cinema. The camera swoops over the dancers and then zooms in on the murderer, a "blacked up" drummer in the band" (Note 7). As the camera approaches, he starts to blink uncontrollably. It is, as critic Charles Barr has noted, as if the camera itself is forcing him to reveal his guilt. He recognizes the old tramp because he had met him before, and this happens through a quick overlapping of images. Hitchcock. "At that moment I cut right back to the old man and the girl, sitting at the other end of the room. Now, the audience has the information and the question is: How are this girl and this old boy going to spot the man?" (p. 156).

N.B. The famous interview with Hitchcock by Truffaut, which we have often quoted in this Dossier, *has been published in* Hitchcock by Truffaut, *Paladin Grafton Books, London (revised edition 1986). A documentary* Truffaut Hitchcock *(by Kent Jones) has been produced on the basis of this interview.The complete interview is available on YouTube as a series of* audio files *(with subtitles available).*

End of Part 1

Notes

(1) Spoto D. 1977. *Hitchcock the Designer*, Print, XXXI:IV.
(2) Truffaut F. 2002. *Il cinema secondo Hitchcock*. Nuove edizioni tascabili, Milano. Edizione inglese/*English edition: Hitchcock by Truffaut*, Paladin Grafton Books, London (revised edition 1986).
(3) Trask M. 2017. *Hitchcock: The act of looking*, Medium.
(4) Leitch, T. 2002. *The Encyclopedia of Alfred Hitchcock: From Alfred Hitchcock Presents to Vertigo,* NY: Facts on File, Inc., New York, p. 358.
(5) Spoto, D. 1976. *The Art of Alfred Hitchcock: Fifty Years of His Motion Pictures, Anchor Books,* New York.
(6) Driscoll, P.A. 2014. ""The Hitchcock Touch": Visual Techniques in the Work of Alfred Hitchcock", *International ResearchScape Journal,* Vol. 1 , Article 4.
(7) *Il Mereghetti. Dizionario dei film.,* Baldini Castoldi Dalai, Milano.

Want to know more?

***** From *The Hitchcock Zone* website:
- A collection of web sites and blogs relating to Hitchcock's life and career, including the Alfred Hitchcock Wiki, which is the largest unofficial Hitchcock site on the web, with news, articles, books, image galleries, videos, interviews, details of DVD & Blu-ray releases

* From the *Senses of cinema* website:
- Hitchcock, Alfred by Ken Mogg

* Hitchcock and His Audience: Creating and Manipulating Reality by Bavand Karifred
* From the *printmag.com* website:
- Hitchcock the Designer, by Donald Spoto, Print, XXXI:IV, 1977
* From the *BFI screenonline* website:
- Alfred Hitchcock: Visual storyteller by Mark Duguid
* From the *SchoolFilmRejects* website:
- Drawing for a master: Storyboards from the films by Alfred Hitchcock by Geoff Todd

**** Videos in English, with subtitles:***

- *From the YouTube channel* ART REGARD Cinema cartography: Alfred Hitchcock and the art of pure cinema
- *From the YouTube channel* Jack's Movie Reviews: Rear window - Hitchcock's manipulation