

Hitchcock: the primacy of visual over verbal (Part 2)

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5. Looking at the ordinary to see the extra-ordinary

Hitchcock's great mastery of the visual allows him to convey meanings and emotions and to dramatize situations and characters starting from ordinary people and objects and from daily contexts, which take on an extra-ordinary value in viewers' eyes. Thus several of his movies start in a ordinary place and show "normal" people, who, however, are soon obliged to face unusual situations, ranging from the weird to the terrifying. Let's consider as an example the starting sequence of Psycho (watch the original Hitchcock version on the left and Gus Van Sant's remake on the right).

[Psycho \(1960\)](#) [Psycho \(by Gus Van Sant, USA 1999\)](#)

A "bird's eye" view over a city then zooms to an ordinary building, and we get closer and closer to a window ("any" window), through which the camera (i.e. us, as people watching) moves, as if surrepticiously, unveiling the intimacy of the place. We see a woman in bed, wearing a bra, and a bare-chested man exchanging kisses. As an exception to his habits, in this case Hitchcock shows through superimposed titles the place, the date and the exact time: Phoenix, Arizona, Friday 11th December, 2:43 p.m. Why? Let's read Hitchcock's own explanation: "In the opening of Psycho I wanted to say that we were in Phoenix, and we even spelled out the day and the time, but I only did that to lead up to a very important fact: that it was two-forty-three in the afternoon and this is the only time the poor girl has to go to bed with her lover. It suggests that she's spent her whole lunch hour with him" (A shot shows an untouched lunch). Truffaut: It's a nice touch because it establishes at once that this is an illicit affair". Hitchcock: "It also allows the viewer to become a Peeping Tom" (Note 1, p. 411). This ordinary girl can't imagine that her time will soon be up ...

Rope, too, starts with a fixed image of an ordinary street at any time, where we see cars, a woman with a pram, and other passers-by (among which Hitchcock himself, in one of his legendary cameos).

[Rope \(1948\)](#)

Then the camera starts moving, reaches a terrace and stops out of a window with drawn curtains. We hear a scream coming from the window. The spell of the ordinary road in any ordinary city has already been broken.

The wrong man starts with an unusual appearance by Hitchcock, who, lit by a back light, projects his shadow forwards towards us. A ghostly start which is well suited to the director's words: "This is Alfred Hitchcock speaking. In the past, I've given you many kinds of suspense pictures ...but this time I would like you to see a different one. The difference lies in the fact that this is a true story, every word of it ... and yet it contains elements that are stranger than all the fiction that has gone into many of the thrillers that I've made before". Thus this is a true story, which starts in an ordinary way but soon turns into a nightmare.

[The wrong man \(1957\)](#)

And the initial sequence couldn't be more "ordinary" and reassuring: a panoramic view of a dancehall, with a superimposed title: "The early morning hours of January the fourteenth, nineteen hundred and fifty-three, a day in the life of Christopher Emanuel Balestrero that he will never forget ...". Thus it is an ordinary night, but the title makes us realize that something terrible is going to happen. While the opening credits roll up, we see the hall slowly showing fewer and fewer people, the camera now zooms to the orchestra, until the music fades out and finally stops. The players, among whom our main character (Henry Fonda), pack their instruments, ready to go home ... Our man, like Marion at the start of Psycho, is a very "normal" person, but he doesn't know the nightmare waiting for him ...

The "ordinary" window as a privileged place through which one can surreptitiously enter to discover something unusual is also shown in the initial sequences of I confess.

[I confess \(1952\)](#)

The story is set in Québec, Canada. We are shown several views of the city's monuments, which are silhouetted against the night sky with their dark profiles, with a dark musical background. (Above a stairway we can also see Hitchcock crossing the scene, in another of his cameos). Then, at short intervals, we repeatedly see a road sign with an arrow: "Direction >>", which seems to invite us to follow an established itinerary. Views of the city alternate with the same sign, until the last one, now in close-up, moves the camera in the shown direction, towards a window, through which we enter a room where a man's dead body is lying on the floor. The camera moves to a curtain, suggesting that someone has just got out, and the next shot actually shows a priest walking briskly down a street ... The fast editing of the shots leads us to think that the priest is the murderer, and the movie will center on a priest (Montgomery Clift) facing a groundless charge ...

6. Details pointing to drama

From panoramic views over cities, landscapes and dancehall to the minute detail: Hitchcock's visual art can charge any context with drama - sometimes, focussing on small details is even more powerful since the story being told has already invested most of its meaning on them. A glass, a key, a cup: ordinary, everyday objects which, just like ordinary people, become charged with meaning and emotion, which the director then skillfully exploits to intensify his characters' emotions and, with them, our own emotions as well.

[Suspicion \(1941\)](#)

In Suspicion, a rich girl (Joan Fontaine) marries a spendthrift and rather deceitful playboy (Cary Grant), and throughout the movie we, together with her, are slowly but inexorably induced to think that he wants to kill her to enjoy her money all by himself - although these are only suspicions ...

Towards the end of the movie, we see a door opening and a threatening shadow silhouetted against a strip of light (the use of light reminds us of the German expressionist experiences which influenced Hitchcock at the very beginning of his career). Then, in the darkness, we see a small light moving, then this light turns out to be a glass of milk, which the husband is taking up to his wife on the first floor. The light coming from the glass becomes stronger as the camera zooms in on it, in a big close-up shot. The husband enters the wife's bedroom, leaves the glass on the bedside table and wishes her good night. The woman is terrified: we, just like her, are (almost) convinced that the milk is poisoned. All through this sequence, the only words we hear are "good night". In that glass, Hitchcock had put a bulb to make it even more threatening ...

In Notorious, Alicia (Ingrid Bergman) is persuaded by the secret services to marry Sebastian (Claude Rains), a Nazi who, after moving with others to South America, is suspected to be involved in the production of a radioactive substance. Her task is to discover the truth, with the help of a secret agent, Devlin (Cary Grant), whom she falls in love with. They suspect that this mysterious substance is contained in some bottles in Sebastian's cellar.

Notorious (1946)

This sequence starts with Alicia who, after getting hold of the cellar's key, lets it fall to the floor while her husband is hugging her, with the intention of passing on the key to Devlin during a party that same night. This key is now charged with a strong meaning for the story as well for the characters (and for us).

In one of cinema's most famous long takes, we then see a panoramic view of the hall where the party is taking place. From above, the camera pans all over the hall, then starts zooming in slowly towards Sebastian and Alicia, who are greeting the guests. The zoom continues until we get a big close-up of the woman's hand, who is holding the key in her hand, while a growing anxiety shows on Alicia's face - an anxiety we share with her. When Devlin arrives, as a guest, Alicia welcomes him and manages to pass on the key to him, which we see in a big close-up of both hands.

At this point a further detail is added to intensify the suspense of the scene. Alicia and Devlin reach the table where champagne is being served (and here we can spot Hitchcock drinking a champagne glass in a gulp, and then move on out of sight). Alicia starts worrying that the champagne bottles might not be enough for the whole evening, since in this case Sebastian would be obliged to go down to the cellar to fetch some more - the cellar which Alicia and Devlin intend to inspect - and Sebastian would immediately find out that his key is missing. Alicia asks the waiter whether the champagne will be sufficient for the whole evening, but doesn't get any reassurance: her anxiety intensifies ... and from this moment on all shots show people drinking champagne, the ice container with the bottles, a waiter carrying around a tray full of glasses. Alicia meets Devlin in the cellar, and from now on the scenes in the cellar alternate with images of the champagne being served at the party and the bottles getting fewer and fewer. When Devlin accidentally drops a bottle, he discovers its contents, a mysterious powder. In the hall, the waiter asks Sebastian to go down to the cellar and fetch some more champagne bottles. And while the two men are going down the stairs, Alicia and Devlin come out of the cellar, and Devlin, to save the situation and justify their presence there, lets Sebastian see him hugging Alicia, as if they were lovers. Obviously Sebastian sees them, and this is followed by an embarrassing dialogue. While Devlin quickly leaves the scene and Alicia goes back to the hall, Sebastian and the waiter reach the place where the champagne bottles are stored ... and here Sebastian finds out that his key to the cellar is missing ... Once again, dialogues

in this sequence carry little meaning, while images only convey the anxiety and suspense of the situation.

Notorius (1946)

Sebastian and his mother now discover Alicia's true identity and mission and slowly start poisoning her. In this sequence, her mother-in-law pours coffee into a cup, then the camera shows in a close-up her hand carrying the cup and leaving it, now in a very big close-up, on the small table next to Alicia. We are aware that the coffee is poisoned and all the tension of the scene concentrates on the cup. A few moments later Alicia, who is clearly already ill, starts drinking from the cup. When another character in the scene happens to pick up Alicia's cup instead of his own (we get a close-up of the two cups), Sebastian and his mother cry out, "No, no, that's not your cup!", Alicia cannot help noticing this and her dismayed look goes, once again, towards the cup in close-up, then, with a zoom, towards a close-up of her mother-in-law and finally, with another zoom, towards a close-up of Sebastian. The whole dialogue accompanying this scene has no real importance, since the true drama is acted out through the cup and what happens around it.

Alicia tries to stand up, but her strength is giving out and this time we see through her eyes and ears (thus subjectively) the room and the characters waving and the sounds fading, as if coming from a far echo. We live this experience too, as we now totally identify with her.

7. Mystery development through images: from surprise to suspense

What was Hitchcock's use of his masterly images? He stated several times that he was not interested in classic thriller stories where the focus is on searching for and finding out the murderer ("whodunnit" stories). To him, such stories were not attractive because they are based on a rational, pre-established sequence of events (a sort of puzzle or a game of patience) and not enough on emotion, which for him was the true challenge required by the audience. In the following video, Hitchcock makes it very clear that mystery implies an intellectual process, while suspense is an emotional process. In classic thriller stories, gaining more and more information which leads to the discovery of the culprit is like reading a book, when the reader is tempted to go to the final pages so as to find out the solution of the puzzle - but this is mere curiosity: mystery only helps to mystify the audience.

Hitchcock explaining the difference between mystery and suspense - (American Film Institute)

How, then, can we build suspense? Hitchcock himself explain this in the video. Essentially, the key is to provide the audience with information (and for him, information must mainly be conveyed through images and their editing) - however, not all information, but just bits, leaving the audience to imagine the missing parts. The video shows some sequences from Sabotage (1936), in which a boy has been given the task of delivering a packet: we (just us, the audience) know that the packet contains a bomb, and we also know at what time it will go off. Big close-ups of the packet alternate with the route followed by the boy, showing traffic lights, clocks marking the time, i.e. the minutes before the explosion is due ... In this movie, Hitchcock admitted he had made a serious mistake, because he showed the bomb going off and the boy being killed: the viewers had no need to have a confirmation of what they already knew - they rather needed to be relieved after going through all that suspense. This equals to saying that the audience must feel in danger, but at the same time continue to feel that they are in a theatre, in a safe setting, since that danger is on the screen.

Hitchcock explaining what suspense is (care of Maria Teresa Steri)

Hitchcock once again made it very clear that there is a big difference between showing the explosion of a bomb and letting the audience know about the bomb itself: "In the first case we have given the public fifteen seconds of surprise at the moment of the explosion. In the second we have provided them with fifteen minutes of suspense. The conclusion is that whenever possible the public must be informed. Except when the surprise is a twist, that is, when the unexpected ending is, in itself, the highlight of the story" (note 1, p. 91).

"Let's take another example. A curious person goes into somebody else's room and begins to search through the drawers. Now, you show the person who lives in that room coming up the stairs. Then you go back to the person who is searching, and the public feels like warning him, "Be careful, watch out. Someone's coming up the stairs". Therefore, even if the snooper is not a likeable character, the audience will still feel anxiety for him. Of course, when the character is attractive, as for instance Grace Kelly in Rear Window, the public's emotion is greatly intensified" (Note 1, p. 90).

Rear window (1954)

Let's examine this very example from Rear window then. You will remember that the main character is Jeff (James Stewart), a reporter sitting in a wheelchair with his leg in plaster. In this sequence, Lisa (Grace Kelly), Jeff's fiancée, goes into Thorwald (Raymond Burr)'s flat - the man who might have killed his wife - in order to try and find some evidence of the crime. Jeff can see what is happening because Thorwald's flat is opposite his, but he cannot hear the voices, and in any case he cannot do anything himself. Once again, we are faced with the classic situation when a character, whom we identify with, looks, watches, spies, but at the same time is powerless and cannot act on what he sees.

The screen seems almost divided into several frames, which correspond with the windows in Thorwald's apartment, which Jeff watches together with his nurse Stella (Thelma Ritter). Through the window on the right we can see Lisa, while through the window on the left we can see Thorwald coming back home. Lisa realizes this and tries to hide, while Jeff calls the police. Thorwald discovers Lisa, who tries to defend herself and desperately calls Jeff, who is powerless and terrified. Luckily, the police arrives. At this moment Jeff picks up his telephoto lens (and Stella a pair of binoculars) and we are thus able to have a clearer picture of what is happening. While the policemen are talking with Thorwald and Lisa, she draws Jeff's attention to a ring she is wearing on her finger (this is Thorwald's wife's ring, evidence of the crime) - but Thorwald notices this and looks at Jeff's window (i.e. at us), who puts the lights out hoping that he won't be spotted ...

Some have considered this as the most terrifying sequence of the whole movie. So far, we have seen the other people living in the apartments, but we have seen them all framed by their windows. "This gives a strong feeling of being on the outside - separate from the goings on of these people. And yet it is that almost constant feeling of exclusion that gives a certain shot its ability to have such a powerful and frightening impact. We have been viewing everything through Jeff's window and standing on the outskirts of the story until we are brought abruptly into the world of the film by a short and simply choreographed shot. This sudden inclusion is what creates the sudden spike in tension the audience feels as the film begins to reach its climax. Had it not been contrasted by the feeling of being on the outside that carried through the rest of the film, the impact would not have been nearly as great" (Note 2).

8. Conclusion

"I don't want to film a "slice of life" because people can get that at home, in the street, or even in front of the movie theater. They don't have to pay money to see a slice of life. And I avoid out-and-out fantasy because people should be able to identify with the characters. Making a film means, first of all, to tell a story. That story can be an improbable one, but it should never be banal. It must be dramatic and human. What is drama, after all, but life with the dull bits cut out. The next factor is the technique of film-making, and in this connection, I am against virtuosity for its own sake. Technique should enrich the action. One doesn't set the camera at a certain angle just because the cameraman happens to be enthusiastic about that spot. The only thing that matters is whether the installation of the camera at a given angle is going to give the scene its maximum impact. The beauty of image and movement, the rhythm and the effects - everything must be subordinated to the purpose" (Note 1, p. 135-136).

N.B. The famous Truffaut's interview with Hitchcock, 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).

Notes

(1) 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). (2) Driscoll, P.A. 2014. [""The Hitchcock Touch"": Visual Techniques in the Work of Alfred Hitchcock"](#), *International ResearchScape Journal*, Vol. 1, Article 4.



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 *open access* website:
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 - [The Hitchcock's Gallery](#), a video essay
- * From the *AlbPjerl* YouTube channel:
 - [Interview with Hickcock](#) in Burbank, California (1973) - NBC
- * From the *Eyes on Cinema* YouTube channel:
 - [An interview with Alfred Hitchcock](#) on filmmaking, suspense, nightmares and more! (1966)
- * From the Carl Hungus YouTube channel:
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- * From the *Eyes on Cinema* YouTube channel:
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- * **Videos in English, with subtitles:**
 - From the YouTube channel ART REGARD Cinema cartography: [Alfred Hitchcock and the art of pure cinema](#)
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