

## Manipulating audience emotional response: Case studies from Hitchcock's films

Luciano Mariani

[info@cinemafocus.eu](mailto:info@cinemafocus.eu)

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### *0. What it means to be “manipulated” as viewers*

In what is probably Hitchcock's best-known film, *Psycho* (1960), we are introduced to the character of Marion (Janet Leigh), a young woman who, in order to fulfil her desire to move in with her divorced lover (John Gavin), decides to steal \$40,000 from the office where she works as a secretary. We follow Marion's actions (who we consider to be the protagonist of the story) from the theft to her escape to the place where she is supposed to meet her lover. As viewers, we are aware that Marion is a thief, and therefore we have an ambiguous attitude towards her: on the one hand, we are inclined to pass negative moral judgement (the theft is, after all, intended to facilitate an “illicit” relationship), but on the other hand, we cannot help but share her fear of being discovered, and so we follow her escape by car with apprehension - all the more so as, as the hours pass, Marion realises the crime she has committed and begins to think about turning back and returning the stolen money (making us re-examine our moral judgement of her). But it is now late at night, and in the pouring rain, Marion decides to stop at the Bates Motel. Here she is welcomed by the owner, Norman (Anthony Perkins), a friendly, simple, thoughtful young man... definitely likeable, at least at first, with an invalid mother who lives with him in a villa next door.

However, we soon discover not only that Norman has a rather unhealthy relationship with his mother (he immediately becomes irritated when Marion suggests that she be admitted to an old people's home), but also that he is a voyeur (he watches Marion undressing through a hole in the wall). Even towards Norman, we as viewers cannot help but feel rather ambiguous. That same evening, Marion is stabbed to death in her bathroom shower by a mysterious female figure. At this point, our expectations are brutally dashed: the character we thought was the protagonist is eliminated before the film is even halfway through, and the actress who plays her (Janet Leigh, already very famous in Hollywood) is “burned” in a film that was supposed to see her as the star. At this point, after Norman discovers the murder committed by his mother, our sympathies are at least partly transferred to this boy, who strives to erase all traces of the crime ... and when Norman pushes Marion's car into a pond, and the car doesn't seem to want to sink, we are all on his side, until we breathe a sigh of relief when the car finally sinks. So, the protagonist seems to have become Norman. But we are only halfway through the film, and many surprises still await us...

We have talked about the attitudes and reactions of the audience, but we must acknowledge that all our reactions (emotional, but also moral) have been skilfully “piloted” by Hitchcock, who created constant false expectations in us, only to frustrate them to our great surprise and almost embarrassment; and even the feelings he stimulated in us towards the characters were not only ambiguous, but also subject to constant re-evaluation. The ambiguity (what is good/what is bad? what is right/what is wrong?) puts us in the position of wondering, as the film progressed, which character we should believe, which one we should trust. In short, we were manipulated in every way by the director, who at all times held the reins, not only of the story and its characters, but also of his audience, who experienced exactly what Hitchcock intended to provoke: sympathy, positive and negative judgements, anxiety, fear, surprise, suspense ... not to mention the horror and terror of the famous murder in the shower. We trusted the director, as we always do when we sit down in front of a screen to watch a film, but the director himself set continuous traps for us which, from a certain point of view, “betrayed” our trust - even if the film provides us with what, in reality, even if perhaps unconsciously, we have always thought we wanted from a Hitchcock film, namely a good dose of suspense and terror, discovering the darkest corners of the human mind (the minds of the characters, but also our own minds...).

### **1. Introduction**

Every director has a certain type of relationship with her/his audience. At one extreme, we find directors whose main purpose in making a film is to attract what is considered the target audience, i.e. the viewers who are most likely to choose to see that particular film: to this end, the director may decide to “play it safe”, for example by strictly adhering to the rules of a certain film genre (a romantic comedy, a horror film, an action film), so that the audience can easily identify with stories, characters and events that are familiar to them. At the opposite extreme, we find directors of “experimental” or “avant-garde” films who may decide not to worry too much about audience reactions, as their intention is not primarily commercial, but to create a work that, in their opinion, finds its *raison d'être* and therefore its value in itself. Of course, between these two extremes we find the majority of directors who, on the one hand, choose (or are forced) to make a certain type of product that is successful (or at least covers the increasingly high costs of the relative budget), but on the other hand, allow the director himself to express his personality and “style”. Many directors have often had to find some form of compromise between the commercial demands of producers and their desire to create a work in some ways original. With the decline of Hollywood studios, increasingly swallowed up by streaming platforms such as Netflix, Amazon and Disney, which no longer limit themselves to distributing products but also provide funding for film production, the relationship between directors and new forms of production has become increasingly problematic.

### **2. Hitchcock and his audience**

From this point of view, Alfred Hitchcock occupies a somewhat unique position. He was certainly one of the directors who cared most about audience reactions, but at the same time, he was able to achieve this by seeking original formal solutions, often disruptive if not revolutionary, to the point of allowing him to create his own recognisable “style” (and consequently earn the somewhat ambiguous status of “auteur”) - even within a “classic” Hollywood-style production system that certainly did not forget commercial profit as a central element.

Hitchcock has often been described as a “manipulator” of the audience, and although this definition has possible negative connotations, it must be recognised that the director's creative effort was always, first and foremost, subordinated to creating a strong and original emotional experience for his

viewers: from this point of view, “manipulation” could also be seen as respect for the needs of the audience and the ability to adapt to them. In fact, Hitchcock always had an active audience in mind, ready to respond and react to the stimuli of the images and sounds coming from the screen. As he said in his famous interview with François Truffaut:

*"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 1).

*"It was rather exciting to use the camera to deceive the audience ... 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 ..."* (Note 2)

As we can see, Hitchcock did not hesitate to use the phrase “deceive the audience”, thus justifying, at least in part, the term “manipulation”...

The unique relationship between Hitchcock and his audience is in fact ambivalent: on the one hand, the director needs active viewers, capable of filling in the “gaps” in the information conveyed by the film, of making assumptions (and reformulating them if necessary), of reaching conclusions (only to change their minds shortly afterwards); on the other hand, the director exercises total control over these viewers, precisely because of their “flexibility” and constant attention:

*"He doesn't want audiences to be passive, he want to evoke something, a thought or an emotion, he wants to be the puppet master that makes an audience see his films as he perceives they should. Other directors allow for individual interpretation, Hitchcock did not want that - he wanted millions of people to interpret the story as he the auteur wanted the narrative interpreted. Hitchcock wanted to coerce an audience but you cannot compel an audience who sits and does not engage. Hithcock did not want a totally unthinking audience because then the manipulation would be too easy."* (Note 3)

### **3. The ‘worlds’ created by Hitchcock on screen**

In order to exercise this power of absolute control, it was essential to create stories, characters and events that were credible and plausible in the eyes of the audience: these ‘worlds’ created through film had to be based on the realism of the settings and situations - settings and situations that had to be perceived as truly possible in the real world and in everyday life. Only in this way could the audience accept them (and thus proceed, if and when necessary, to identify with the characters in the film). But the director's skill also lay in subverting this reality once it had been accepted, thus surprising the audience.

'Going to the cinema', i.e. paying for a ticket, sitting in a seat and looking at the screen, always involves a “suspension of disbelief” on the part of the audience, i.e. a willingness to accept what they see and hear as if it were real: only in this way can the “magical illusion” that is cinema be created. As an audience, we understand, appreciate and enjoy what is presented to us, while being aware that it is fiction and that the real world is almost never what we are shown. This is why the “worlds” created by Hitchcock in his films are so vivid, realistic and easily acceptable: his desire was to

*"make everything look as real as possible, because the effects .. are really quite bizarre. The audience responds in proportion to how realistic you make it ... [and] gets involved and believes ... what's going on up there on the screen."* (Note 4)

As mentioned above, once viewers were “ensnared” in these “worlds”, the necessary foundations were laid to subvert them and thus surprise the audience.

This also means that viewers identify, at least in part, with the characters and events shown in the film: they are “normal”, “ordinary” people and situations that many of us have actually encountered and experienced in our daily lives. This also explains why virtually all Hitchcock's films feature themes, characters and events that are not particularly significant from a historical or cultural point of view (it is perhaps no coincidence that Hitchcock's only “period” film, *Under Capricorn* (1949) was one of his “weakest” and least commercially successful works), but rather universal, i.e. understandable and acceptable to a large part of the audience for which they are intended: especially when, as in most of his films, he delves into the human mind to explore and discover its darkest sides: fear, suspicion, anxiety, terror, horror, death... are fundamental psychological elements to which every human being tends to respond strongly and, in part, predictably.

Here, Hitchcock plays another of his most powerful cards. As mentioned above, viewers of his films know that they are in a position of “illusion” because, whatever is shown on screen, they are aware that they are sitting in a comfortable armchair, safe inside a cinema, and therefore willing to ‘take risks’ that they could not and would not take in real life - in the cinema, however, safe in the darkness of the theatre, it is precisely the stimulating situations of risk and danger that they want to experience, albeit vicariously. But are they really safe? Hitchcock is there precisely to challenge their sense of security and protection, using his images and sounds to disrupt their apparent calm and tranquillity: the subversion of their expectations, the surprise at how the tables are turned, the suspense that precedes the horror, soon intervene to make the audience experience unexpected and, for this reason, even more disturbing sensations and emotions.

*"His plots involve men and women who delve into the darker sides of their psyches in order to attempt what most of us only consider in the abstract if we consider these actions at all. In knowing that these characters threaten the individual audience members Hitchcock's manipulation is subtle yet clear. Even if the characters do not actively seek to delve into the darker side of human nature they are almost always forced into it, or are passive participants because of circumstance, seen in the many films involving the wrongly accused man or woman as the case may be. Just as these characters may be passive participants that are drawn into circumstances unknowingly or even against their own volition, so too are the audience subject to the will of Alfred Hitchcock."* (Note 5)

And so, as we end up identifying with certain characters, we are instilled with the doubt that perhaps we are not so different from them, that what they think and do we could, given the right circumstances, think and do ourselves - in other words, that the exploration of the human psyche, which we see so vividly represented on screen, also concerns us, because we all share a single existential condition.

#### ***4. Acting on emotions through information management: from mystery to surprise to suspense***

*"You know that 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."* (Note 6)

When Hitchcock talked about viewers' thoughts, he actually meant what thoughts give way to, i.e. *emotions*. 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 explains the difference between mystery and suspense

Thus we have introduced one of the key concepts to orient audience emotions, the creation and managements of *suspense* - a process where Hitchcock is universally recognized as an absolute master.



Hitchcock explains what *suspense* is (with scenes from *Sabotage* which we discuss below)

At the heart of the suspense mechanism is a very precise management of the information that the film conveys to viewers. Sometimes this information is shared between the characters in the film and the viewers, but very often, in Hitchcock's films, viewers have access to information that is denied to the characters, with the result that the former are in a better position to understand and appreciate the attitudes and actions of the latter. In this way, the audience is in a position of relative control over what they see and hear: they can make inferences and assumptions, imagine subsequent events, and anticipate what they are about to see (this control is obviously only relative, as the information may be insufficient, uncertain, or even, albeit rarely, false, and in any case may be contradicted by the "master of ceremonies" who presides over its management, i.e. the director). The famous example of the "bomb" clearly illustrates how information directs the emotional response of viewers. There is a fundamental difference between showing the explosion of a bomb and informing the audience of the existence of this bomb:

*"In the first case, we offered the audience fifteen seconds of surprise at the moment of the explosion. In the second case, we offer them fifteen minutes of suspense. The conclusion of all this is that the audience should be informed whenever possible, except when the surprise is a twist, i.e. when an unexpected conclusion is the spice of the anecdote."* (Note 7).

In other words, as Hitchcock further clarified, if two people are sitting at a café table talking animatedly about football, but we are informed that there is a package with a bomb under the table, and if, moreover, we are reminded of the time when the bomb will explode, we are spontaneously inclined to say: "Stop talking nonsense! There's a bomb ready to explode right under you!" Only, as spectators, we are totally powerless in the face of what we see, we have no way of intervening - and this sense of powerlessness, of 'knowing but not being able to act', is the condition for suspense to arise and grow.

*"Let's take another example, that of a curious person who breaks into someone else's room and rummages through the drawers. Then the owner of the room is seen climbing the stairs. Then once again we see the person rummaging and the audience would like to say: "Watch out, watch out, someone's coming up the stairs". So, someone who goes rummaging through drawers certainly does not need to be a likeable character; the audience will still be apprehensive for them. If the person rummaging is a likeable character, the viewer's emotion is doubled, as for example with Grace Kelly in Rear Window."* (Note 8)

A clear example of information managements meant to create suspense is offered in *Sabotage*. The film centres on Verloc, a saboteur working for a secret terrorist organisation, who is married to Sylvia and lives with her and her younger brother Stevie. Unable to carry out the next sabotage operation in a underground station himself, Verloc asks the boy to deliver the package (containing a bomb) to the station by 1.30 p.m. (the bomb is set to explode at 1.45 p.m.). So in this case, we share all the information with Verloc, but not, of course, with Stevie. The boy sets off to make his delivery, but on the way he wastes time watching a military parade and finally manages to catch a bus. As spectators, we follow Stevie's journey step by step, while other images ("Don't forget the birds will sing at 1.45 pm") and various clocks with the time ticking away relentlessly remind us that time is running out ... Close-ups of the parcel and images of the route alternate continuously, with a whole series of events (the boy's distractions, various red lights, the crowd slowing down ...) The tension mounts, while we would like to say to Stevie, 'Hurry up! Don't dawdle around!' - but of course we are prisoners of our own helplessness. Then comes the moment of the explosion, which kills all the passengers on the bus, including Stevie. "There is no terror in the explosion, only in its anticipation", Hitchcock said.



### Sabotage (1936)

In fact, many years later Hitchcock confessed that he had made a serious mistake in detonating the bomb with Stevie's death, as the audience, caught up in the suspense, would have reacted very badly to the death of a young boy (as well as being unable to find relief from the anxiety that had been built up so relentlessly). In other words, the audience did not need confirmation of what they already knew, but rather relief after experiencing all that suspense. Another way of saying that the audience must feel in danger, but at the same time continue to feel that they are in the cinema, in a protected environment, because the danger is on the screen.

### 5. *Point(s) of view*

Hitchcock also manages information primarily through the interplay of different *points of view*. We know that viewers tend to identify with one or more characters in the film, thus adopting their point of view (Note 9) (and thus excluding alternative points of view) - only to have to change their minds when new information becomes available, as mentioned above. Let us consider another sequence from *Sabotage*. Notice the 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. Shocked by this discovery, the woman is going to have dinner with her husband. 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."* (Note 10).

In an interview, Hitchcock was keen to point out that his desire was “to make the murder scene inevitable without attributing blame to the woman” (Note 11). And indeed, it is Verloc who throws himself at Sylvia, impaling himself on the knife she is holding. This demonstrates once again the precision with which Hitchcock constructed meaning in his films, while always being mindful of the emotional reactions that even the smallest detail could provoke in his audience.



#### Sabotage (1936)

Another example of identifying with characters and adopting their point of view is offered in *Suspicion*. A rich girl, Lina (Joan Fontaine), marries a spendthrift playboy and bit of a liar, Johnny (Cary Grant), gradually discovering that the man has no job and no income, but rather has a gambling habit and lives on loans. Throughout the film, our point of view coincides with that of the wife and, together with her, we are gradually led to believe that he wants to kill her in order to enjoy her inheritance in peace, even if these are only suspicions... Towards the end of the film, we see a door open from above, and in the strip of light that appears, we see a menacing shadow looming (the use of light suggests the legacy of the German expressionist season, which influenced Hitchcock in the early years of his career). Then, in the darkness of the house, we see a small light moving, then this light materialises into a glass of milk, which the husband is carrying up the stairs to his wife. The light from the glass intensifies until we see a close-up of the object. The husband enters his wife's bedroom, leaves the glass on the bedside table and wishes her good night. The woman remains terrified: we, like her, are (almost) convinced that it is poisoned milk. Throughout the sequence, the only words spoken are the husband's “Good night”. Hitchcock had placed a light bulb in that glass to make it even more evident and terrifying.



#### Suspicion (1941)

At the end of the film, we see the couple travelling at high speed in a car. During the journey, Johnnie drives recklessly on a road adjacent to a cliff; at one point, Lina's door opens and Johnnie reaches out towards her, terrifying her. The car stops and Lina confronts her husband. He tells her that he intended to commit suicide after taking her to her mother's house, but now he realises that such a way out would be cowardly and therefore wants to turn himself in to the police for the embezzlement he committed ... With all suspicions now put aside, the woman convinces him not to turn himself in to the authorities, so that they can face the future together. This ending has been criticised for several reasons. The happy ending, which lasts only a few minutes, seems to be in stark contrast to the rest of the film, which deliberately made us side with Lina and share her suspicions: an example of prolonged “manipulation”... Perhaps Hitchcock was partly forced to include this happy ending to safeguard Cary Grant's character, who had always appeared in positive roles in previous films (especially comedies) and would have been unpopular with audiences in a “negative” role.

However, the audience's point of view does not always coincide with that of a character. Sometimes viewers have more information than the characters themselves, which implies a different form of involvement. In a sequence from *The Birds*, for example, the protagonist (Tippi Hedren) is sitting on a bench at the entrance to a school. Behind her is a metal structure (which the woman cannot see at the moment), on which a black crow comes to rest. We hear children singing a repetitive nursery rhyme. As the rhyme gets longer and longer, images of the woman sitting, smoking a cigarette, alternate with images of the structure, on which more and more birds are landing... almost as if to visually balance the repetitive sound coming from the school. The tension grows, but the woman, although looking worried (there have already been incidents of bird invasions), does not notice what is behind her... until, spotting a crow approaching and following its flight, she is forced to turn around and notice the terrible sight of a horde of menacing birds. At this point, the woman hurries towards the school entrance... For a few moments, viewers are able to follow the unfolding threat without the protagonist being aware of it ...



#### The birds (1963)

At other times, our gaze is aligned not with a character's point of view, but with the camera itself, which takes on the task of accompanying us through the scene, with different effects on the suspense. In this sequence from *Frenzy*, for example, the man (who we already know to be the serial killer) accompanies a woman to his flat on the first floor of a building: we see them climbing the stairs, then entering the flat. The door closes, leaving us outside... At this point, in total silence, the camera moves backwards, descending the stairs to the ground floor entrance ... here we begin to hear the sounds of the street. The camera continues its movement, leaving the house, then rises to frame the first-floor windows ... With a single sequence shot, without any cuts, the camera has taken our place and all we can do at this point is let our imagination run wild to guess what is happening behind those first-floor windows...



#### Frenzy (1972)

Another clear example of the camera acting as an omniscient agent, accompanying and directing the viewers' gaze towards a specific position, is provided by this sequence from *Young and Innocent*. 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 "blackened up" drummer in the band" (Note 12). 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?*" (Note 13).



Young and innocent (1937)

## 6. Viewers as "powerless voyeurs" and the role of editing

*"I'll bet you that nine out of ten people, if they see a woman across the courtyard undressing for bed, or even a man puttering around in his room, will stay and look; no one turns away and says, 'It's none of my business'. They could pull down their blinds, but they never do; they stand there and look out."* (Note 14)



Psycho (1960)



Rope (1948)

*"The cinema and the cinematic director (Hitchcock) turn the audience member into a voyeur too, making them complicit in the on-screen character's illicit act of viewing the forbidden. In such moments ... the viewer-in-the-theatre may experience the emotions of shame, embarrassment and fear that are felt by the illicit looker who has been caught looking."* (Note 15)

The various techniques Hitchcock uses to direct the viewer's gaze in predetermined directions and along predetermined paths ultimately draw the viewer into a subtle game of revelations. If we are always a bit of a "voyeur" at the cinema, in the sense that our gaze "enters" a world of characters and events that are ultimately foreign to us, but precisely for this reason attractive and compelling, the game that Hitchcock plays is particularly subtle (and relentless). Often, in his films, the audience is called upon to exercise an active and penetrating gaze on the glimpses of life that appear on the screen. At the same time, since viewers have no way of intervening in what they see and hear, as the film proceeds inexorably along the tracks laid out by the director, they find themselves in the unsettling position of being able to watch but having to experience all the tension caused by their powerlessness. It is precisely on this role of "powerless voyeur" that Hitchcock plays all his cards, eliciting the emotions of anxiety and suspense that arise from this situation.

The protagonist of *Marnie* (Tippi Hedren) is a young woman who, due to a severe trauma suffered in childhood, has become a "serial thief": she gets hired by a company and, after discovering the combination to the safe, proceeds swiftly with her plans to steal. In this sequence, after waiting for all the employees to leave the office at the end of the working day, Marnie goes to the safe room and opens it. There is complete silence. At this point, however (at exactly **2:50**), the screen seems to split in two: it is actually the same room, but divided in the middle by a large cupboard. On the right, we see Marnie putting the money into her bag, but on the left, a cleaning lady appears and begins to wash the floor. We are thus in the classic situation of the "helpless voyeur": even though Marnie is a thief, we naturally find ourselves on her side: will she manage to escape without being seen? But, as spectators, we can only watch the scene unfold with growing anxiety. After closing the safe, Marnie immediately notices the cleaning lady. Her gaze (and ours) falls on the stairs (the way out). She takes off her shoes, puts them in her coat pockets and proceeds silently... until one shoe falls to the floor with a loud thud. However, the cleaning lady seems not to have noticed anything, and Marnie manages to escape ... just as a man arrives on the scene, walks up to the cleaning lady and shouts a few words in her ear: at this point, we understand Hitchcock's ingenious twist: this woman is deaf! But that didn't stop us from experiencing a few moments of pure suspense ...



## Marnie (1964)

It is clear that in this sequence everything hinges on the staging of a suitably divided space, almost as if there were two independent screens, and on the editing cuts (the shoe falling to the ground, Marnie having to reach the stairs, the man arriving just as Marnie is descending...). Through the editing cuts, our attention is directed from time to time to a part of the environment, to important details (the shoes), to Marnie's tense face...

Another masterful example of how editing is essential in directing the viewer's attention to one element and then another can be found in *Dial M for Murder*. A man (Ray Milland) discovers that his wife (Grace Kelly) has a lover and decides to have her killed by a hitman (Anthony Dawson) in order to pocket a large inheritance. The murder plan is planned down to the smallest detail: the hitman will hide behind a curtain and, when the husband, dining out with friends to secure a solid alibi, calls his wife on the phone, she will walk towards the curtain, at which point the hitman will strangle her. Therefore, the action must take place in two distinct settings: the telephone booth, from which the husband will make the fatal call, and the living room, the scene of the murder. Editing alternates between the two settings "in real time" for the viewer, who has all the necessary information. Of course, there are obstacles that somewhat complicate events: the husband's watch seems to have stopped, the hitman looks at his own watch and is about to leave, the husband finds the telephone booth occupied ... When he finally manages to call (and the dramatic tension is heightened by the image of the switchboard inexorably forwarding the fatal call), the hitman, who was about to leave, resumes his position behind the curtain. The image of the woman answering the phone and then being attacked alternates with that of her husband, who, on the other end of the line, waits for the events to unfold ... But not everything goes as planned. The woman manages to stab the hitman with a pair of scissors ... leaving her husband on the phone in total uncertainty about what is happening. Note the different levels on which the action takes place, alternating between the telephone booth, the living room where the murder takes place, and ... the gaze of us viewers, who know everything that should happen and watch helplessly - but our reaction is mixed: suspense is followed by terror ...



## Dial M for Murder (1954)

The theme of the "helpless voyeur" is masterfully illustrated in *Rear Window*.

The main character is Jeff (James Stewart), a reporter sitting in a wheelchair with his leg in plaster.

With nothing to do during a scorching summer, Jeff observes (or, rather, spies on) what is happening in the flats overlooking the courtyard from his window. Jeff's situation is therefore that of someone who sees but cannot do anything - just like us viewers, who in turn "spy" on what Jeff is doing and, through him (and thanks to his binoculars and telephoto lens), have access to the "private lives" of many different people.

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 16).



#### Rear window (1954)

Another masterful example of a character who helplessly witnesses a murder that has been announced (and how we, the viewers, identify with her and end up feeling the same emotions) can be found in this famous sequence from *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. At the same time, this sequence demonstrates its full emotional impact on the audience thanks to tight editing, which, by alternating different "dramatic action points", builds an almost unbearable tension. The characters in the film are an American tourist couple, Ben (James Stewart) and Jo (Doris Day), whose son is kidnapped. In this way, despite themselves, they are blackmailed and involved in a plot to assassinate the Prime Minister of an unidentified country. Through a series of events, we learn that the assassination will take place during a concert at the Royal Albert Hall in London, precisely at the moment when a cymbal crash will cover the sound of the gunshot.

The action in this sequence takes place in various locations within the Royal Albert Hall: the position from which Jo can see the entire theatre; the box where the murderer and his companion are seated, the latter following the concert by reading the score; the box where the Prime Minister is seated; the orchestra and choir, both as a whole and in relation to the musician who, following the score, prepares to strike the cymbals; Ben arriving at the theatre and trying, in vain, to warn the Prime Minister. The entire sequence is without dialogue, as the soundtrack consists of the concert that is taking place. The fast-paced editing alternates between scenes from the various perspectives mentioned above, and viewers are invited to follow the progress of the concert, including the score, which inexorably proceeds towards the fateful cymbal crash; but viewers also identify with Jo, who is in the best position, as she sees the assassin preparing to shoot, and at the same time the royal box where the Prime Minister is seated. Jo sees everything, but like us, she is powerless in the face of what she knows is about to happen... A moment before the cymbal crash, terrified, Jo lets out a scream - and

this breaks the tension and also resolves the state of anxiety and suspense that has gripped us: the assassin, taken by surprise, shoots but only wounds the Prime Minister in the arm, and Ben engages in a brief struggle with him, which ends with the hitman falling from the box into the void.

It is thanks to the editing that the audience is able to follow, moment by moment, the chain of events, with the score marking the relentless progression towards the fatal moment; but it is also thanks to Jo's "optimal" position that we can alternately shift our gaze between the assassin's box and that of the Prime Minister. In this case, therefore, Hitchcock used the camera flexibly, framing individual elements one at a time, which, in their sequence through editing, allow us to enjoy both the "omniscient" gaze of the camera and, subjectively, Jo's powerless gaze.

*'Viewers are both forced to identify with the actions taking place and to look upon them: they see the action happening and, at the same time, are implicated in the voyeuristic gaze.'* (Note 17)



The man who knew too much (1956)

### **7. Objects are charged with suspense (and the role of editing)**

In many of the previous examples, we have seen how certain objects, part of the *mise-en-scène*, play an active role in building suspense: once identified as "crucial points" in the narrative, a single shot in which they appear is enough to generate and increase dramatic tension. This is the case with the telephone in *Dial M for Murder*, the glass of milk in *Suspicion*, and the musical score in *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. When objects are charged with drama, Hitchcock's gaze on them is enough to immediately draw us into his game - thus manipulating our fear. But this function can also be performed by other elements of the film, such as a recurring colour (white in *Spellbound*, red in *Marnie* - colours that are associated with a crime or other dramatic circumstance), and even a character who "moves" events but does not actually exist (such as the fake spy in *North by Northwest*).

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 of being 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), with whom she falls in love. They suspect that this mysterious substance is contained in some bottles in Sebastian's cellar.

This sequence begins while Sebastian is in the bathroom. Elena enters the scene and immediately afterwards the camera zooms in on a bunch of keys: we understand that among them is also the key to the cellar. Elena quickly takes possession of it, despite her fear of being discovered - but we only see Sebastian's shadow moving in the bathroom and hear his voice ... When Sebastian comes out of the bathroom, he takes Elena's hands (which are hiding the stolen key) in his. The camera zooms in again on their clasped hands ... Sebastian opens one of Elena's hands (the empty one!) and immediately afterwards Elena hugs him - managing to drop the key onto the carpet. This key has now taken on great significance for the story and is a source of anxiety and fear for the protagonists (and for us).



Notorius (1946)

Elena must now manage to give Devlin the key, and to this end she manages to get him invited to a party. In one of cinema's most famous long takes, we 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 ...



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. The silhouettes, then the shadows, of Sebastian and his mother appear menacing to Elena's blurred vision ...



Notorius (1946)

## **8. Conclusion**

Alfred Hitchcock occupies a unique position in the history of cinema and its evolution.

On the one hand, since the middle of the last century, he has been recognised as an “auteur” of classic Hollywood cinema, with a body of work that, beyond individual films, testifies to a highly original vision of what cinema can produce and how it can do so according to recognisable personal criteria. Hitchcock's influence on many directors in the decades that followed, and up to the present day, is well documented, and his techniques, but even more so his highly personal use of cinematic language (from staging to editing, from camera movements to sound treatment) have rightfully become options that every director, even outside the “thriller/horror” genre, knows they can use and adapt according to their personal point of view.

On the other hand, film genres, themes, directors and audiences themselves have changed radically over the last few decades. Few directors today would subscribe to Hitchcock's vision of cinema and audiences. The relationship between director, film and audience remains at the heart of the cinematic experience, but total control, even manipulation, of the audience is a concept that clashes with new and current trends in cinema (not only in Hollywood). The themes dealt with have broadened and diversified, the characters have become increasingly complex and ambiguous, the narratives less linear and complete, reflecting a world that is increasingly difficult to describe and interpret. It has been said that the characters and situations in Hitchcock's films are often ambiguous, but this aspect was consciously intended by the director and, in any case, always subject to his total control, as he guided viewers along the paths to follow, thus determining their emotional reactions at every step.

'Modern' (or “post-modern”) narratives increasingly tend to offer the audience a variety of elements, without this implying predetermined directorial choices: the ambition of many directors is not to provide certain and unique answers, but rather to formulate questions, without indicating solutions or even paths to follow. In other words, audiences have changed, and today often “tolerate” and accept complex narratives that do not invite a single interpretation but leave ample room for interpretation. The relationship between director and audience has therefore evolved, and the film, which is at the heart of this relationship, often remains “open”, as does the dynamic between the director, the bearer of meaning, and the audiences, who are invited to deduce, hypothesise, discuss and actively interpret that meaning.

This does not mean that all films today have these characteristics, as there are still film genres and trends that respond to more “classical” and traditional narrative canons, just as audiences continue to be diverse and have very different needs and interests. In any case, Hitchcock's films continue not only to be seen around the world, but also to be studied, analysed and discussed - a clear sign that this director's “style” is still relevant and capable of stimulating not only the most superficial emotional reactions, but also, and perhaps above all, more complex reflections on what it means to tell stories from a cinematic point of view and to engage viewers at the deepest levels of understanding and involvement. Hitchcock's films continue to provide not only intelligent entertainment, but also fascinating paths of exploration and discovery of the universal human condition.

**Notes**

- (1) Truffaut F. 2002. *Hitchcock by Truffaut*, Paladin Grafton Books, London (revised edition 1986), p. 7.
- (2) Ibid, p. 427.
- (3) Webber R. 2007. ["Director of audiences": A study of Alfred Hitchcock's manipulation of his audiences](#), Master of Arts Dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, p. 149.
- (4) Bavand K. 2009. *Hitchcock and his audience: Creating and manipulating reality*, p. 9.
- (5) Webber, op. cit., p. 128.
- (6) Truffaut, op. cit., pp. 4-5.
- (7) Ibid p. 61.
- (8) Ibid., p. 60.
- (9) Spoto, D. 1976. *The Art of Alfred Hitchcock: Fifty Years of His Motion Pictures*, Anchor Books, New York.
- (10) Truffaut, op. cit.. p. 152.
- (11) Singer I. [Three philosophical filmmakers](#), MIT Press, p. 11.
- (12) *Il Mereghetti. Dizionario dei film*, Baldini Castoldi Dalai, Milano.
- (13) Truffaut, op. cit., p. 156.
- (14) Ibid., p. 3.
- (15) Spoto 1976, op. cit., p. 85.
- (16) Driscoll, P.A. 2014. ["The Hitchcock Touch": Visual Techniques in the Work of Alfred Hitchcock](#), *International ResearchScape Journal*, Vol. 1, Article 4.
- (17) Ibid.