

ELEMENTS OF SUSPENSE

On Why Hitchcock Still Can Make You Sit on the Edge of Your Seat

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Table of contents

1. What is Suspense?.....	3
2. Classic Suspense Scenes	5
2.1. Rear Window	5
2.1.1. Searching for Evidence	5
2.1.2. The Tension Builds Up	6
2.1.3. A Pure Film	7
2.2. Psycho	8
2.2.1. The Strange Behavior of Norman Bates	8
2.2.2. Taking a Shower	9
2.3. The Birds.....	9
2.3.1. The Birds are Coming	10
3. Comparing the Structure	12
3.1. The Elements.....	12
3.1.1. Always let the audience know more than the characters on the screen	12
3.1.2. The editing must flow with the action	12
3.1.3. The framing of the shots	13
3.1.4. Make the audience have compassion for the characters on the screen	13
3.2. Epilogue	13
4. References.....	14
4.1. Books	14
4.1.1. English Books	14
4.1.2. Danish Books	14
4.2. Internet resources	14
4.3. Image reference.....	15

Image on front page: Actor Anthony Perkins relaxing in between takes on the set of “Psycho” as he prepares for the role of Norman Bates. (Image Source: “Magnum Cinema”, 1995, p. 26)

1. What is Suspense?

Suspense is today such an incorporated element of movies that it for many seems second hand, but what elements are needed to create a good suspense scene? It is easy to spot a non-working suspense scene, but what are the key elements that make a good scene become a masterpiece?

It is impossible to talk about suspense without mentioning Alfred Hitchcock (1899-1980). He was the master of the technique. Although Hitchcock was not the first to use suspense in movies he had in the “golden era” of his career (from the mid 50s to the late 60s) developed a template for implementing suspense that worked so well that it is still revered as the best examples of the use of suspense. (Sinyard, 1994, p. 147)

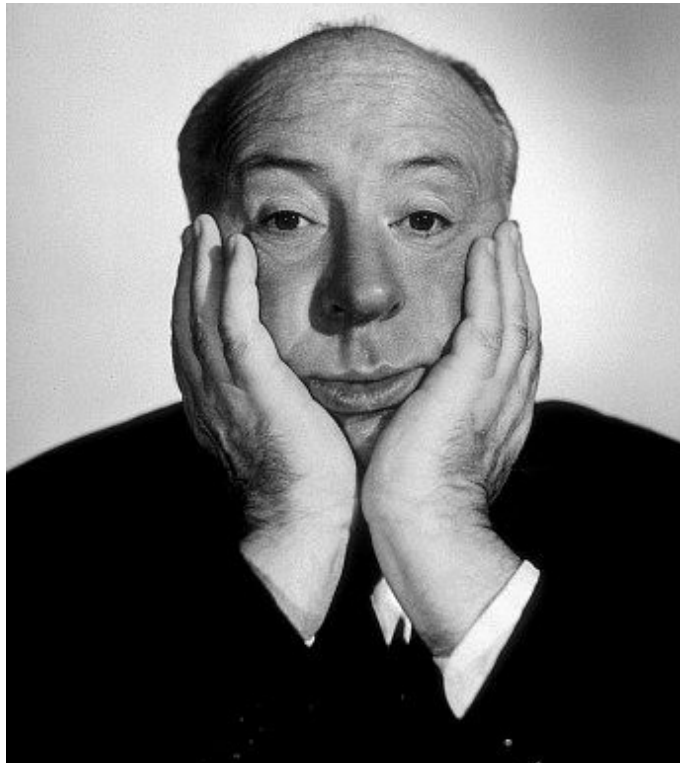


Image 1: The Master of Suspense; Alfred Hitchcock.

In Hitchcock’s own words: “There is a clear difference between *surprise* and *suspense* [...]. We are sitting here and having an innocent conversation. Let us assume that there is a bomb under this table between us. [...] suddenly there is a loud boom and the bomb goes off. The audience is *surprised*, but before this surprise they have only seen a very ordinary scene without any significance. Let us instead look at *suspense* scene. The bomb is under the table and the audience is aware of this

because they have seen the anarchist plant it there. They also know that the bomb will go off at one o'clock, and up on the wall is a clock showing that the time is now quarter to one [...]. In the first scene we have given the audience 15 seconds of surprise [...] but in the last scene we have given them fifteen minutes of suspense.” (Truffaut 1973, p. 52-53)¹. The whole scene rests on this difference in knowledge and the audience's fear on behalf of the unknowing characters.

In short: Suspense is a dramaturgy technique that plays of the difference in knowledge between the audience and the characters on the screen. (Schmidt, 1995, p. 143) It often revolves around subjects like; will the hero reach the right place and save the heroine before it is too late? Will the bomb expert defuse the bomb before it goes off? Will the detective see the sinister figure waiting in the alley? (Schepelern, 1995, p. 495)

¹ A free translation from the Danish text.

2. Classic Suspense Scenes

Many of the so-called *classic* suspense films were made by Hitchcock in the period spanning from the early 40s to the mid 60s including films such as “Shadow of a Doubt” (1943), “Spellbound” (1945), “Rope” (1948), “Dial M for Murder” (1954), “Rear Window” (1954), “North by Northwest” (1959), “Psycho” (1960), “The Birds” (1963) and “Marnie” (1964).

The focus of this essay lies on the films “Rear Window”, “Psycho” and “The Birds”, as these films excel in their extensive use of the suspense techniques. Throughout our examination and describes of the three films we will describe how classic suspense is used and how it works.

2.1. Rear Window

“Rear Window” from 1954 contains some of Hitchcock’s most easily recognizable suspense elements.

It is the story of the newspaper photographer Jeff (James Stewart) who has broken his leg. Confined to a wheelchair he spends the hot summer days and nights spying on his neighbors. He is spending so much time looking out the windows that he by chance sees that the man across the courtyard, Lars Thorwald (Raymond Burr), allegedly kills his wife. But how does he prove it? Stella (Thelma Ritter), his nurse, and his beautiful girlfriend Lisa (Grace Kelly) reluctantly agree to help him with the investigation.

2.1.1. Searching for Evidence

In one of the scenes² they lure Mr. Thorwald out of the apartment with a prank phone call, and Lisa and Stella goes down into the courtyard digging up the rose bed in search of the evidence. They find nothing and, much against their plans, Lisa enters Thorwald’s apartment by the fire escape and immediately starts to search there for evidence.

Stella rushed back to Jeff’s apartment. Jeff starts to get anxious right away. This was not what he planned and Thorwald could return every minute. Stella suggests that they call to Thorwald’s apartment when they see him return, and hopefully giving Lisa time enough to get out.

² Approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes into the film.

But “Miss Lonelyheart”, in the apartment below Thorwald’s seems to be determined to commit suicide. Jeff and Stella’s attention instead shifts to her and they decided to call up the police and tell them of Miss Lonelyheart’s tragic attempt to end her own life. While on the phone with the police Jeff and Stella all too late realize that Thorwald is returning and he is already outside his apartment. There is no time to warn Lisa. She is on her own.

2.1.2. The Tension Builds Up

One trick that Hitchcock implemented with great success in “Rear Window” was to have the camera confined within Jeff’s apartment. The camera has, so to speak, also broken its legs and is unable to leave Jeff’s side. This proves to be one of the key elements in the scene described above. Jeff is sitting across the courtyard and so are we, the viewer.



Image 2: James Stewart looking out over the courtyard as Grace Kelly tries to reason with him.

All through the scene the framing of the images is getting closer and closer. In the beginning where there is little danger we see Jeff in a total shot and Lisa and Stella in an equally large framing. When Thorwald is returning the framing has slowly tightened more and more on both Lisa and Jeff. In the shot where Thorwald surprises Lisa, Jeff is shown in very tight close-up, and slightly from below, a frog perspective shot to intensify the feeling of horror he must feel seeing the love of his life in a

brawl with a presume murderer. And there is absolutely noting he can do about it. These close-ups make the atmosphere more and more intensive.

It is one of Hitchcock's trademark techniques. Making the audience relive the agony and pain of the characters portrayed on screen. And as soon as the police arrives the frame is much wider again, and we can relax. The danger is over.

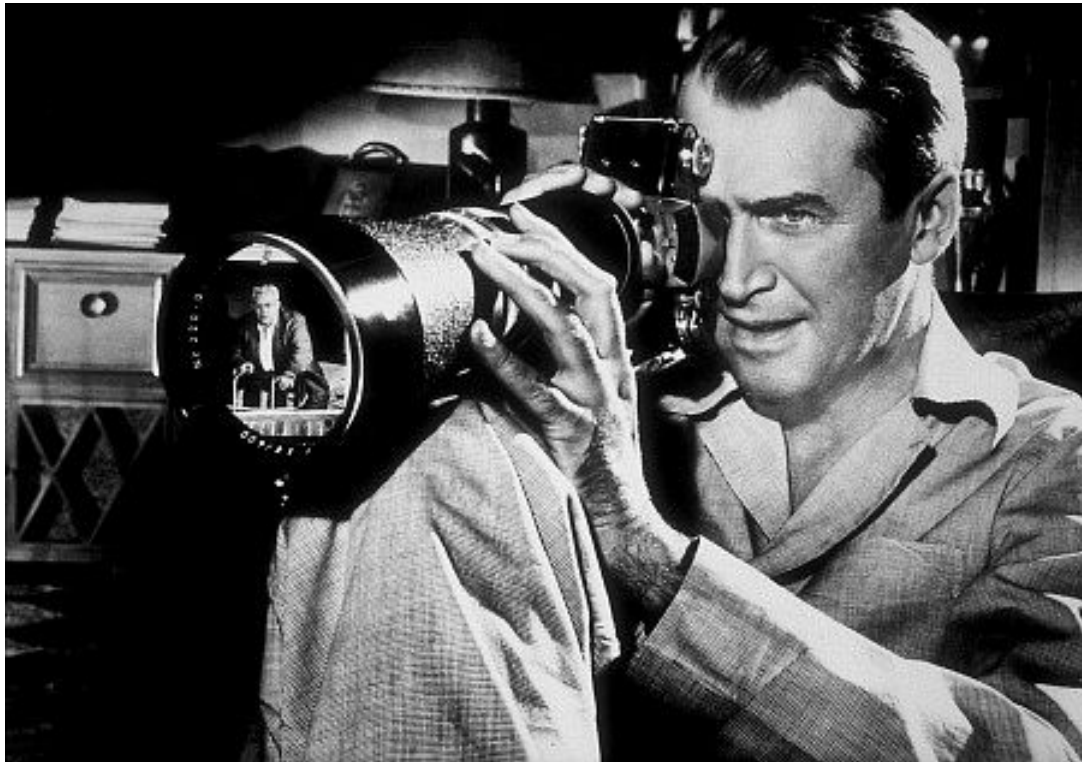


Image 3: James Stewart as the Pepping Tom in Rear Window and Raymond Burr (reflected in the camera lens) as the presumed murderer.

2.1.3. A Pure Film

Hitchcock tried to make what he called a “pure film” with “Rear Window” (Sinyard, 1994, p. 84) by using montage editing³. James Stewart shows his great acting talent by downplaying his horror. His facial expression is hardly changing throughout the scene, but everyone in the audience feels the horror because of the crosscutting between close-ups of his face and the brawl at Thorwald's apartment. The images express little by themselves but edited together they form a powerful synergy (Truffaut, 1973, p. 163).

³ The Russian film director Sergei M. Eisenstein (1898-1948) is generally recognized as the inventor of the montage editing technique Hitchcock here is talking about and it is therefore often referred to as Russian montage (Schepeleyn, 1995, p. 350).

The pace of the editing also becomes much faster as the scene progresses. First we see Jeff surveying the two women as they dig through the flowerbed. The cuts between the courtyard and Jeff's apartment are flowing at a relative slow pace. But as the tension intensifies the crosscutting becomes quicker and quicker, and again abruptly slows down when the police arrives.

2.2. Psycho

The story of Psycho is well known and revolves around Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) who in a moment of poor judgment decides to steal money from her work. She is running scared and drives out of town and checks into Bates Motel. The decision proves to be fatal, because only about 45 minutes into the film, Marion is killed and the leading character in the film shifts from her to Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) and his struggle with his long dead mother.

2.2.1. The Strange Behavior of Norman Bates



Image 4: Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) and Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) talks as she arrives at Bates Motel.

The suspense build-up to the fatal shower scene starts very early with the dinner scene in Norman's parlor behind his office. Marion does not sense it, but there is not doubt in the audience's mind that there is something very wrong with Norman. It is unclear what the problem is, but the dialogue with its eerie silences and strange subjects give evidence that Norman have not talked with anyone except his mother for a long time.

2.2.2. Taking a Shower

Marion starts her almost ritual cleaning, and the only sound we hear is the sound of the running water. The door opens and a dark figure comes in. The shower curtain is ripped away and the dark figure is holding a knife and starts stabbing Marion. Bernard Herrmann's music enters with screaming violins that is almost deafening. The speed of the editing also erupts in a frantic pace. None of the cuts is more than a second long, and the brutality of the ongoing slaughter is intensified.



Image 5: Janet Leigh in the famous shower scene from Alfred Hitchcock's "Psycho".

You never actually see the knife cut Marion but still it is revered as one of the most brutal murder scenes ever (Truffaut, 1973, p. 209). Hitchcock clearly plays of the audience's imagination; both in term of the sheer shock of seen Marion killed but also because of the different elements (the music, the framing and the editing) combined intensify the shock (Sinyard, 1994, p. 113).

The slow death of Marion is also reflected in the editing. Her life is slowly fading as the blood runs down the drain, and now there are only a few cuts between the shots. The camera is slowly moving away from the close-up of Marion's eye, underlining the vanishing signs of life.

2.3. The Birds

In 1963 Hitchcock made "The Birds" which again underlined his ability to incorporate suspense in movies. But whereas "Psycho" involved a very interpersonal struggle, "The Birds" is much more a "mankind-versus-nature" film (Sinyard, 1994, p. 116). The birds in the quite coastal town of

Bodega Bay have run amok for no apparent reason, and Mitch Brenner (Rod Taylor) and his new love interest Melanie Daniels (Tippi Hedren) is caught in the middle of the mayhem.

2.3.1. The Birds are Coming

On request of the very worried grandmother Lydia Brenner (Jessica Tandy) Melanie agrees to pick up the children from school⁴. At the school she sits outside waiting for the class to end. Little does she know that the birds are gathering behind her on the school's playground.

First we see Melanie sitting down in a total shot establishing the scene showing that she is indeed sitting just next to the school. The framing of Melanie cuts to a medium shot and crosscutting between her and the climbing frame in the background. As the scene progresses and more birds are gathering on the climbing frame the crosscutting becomes faster and the framing of Melanie goes into a close-up of her face.

The framing of the climbing frame with the birds remains in a medium shot. There is no need to exaggerate the danger with the framing (Schmidt, 1995, p. 144). You, as the audience, already know, from previous scenes, what the birds are capable of.

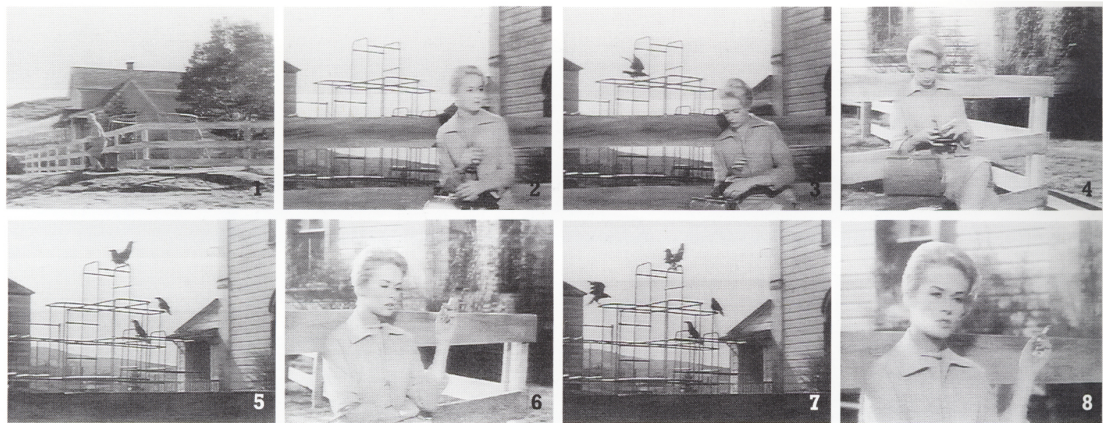


Image 6: The Birds are coming as Melanie is sitting unaware waiting outside the school.

Melanie looks up once in a while, but does not see the birds flying in, and it makes the tension so much higher. When Melanie finally realizes that the birds are behind her, her facial expression is not much changed and she does not say a sound. It would also become too overdramatic if she did (Schmidt, 1995, p. 144). When the children realize the horror the shot goes to a wide shot, as the

⁴ The scene starts approximately 1 hour and 9 minutes into the film.

rage of the birds is unleashed. The wide shot also underlines the helplessness of Melanie and the children. There is nowhere to hide.



Image 7: Tippi Hedren and the children running from the onslaught of the birds in the film bearing their name.

3. Comparing the Structure

The structure of the three scenes analyzed herein follows a very similar path. They all have more or less the same build-up; the same kind of editing, the same gap of knowledge between audience and the characters, and more or less the same camera angles.

3.1. The Elements

These elements are only the most fundamental, but combined they can take a normal scene and make it into a much more audience participant scene.

3.1.1. Always let the audience know more than the characters on the screen

This is the most important of all the elements required to create a believable suspense scene. In the case of the scene from “Rear Window” the audience knows just as much as James Stewart does. He on the other hand knows more than Grace Kelly. The audience and Stewart are one and the same. The audience is personified in Stewart’s role and vice versa.

In “Psycho” you only have a very short warning before Anthony Perkins comes and slaughters Janet Leigh in the shower, but the suspense was build up in the many scenes before. You could not help but to think that there was something wrong with Norman Bates.

Comparing the three different scenes analyzed, “The Birds” have the longest build up. You know for ages that the birds are starting to gather at the school. It is a very long and unpleasant scene, because of the difference in knowledge between audience and characters.

3.1.2. The editing must flow with the action

This is true for all the scenes analyzed. The more intense the action is on the screen the faster and more frantic the editing has to be. Likewise the pace should slow down, as the scene is resolved, giving the audience time to breath and relax and take in the action that has just occurred.

3.1.3. The framing of the shots

As with the editing, all the scenes follow the same principles considering the framing. There is a big difference between using total, medium and close-up shots. With the right editing making the framing closer and closer, the almost claustrophobic feeling of the close-up becomes very apparent.

3.1.4. Make the audience have compassion for the characters on the screen

It is a fundamental flaw in trying to create suspense in a film, if there is no compassion of the characters from the audience (Hitchcock, 1995, p. 114). No matter what they have done you have to make them likable, be that a peeping tom, a thief, a murderer or the like. Otherwise the audience will not sit in agonizing worry, but instead just wait for the enviable fate of the unlikable characters.

3.2. Epilogue

Hitchcock's entire body of films, not only the ones analyzed herein, have proven themselves so well crafted in terms of building a believable suspense, that even though the movies were made almost 50 years ago they prove that Hitchcock can still make you sit on the edge of your seat shouting "Look behind you!".

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Information about "The Birds":

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0056869/>

Alfred Hitchcock – The Master of Suspense:

<http://nextdch.mty.itesm.mx/%7Eplopezg/Kaplan/Hitchcock.html>

4.3. Image reference

Front page image:

“Magnum Cinema”, 1995, p. 26

Image 1:

Alfred Hitchcock:

[http://www.imdb.com/gallery/mptv/1072/Mptv/1072/0017-0270.jpg?path=pgallery&path_key=Hitchcock,%20Alfred%20\(I\)](http://www.imdb.com/gallery/mptv/1072/Mptv/1072/0017-0270.jpg?path=pgallery&path_key=Hitchcock,%20Alfred%20(I))

Image 2:

From “Rear Window”:

http://www.imdb.com/gallery/mptv/1073/Mptv/1073/5375-0002.jpg?path=gallery&path_key=0047396

Image 3:

From “Rear Window”:

http://www.imdb.com/gallery/mptv/1073/5375-0016.jpg?path=gallery&path_key=0047396

Image 4:

From “Psycho”:

<http://www.meredy.com/vinbw/psycho.jpg>

Image 5:

From “Psycho”:

<http://www.margaretmorgan.com/articles/grace/psycho.jpg>

and

<http://www.bergen-filmklubb.no/cinamateket/h02/img/psycho.jpg>

Image 6:

From “The Birds”:

“Film – Historie, Kunst, Industri” (Film – History, Art, Industry), p. 144

Image 7:

From “The Birds”:

<http://www.modcult.brown.edu/students/segall/thebirds.JPEG>