

HITCHCOCK FILM TECHNIQUES

STEP 1: It's the Mind of the Audience

Change everything in your screenplay so that it is done for the audience. Nothing is more important than how each scene is going to affect the viewer. Make sure the content engages them and reels them in. Use the characters to tease the viewer and pull them along desperately wanting more.

Hitchcock knew why people are drawn to a darkened theater to absorb themselves for hours with images on a screen. They do it to have fun. In the same way people go to a roller coaster to get thrown around at high speeds, theater audiences know they are safe. As a film director you can throw things at them, hurl them off a cliff, or pull them into a dangerous love story, and they know that nothing will happen to them. They're confident that they'll be able to walk out the exit when it's done and resume their normal lives. And, the more fun they have, the quicker they will come back begging for more. (Gottlieb)

STEP 2: Frame for Emotion

Emotion (in the form of fear, laughter, surprise, sadness, anger, boredom, etc.) is the ultimate goal of each scene. The first consideration of where to place the camera should involve knowing what emotion you want the audience to experience at that particular time. Emotion comes directly from the actor's eyes. You can control the intensity of that emotion by placing the camera close or far away from those eyes. A close-up will fill the screen with emotion, and pulling away to a wide angle shot will dissipate that emotion. A sudden cut from wide to close-up will give the audience a sudden surprise. Sometimes a strange angle above an actor will heighten the dramatic meaning. (Truffaut)

Hitchcock used this theory of proximity to plan out each scene. These variations are a way of controlling when the audience feels intensity, or relaxation. Hitchcock compared this to a composer writing a music score - except instead of playing instruments, he's playing the audience!

STEP 3: Camera is Not a Camera

The camera should take on human qualities and roam around playfully looking for something suspicious in a room. This allows the audience to feel like they are involved in uncovering the story. Scenes can often begin by panning a room showing close-ups of objects that explain plot elements.

This goes back to Hitchcock's beginnings in silent film. Without sound, filmmakers had to create ways to tell the story visually in a succession of images and ideas. Hitchcock said this trend changed drastically when sound finally came to film in the 1930's. Suddenly everything went toward dialogue oriented material based on scripts from the stage. Movies began to rely on actors talking, and visual storytelling was almost forgotten. (Truffaut) Always use the camera as more than just a camera.

STEP 4: Dialogue Means Nothing

One of your characters must be pre-occupied with something during a dialogue scene. Their eyes can then be distracted while the other person doesn't notice. This is a good way to pull the audience into a character's secretive world.

"People don't always express their inner thoughts to one another," said Hitchcock, "a conversation may be quite trivial, but often the eyes will reveal what a person thinks or needs." The focus of the scene should never be on what the characters are actually saying. Have something else going on. Resort to dialogue only when it's impossible to do otherwise.

"In other words we don't have pages to fill, or pages from a typewriter to fill, we have a rectangular screen in a movie house," said Hitchcock. (Schickel)

STEP 5: Point of View Editing

Jimmy Stewart looks at dog and then we see him smiling. Jimmy Stewart looks at a woman undressing and then we see him smiling. Those two smiles have completely different meanings, even if they are the exact same smile.

Putting an idea into the mind of the character without explaining it in dialogue is done by using a point-of-view shot sequence. This is subjective cinema. You take the eyes of the characters and add something for them to look at.

- ***Start with a close-up of the actor***
- ***Cut to a shot of what they're seeing***
- ***Cut back to the actor to see his reaction***
- ***Repeat as desired***

You can edit back and forth between the character and the subject as many times as you want to build tension. The audience won't get bored. This is the most powerful form of cinema, even more important than acting. To take it even further have the actor walk toward the subject. Switch to a tracking shot to show his changing perspective as he walks. The audience will believe they are sharing something personal with the character. This is what Hitchcock calls "pure cinema." (Truffaut)

Note: If another person looks at the character in point-of-view they must look directly at the camera.

STEP 6: Montage Gives You Control

Divide action into a series of close-ups shown in succession. Don't avoid this basic technique. This is not the same as throwing together random shots into a fight sequence to create confusion. Instead, carefully chose a close-up of a hand, an arm, a face, a gun falling to the floor - tie them all together to tell a story. In this way you can portray an event by showing various pieces of it and having control over the timing. You can also hide parts of the event so that the mind of the audience is engaged. (Truffaut)

Hitchcock said this was "transferring the menace from the screen into the mind of the audience." (Schickel) The famous shower scene in *Psycho* uses montage to hide the violence. You never see the knife hitting Janet Leigh. The impression of violence is done with quick editing, and the killing takes place inside the viewer's head rather than the screen. Also important is knowing when not to cut. (Truffaut)

Basic rule: anytime something important happens, show it in a close-up. Make sure the audience can see it.

STEP 7: Keep the Story Simple!

If your story is confusing or requires a lot of memorization, you're never going to get suspense out of it. The key to creating that raw Hitchcock energy is by using simplistic, linear stories that the audience can easily follow. Everything in your screenplay must be streamlined to offer maximum dramatic impact. Remove all extraneous material and keep it crisp. Each scene should include only those essential ingredients that make things gripping for the audience. As Hitchcock says, "what is drama, after all, but life with the dull bits cut out..." (Truffaut)

An abstract story will bore the audience. This is why Hitchcock tended to use crime stories with spies, assassinations, and people running from the police. These sort of plots make it easy to play on fear, but are not mandatory for all movies.

STEP 8: Characters Must Break Cliché

Make all of your characters the exact opposite of what the audience expects in a movie. Turn dumb blondes into smart blondes, give the Cuban guy a French accent, and the criminals must be rich and successful. They should have unexpected personalities, making decisions on a whim rather than what previous buildup would suggest. These sort of ironic characters make them more realistic to the audience, and much more ripe for something to happen to them.

Hitchcock criminals tend to be wealthy upper class citizens whom you'd never suspect, the policeman and politicians are usually the bumbling fools, the innocent are accused, and the villains get away with everything because nobody suspects them. They surprise you at every step of the plot.

STEP 9: Use Humor to Add Tension

Humor is essential to Hitchcock storytelling. Pretend you are playing a practical joke on the main character of your movie. Give him the most ironic situations to deal with. It's the unexpected gag, the coincidence, the worst possible thing that can go wrong - all can be used to build tension.

In *Marnie*, Tippi Hedren is stealing money from an office safe and is just about to leave when she notices the maid happens to be cleaning in the next room. The maid is completely innocent and unaware. Hedren will get caught if the maid sees her, but the audience is already hoping that she gets away with it. The more happily the maid mops the floor and the closer she gets to seeing Hedren, the higher the tension.

You'll also find that Hitchcock tended to use comical old women to add a flavor of innocent humor in his films. They will usually be opinionated, chatty, and have a highly optimistic view about crime. If someone were committing a crime they might even help with it!

STEP 10: Two Things Happening at Once

Build tension into a scene by using contrasting situations. Use two unrelated things happening at once. The audience should be focused on the momentum of one, and be interrupted by the other. Usually the second item should be a humorous distraction that means nothing (this can often be dialogue.) It was put there by you only to get in the way.

When unexpected guests arrive at the hotel room in the *Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956), Jimmy Stewart and Doris Day are in the midst of a tense phone-call. The arrival of the guests laughing and joking serve a dramatic counterpoint to the real momentum of the scene. In *Spellbound* (1945) Ingrid Bergman sees a note which has been slipped under her door. Just when she grabs for it, her colleagues walk in and speak with her about the disappearance of Gregory Peck, completely unaware they are standing on top of the note from him! The end result is - the audience pays more attention to what's happening.

STEP 11: Suspense is Information

"Information" is essential to Hitchcock suspense; showing the audience what the characters don't see. If something is about to harm the characters, show it at beginning of the scene and let the scene play out as normal. Constant reminders of this looming danger will build suspense. But remember - the suspense is not in the mind of the character. They must be completely unaware of it. (Schickel, Truffaut)

In *Family Plot* (1976) Hitchcock shows the audience that brake fluid is leaking out of a car well before the characters find out about it. In *Psycho* (1960) we know about the crazy mother before the detective (Martin Balsam) does, making the scene in which Balsam enters the house one of the most suspenseful scenes in Hitchcock's career.

"The essential fact is to get real suspense you must let the audience have information." --Alfred Hitchcock

STEP 12: Surprise and Twist

Once you've built your audience into gripping suspense it must never end the way they expect. The bomb must never go off! Lead them in one direction and then pull the rug out from under them in a surprise twist.

In the climax scene of *Saboteur* (1942) Norman Lloyd is cornered on the top of the Statue of Liberty as Robert Cummings holds him at gunpoint. Just when you think it's over, Cummings begins to speak, startling Lloyd to fall backwards over the edge!

STEP 13: Warning: May Cause MacGuffin

The MacGuffin is the side effect of creating pure suspense. When scenes are built around dramatic tension, it doesn't really matter what the story is about. If you've done your job and followed all the previous steps, the audience is still glued no matter what. You can use random plot devices known as the MacGuffin.

The MacGuffin is nothing. The only reason for the MacGuffin is to serve a pivotal reason for the suspense to occur. (Schickel) It could be something as vague as the "government secrets perhaps" in *North by Northwest*, or the long detailed weapons plans of Mr. Memory in the *39 Steps*. Or, it could be something simple like the dog blocking the stairway in *Strangers on a Train*. Nobody cares about the dog. It's only there for one reason - suspense. It could have just as easily been a person, an alarm, a talking parrot, or a macguffin!

"For me, suspense doesn't have any value if it's not balanced by humor." – Alfred Hitchcock

Borgus.com -- Filmmakers who attempt to use Alfred Hitchcock's techniques often overlook comedy, a vital component to his works. Even the most deadly situations depicted in his films have an undercurrent of facetious wit. Hitchcock's own public persona was built on the foundation of his sophisticated British deadpan humor, and it's not surprising this sly attitude permeates his craft.

"In the mystery and suspense genre, a tongue-in-cheek approach is indispensable," said Hitchcock. He felt this was the ingredient which kept audiences coming back begging for more. It is the equivalent of a roller coaster ride in which the passengers scream wildly on the way down but laugh when the ride rolls to a stop. (Gottlieb) In one of his most popular films, *Psycho* (1960), a hotel owner's angry mother kills visitors at night, and there are no obvious laughs in the film. But, Hitchcock often described *Psycho* as a practical joke. (Truffaut) Other films such as *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) and *Strangers on a Train* (1951) are sprinkled with macabre humor. *The Trouble With Harry* (1955) is purely a deadpan comedy.

According to Hitchcock, humor does not diminish the effectiveness of dramatic suspense. In fact, he argued that humor heightens the drama and makes it even more potent. "For me, suspense doesn't have any value unless it's balanced by humor," said Hitchcock. (Gottlieb)

Through his quirky characters, ironic situations, whimsical settings, and a complex balance of laughs and tension, Alfred

Hitchcock had found a way to make his suspense unbearably fun for his audiences:

1. Exploit trivial character traits

In order to heighten tension, Hitchcock would turn the focus of the action to the nonessential and frivolous details. He called this *understatement* – a way of calling attention to the trivial aspects of a character as a way of forming dramatic contrast in a moment of crisis.

“I’ve always found that, in a moment of crisis a person invariably does something trivial,” said Hitchcock, “like making a cup of tea or lighting up a cigarette. A small detail of this sort adds considerably to the dramatic tension of the situation.” (Gottlieb)

The more awkward and drawn out these details are, the better. In the climax scene of *Rear Window* (1954) James Stewart, desperate to delay the attack of Raymond Burr, grabs his camera bulbs and lights them sequentially to create a distraction. Each time a new bulb flashes, Burr awkwardly grabs his glasses as it momentarily blinds him. With each flash Burr struggles with his vision as the tension for the audience rises.

“I make it a rule to exploit elements that are connected with a character or location; I would feel like I’d been remiss if I hadn’t made maximum use of those elements,” said Hitchcock.

2. Create situations of irony

While working on a screenplay Hitchcock would often ask, “Now wouldn’t this be a funny way to kill him off?” (Truffaut) He built his stories around ironic situations. He liked to play practical jokes on the characters, putting them through the worst possible things that could go wrong.

In the *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* episode "One More Mile to Go" (1957, directed by Hitchcock) a policeman has stopped a man because of a burnt out tail light on his car, completely unaware there is a dead body in the trunk. The more obsessed this policeman gets with fixing the light, the more uneasy the murderer gets. Hitchcock pushes this situation to the level of unbearable absurdity as the policeman continues worrying about the light, and gets closer and closer to noticing the body.

North By Northwest (1959) places Cary Grant in an open field on a sunny day, where he is then chased by an airplane. "I like to take a lurid situation and counterpoint it with understatement," explained Hitchcock.

3. Surround drama with a happy setting

Hitchcock believed that in order for drama to be strong it must be surrounded by a light and humorous environment. He preferred to put his crimes out in the middle of sunlight and avoid the cliché shadows, bad weather, and creaky doors most audiences associate with suspense. (Gottlieb)

"The more happy-go-lucky the setting, the greater kick you get from the sudden introduction of drama," said Hitchcock. (Gottlieb)

The opening credits of Hitchcock's films are often playful, many accompanied by Bernard Herrmann's facetious music score.

One of the best examples of Hitchcock's use of whimsical environment is in *The Trouble With Harry* (1955). All is normal in this small town with grassy meadows, sunshine, and orange autumn leaves, until a dead body shows up. Harry Warp becomes everyone's problem – what can be done about Harry?

"It's the juxtaposition of the norm, of the

accurate average, against the fantasy... that's what makes the thing interesting." --Alfred Hitchcock

4. Include a burlesque character

One of Hitchcock's characters must never take murder seriously, mocking it in full delight. The most memorable is probably Henry Travers and Hume Cronyn in *Shadow of a Doubt (1943)* getting laughs around the family dinner table figuring out various ways to murder without getting caught. The shocking sense of humor often disturbs and confuses a gullible person nearby, unsure of whether they are serious. In *Strangers on a Train (1951)* Robert Walker teaches a woman at a party how to strangle someone, and she gets quite a laugh out of it. In *Rope (1948)* Constance Collier laughs hysterically at Rupert's (James Stewart) idea of murdering people for sport. In *Rear Window (1954)* Thelma Ritter is having a great thrill out of the possibility of a murder across the courtyard.

5. Balance laugh and tension

Hitchcock used a delicate combination of tension and relief in his suspense sequences. Often a laugh was inserted at a key point to release some tension. "...when you have comic relief, it's important that the hero as well as the audience be relieved," said Hitchcock. (Gottlieb) This assures that the audience maintains sympathy for the character.

North By Northwest (1959) is one of the best examples of the use of humor involving a chase. Early in the film Cary Grant is intoxicated and becomes comical as he nearly drives off a cliff. He looks down over the edge and laughs drunkenly as he pulls away. Later when he is held by captors at a public auction he becomes a heckler in order to get picked up by the police.

But this balance is not always easy to judge while making a film. "The only question is whether one should always have a sense of humor in dealing with a serious subject," Hitchcock admits, "it's the most difficult thing in the world to control that so as to get the right dosage. It's only after a picture is done that one can judge it properly."

It would be a mistake to think of Alfred Hitchcock's movies as comedies, but it is with his quirky characters, ironic situations, whimsical settings, and deliberate gags that raise his films to an unmatched Hitchcockian brilliance.