

A Brief Discussion on the Suspense Elements in Hitchcock's Films: A Case Study of *North by Northwest*

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doi:10.56397/SAA.2024.09.15

Abstract

Alfred Hitchcock is one of the most renowned film directors of the 20th century, known as the "Master of Suspense." He also pioneered the genre of "Hitchcockian thriller," directing and producing over 50 films and more than 300 television episodes. He seamlessly blended suspense, horror, and humor in his narratives. This paper explores the suspense elements in Hitchcock's films through an analysis of his representative work, *North by Northwest*.

Keywords: Hitchcock, suspense, elements

1. Introduction

Alfred Hitchcock (August 13, 1899–April 29, 1980), a 20th-century filmmaker and director, is renowned as the "Master of Suspense." His films are visually concise, even in scenes of murder, avoiding direct depictions of blood and violence, yet achieving a powerful "effect." Hitchcock excelled at portraying tension, fear, and anxiety, blending simple stories with profound themes to reveal human weaknesses and explore the psychological world. As the pioneer of suspense films, Hitchcock captivated generations of moviegoers with his unique brand of suspense.

North by Northwest is one of Hitchcock's representative works. This film does not delve into deep thematic ideas; its charm lies entirely in its thrilling and unpredictable plot. The suspense in this film does not develop around a

single core, as is often the case, but instead, it continuously throws twists and turns at the audience. By creating false leads and misleading the viewers, Hitchcock entices the audience to experience the charm of his films through one suspenseful moment after another.

2. Hitchcock's Concept of Suspense

Suspense refers to the technique used by a director to engage the audience's concern for the story's progression and the characters' fate. By setting unresolved conflicts within the plot, the audience's attention is captured, creating a sense of anticipation and a desire for resolution, which enhances their viewing experience and draws them deeply into the narrative for aesthetic pleasure. Hitchcock once said, "Suspense comes from giving the audience information that the characters are unaware of. While the characters may not know certain things, the audience does,

and this discrepancy creates a tension that leads to the comedic or dramatic effect.” Unlike many suspense directors who enjoy creating an unexpected ending, Hitchcock preferred to offer the audience unexpected clues throughout the film. This approach makes the audience more anxious and uneasy than the characters themselves, turning viewers into participants rather than mere spectators, engaging them in a dynamic interaction with the actors.

Hitchcock’s childhood experiences had a significant influence on his future filmmaking style. As a child, he was once sent to a police station cell by his father for misbehaving. Hitchcock recalled, “I will never forget the sound of the door slamming shut, followed by the clank of the cell bolt locking—it left a lasting impression on me.” Additionally, his experience of corporal punishment while attending St. Ignatius College at the age of 11 not only fostered his independent and thoughtful personality, but also taught him valuable lessons for his later films. These included how to create a strong sense of fear, evoke realism, and develop methodical thinking and reasoning abilities. All of these elements became the foundation of his artistic creativity.

Regarding suspense, Hitchcock famously said, “The bomb exploding is not scary; what’s terrifying is the waiting for the bomb to explode.” In Hitchcock’s view of suspense, there are two unusual perspectives: first, reasoning does not create suspense; second, suspense should not be confused with shock. In the film *Death on the Nile*, five people die throughout the story, yet the famous detective Poirot calmly proceeds with his investigation. Even when a venomous snake approaches and threatens his life, he remains unhurried, merely calling for help. What is presented to the audience is a story, rather than an interactive emotional experience. Thus, reasoning is an “intellectual question” that can only provoke “curiosity without passion.” On the other hand, “shock” brings a sensory aesthetic but lacks the depth of “thought.” Hitchcock believed that the allure of suspense lies in the combination of intellectual “doubt” and sensory “tension,” immersing the audience in the film’s plot as “voyeurs” rather than mere “spectators.”

3. Suspense Elements in Hitchcock’s Films as Seen in *North by Northwest*

In Hitchcock’s films, suspense is ever-present,

and the plots are tightly woven, reflecting his mature understanding of suspense and the “elements” that create it. These suspense elements effectively enhance the tense atmosphere and captivating narratives in his works, becoming iconic and often emulated by future filmmakers. Some of these elements include the “MacGuffin,” the “red herring,” chase sequences, and clue-related props. The film *North by Northwest* tells the story of an ordinary man who becomes entangled with a criminal organization, leading to a series of events involving love, murder, chases, and conspiracy.

3.1 MacGuffin

The “MacGuffin” refers to something that doesn’t really exist. It represents a topic, a simple plot, or an idea that generates suspense and storyline. The term “MacGuffin” comes from a favorite story Hitchcock used to tell. On a Scottish train, a curious person sees the passenger next to him carrying a peculiar package and asks what it is. The passenger replies, “It’s a MacGuffin.” “What’s a MacGuffin?” the man asks. “It’s used for catching lions in the Scottish Highlands.” “But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands.” “Well, in that case, there’s no MacGuffin either.” From this, we can see that a MacGuffin is an irrelevant or nonexistent object, yet it serves as the core of the conversation, action, or even the entire story.

It is undeniable that *The 39 Steps* marks the beginning of the widespread use of the “MacGuffin.” In this film, the plot revolves around the spy organization known as the “39 Steps,” yet what this organization is or what kind of intelligence it is stealing is left largely unexplained. Other notable examples of MacGuffins include the Avenger in *The Lodger*, Rebecca in *Rebecca*, and the motel owner’s mother in *Psycho*. These are all representations of the MacGuffin, serving as central elements that drive the plot forward without being fully explained or relevant to the deeper themes of the story.

Looking at the film *North by Northwest*, it is clear that the “MacGuffin” in this movie is the nonexistent “Mr. Kaplan.” Hitchcock believed that the MacGuffin could make the pacing of the film tighter and propel the story forward. Once the storyline is properly handled, the key element of the film needs to be minimized in

order not to disrupt the suspense, thereby drawing the audience into the film. Undoubtedly, the MacGuffin in *North by Northwest* stands as one of Hitchcock's most successful examples.

The entire film revolves around the nonexistent "Mr. Kaplan," a character fabricated by a counterintelligence organization as part of a ruse to target a terrorist group. The innocent advertising executive Roger Thornhill, played by Cary Grant, unexpectedly becomes the embodiment of the fictitious Mr. Kaplan, serving as bait to lure the terrorist organization, which leads to a series of innocent yet thrilling attempts on his life. In the first half of the film, the audience is focused on whether the advertising executive is really the impersonator of Mr. Kaplan, and they seek to uncover the identity of the real Mr. Kaplan. As the film progresses, the director uses conversations between CIA agents to reveal to the audience that Mr. Kaplan does not exist. This shifts the audience's attention to the protagonist's plight of being falsely accused, followed by a desire to "uncover the truth," then the tense moments of "being hunted," and ultimately the resolution in "discovering the truth." In this process, the film not only builds suspense but also provides a visually gripping experience during the harrowing chase scenes.

3.2 Red Herring

Red herring was once a staple food for coastal people in the Atlantic region. Since it was difficult to preserve, they salted and smoked the fish, which turned deep red and had a distinct smell. It was used to train hunting dogs to track foxes. On one hand, people would hang red herrings in the forest, using their smell to distract the dogs from following the scent of the fox. On the other hand, they placed red herrings in areas frequented by foxes to test the dogs' tracking skills, seeing if they could resist the overpowering smell. Because of this, "red herring" in detective novels or suspense films refers to a misleading, fabricated, or false clue designed to distract or confuse the audience. A classic example of a red herring can be seen in the film *Psycho*, where the subplot involving the female protagonist stealing \$40,000 and fleeing is a typical red herring meant to mislead the audience.

In the film *North by Northwest*, the core suspense revolves around "Roger Thornhill's

self-redemption." However, during the first 38 minutes of the film, the director meticulously constructs another suspenseful question: "Who is the real Mr. Kaplan?" To make this mystery feel authentic and fully developed, the director repeatedly references Mr. Kaplan throughout the film. For instance, a hotel employee tentatively mentions Mr. Kaplan's name, Roger Thornhill is kidnapped because he is mistaken for Mr. Kaplan, and the leader of the criminal organization speaks of the intelligence he has gathered on Mr. Kaplan, noting that he frequently changes hotels and is a spy. In Roger Thornhill's quest to uncover the truth, he visits a hotel and discovers that Mr. Kaplan is shorter than he is and even has dandruff, further adding to the mystery.

Thus, "Mr. Kaplan" becomes a red herring, exuding an enticing allure that continuously draws the audience's attention. This clever distraction lays the groundwork for the unexpected revelation at the 38-minute mark—that Mr. Kaplan does not exist. After this point, the suspense surrounding Mr. Kaplan loses its significance as the conversations between CIA agents reveal that he is a fabrication, deviating from the audience's expectations. This shift in the narrative sparks intense curiosity and concern for the fate of the "imposter" Mr. Kaplan, leading to heightened anticipation for what will happen next.

3.3 The Blonde Beauty

In Hitchcock's films, one can always spot a blonde beauty. It is said that when Hitchcock was seven, a local case involving the poisoning of a blonde woman occurred near his home, leaving a lasting impression on him, though it's unclear how this event influenced his film creations. Nevertheless, Hitchcock undeniably had a fixed and unique aesthetic preference for his leading actresses. In *The Lodger*, filmed in March 1926, Hitchcock used a blonde woman for the first time. From Ingrid Bergman in *Notorious* to Grace Kelly in *Rear Window*, the blonde women in Hitchcock's films follow a consistent standard: they are glamorous, cold as ice, and possess an elusive, mysterious aura. In a 1931 article, Hitchcock mentioned that if an actress had blonde hair, she should appear as a cold and frosty beauty, like a volcano covered in snow, with passion simmering and boiling beneath the ice. He further explained that the task of both the film and the director is to ignite this dormant volcano.

In *North by Northwest*, Eva Marie Saint's portrayal of the secret agent Eve Kendall once again embodies the elegant, poised, icy, and mysterious blonde beauty that Hitchcock favored. It is undeniable that in Hitchcock's films, the blonde women rarely turn out to be heinous murderers; more often, they are victims. This pattern underscores Hitchcock's recurring depiction of blondes as enigmatic figures who, despite their cool exteriors, are often caught in circumstances beyond their control, further amplifying their allure and vulnerability within the suspenseful narratives.

When the secret agent Eve Kendall, played by Eva Marie Saint, first appears in *North by Northwest*, she immediately engages in a romantic encounter with the protagonist Roger Thornhill. Shortly after, Eve arranges a meeting between Thornhill and Mr. Kaplan, sparking suspicion and intrigue about her true identity. However, when Thornhill arrives at the meeting location only to be attacked, the audience's initial perception of this blonde beauty shifts, casting doubt on her motives and creating another layer of suspense. As the plot unfolds, the revelation by CIA agents that Eve is a dangerous undercover agent deepens the audience's concern and empathy for her, seeing her as a cold yet fiery character beneath the surface. By the film's climax, after the leader of the criminal organization uncovers her "blank bullets" ruse, Eve's safety becomes another point of tension. The suspense peaks with the looming question: "Will she be thrown into the sea after boarding the plane?" This final suspenseful moment intensifies the audience's emotional investment in her fate.

3.4 Chase Sequences

In Hitchcock's films, the theme of pursuit and being pursued frequently plays a central role, with various cinematic elements and language surrounding chase sequences to immerse the audience in a thrilling, suspenseful, and tension-filled atmosphere. Hitchcock often portrayed ordinary individuals being drawn into a crisis by chance, embarking on a journey to prove their innocence. During their escape from capture, they face numerous dangers and, ultimately, overcome the challenges with exceptional bravery and intelligence, often winning the love of the heroine by the film's end. This narrative structure is evident in films like *The Lodger*, *The 39 Steps*, and *North by Northwest*. Today, we continue to see Hitchcock's influence

in Hollywood films, with his classic formula still prevalent in action-packed thrillers like the *Terminator* series.

In *North by Northwest*, one of the most iconic and often imitated scenes in Hollywood films is the famous airplane chase sequence. For instance, the *Naked Gun* series parodied this very scene. This chase lasts for seven minutes, during which Hitchcock used 131 shots. On one hand, this sequence perfectly establishes the relationship between time and space; on the other, it masterfully creates a tense atmosphere and builds suspense. For many, this scene is the most memorable part of the film. Hitchcock abandoned dialogue and instead used a series of subjective and reaction shots to convey the lurking danger. In the scene, the protagonist runs along an open rural highway, trying to evade a crop-dusting plane, which relentlessly attacks him with both pesticide and machine gunfire. This sequence is regarded as the highlight of the entire film, with its powerful visual impact and intense thrill captivating audiences. François Truffaut once remarked that "the most captivating part of this scene is that it lacks any dramatic motivation. This scene strips away all meaning and realism." This absence of clear motivation is precisely what makes the scene so appealing. The farmer casually mentions to Roger that there's a plane flying nearby, spraying pesticides, which serves as a setup for the chase. What follows is an adrenaline-pumping pursuit, culminating in the plane crashing into a truck and exploding, allowing the audience to finally relax after the gripping tension.

3.5 Clue Props

Clue props are a vital element in Hitchcock's films. When creating suspense through the storyline, props become indispensable. These objects often lead characters to moments of "sudden realization" or "utter shock," intensifying the film's tension. For example, Alice's gloves in *Blackmail*, the letter "R" in *Rebecca*, the wine bottle in *Notorious*, and the musical note in *The Man Who Knew Too Much* all play subtle yet significant roles in advancing the plot. These props not only help to unravel the mysteries but also enhance the overall suspense and emotional impact of the scenes they appear in.

4. Conclusion

In the ending of *North by Northwest*, Roger

Thornhill not only rescues the heroine but also completes his own journey of self-redemption, aligning with Hitchcock's recurring focus on the "transformation" of ordinary people in many of his films. Most of Hitchcock's films reflect a theme of "punishing evil and rewarding good," carrying a certain positive message. However, his films often emphasize suspense techniques at the expense of in-depth character development. While they leave audiences with thrilling and tense scenes, there are few truly memorable, well-rounded characters. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that Hitchcock pushed the element of "suspense" in cinema to its peak. His mastery of suspense, film language, and stylistic techniques remains exceptional and influential to this day.

François Truffaut once said, "Hitchcock's films will stand the test of time more than any other, because each of his films is completed with extraordinary artistry and craftsmanship." Hitchcock entered the film industry during the silent film era, initially working on intertitles before becoming a screenwriter, and later transitioning to directing. This background made Hitchcock exceptionally skilled at storytelling—he knew what kind of stories would captivate audiences and what narrative techniques could hold their attention. Hitchcock's suspense films had a profound and lasting impact on the development of world cinema. In America, many of his iconic scenes and filming techniques have been widely imitated by subsequent directors, a testament to Hitchcock's mastery of suspense. There is no doubt that suspense is not exclusive to the thriller genre; it can be found in science fiction, horror, detective, and crime films to varying degrees. Elements such as the MacGuffin, red herrings, chase sequences, and clue props make Hitchcock's films meticulous in their construction, distinct in style, and deeply engaging, creating a constant sense of tension and anticipation. His title as the "Master of Suspense" is indisputable, and *North by Northwest* has undoubtedly earned its place as a classic in the history of world cinema.

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