

Dramatic Tension in Hitchcock's Films—Taking *North by Northwest* as an Example

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ABSTRACT

North by Northwest was directed by Hitchcock in 1959, which represented Hitchcock's filming style. This paper attempts to analyze how Hitchcock constructed dramatic tension and the uniqueness of dramatic tension in his films. In addition, this paper aims to discover ways that film workers today can learn from Hitchcock and make progress in their films. By interpreting the narrative structure, filming techniques and suspense in *North by Northwest*, this paper concludes that Hitchcock utilized three innovative means which are the unexpected transition in character's personality/identity, the crucial use of MacGuffin and suspense, and the restriction in plots caused by optical POV to enhance the dramatic tension. Therefore, film makers can learn the three approaches from Hitchcock.

Keywords: *Dramatic tension, narrative structure, filming techniques, suspense*

1. INTRODUCTION

Regarded as the most influential film director in the world, Alfred Hitchcock had directed more than 50 films in his life. In most of his films, Hitchcock presented his unique filming style through the utilization of suspense. The most renowned masterpieces of Hitchcock are *North by Northwest*, *Psycho*, and *Rear Window*, which are Hitchcock's significant contributions to film industry. This paper will mainly discuss the dramatic tension in *North by Northwest*.

North by Northwest was a film directed by Alfred Hitchcock in 1959. The outstanding film technique and the complex story structure were highly complimented at that time, making this film one of the most important works of Alfred Hitchcock. Although this film is likely to be regarded as an action film and mystery film in today's standard, Hitchcock insisted that most of his films, including *North by Northwest*, were actually thriller films. In this film, dramatic tension, which is a technique that attracts audiences, is entrenched to intensify the topic and reflect the genre. When Roger Thornhill was driving unconsciously on the edge of the cliff, audiences are petrified and agitated to find out how the story will continue because of the dramatic tension in the scene.

This paper will analyze the dramatic tension in *North by Northwest* through narrative structure, filming techniques, and the establishment of suspense. There are some focuses in this paper, including the analysis of dramatic tension in Hitchcock's films and the integration of filming practice in Hitchcock's films. The purpose of this paper is to reveal how Hitchcock employed different filming methods to set up the dramatic tension in most of his films, and what is

the uniqueness of dramatic tension in Hitchcock's films. By scrutinizing Hitchcock's films, this paper has the meaning of facilitating film workers to improve their movies by learning from Hitchcock's filming methods.

2. NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

2.1. Difference between story and plot in the film

When people are watching films, they are unconsciously appreciating the "story" of a character's life. Although people believe the film presents the story of one's entire life, story and plot are innately different things to audience. Audiences are engaged in the process of deducing and hypothesizing when they are viewing films, and through this process they can apprehend the cause and effect, time, and space in a film [1]. Story is the events of a character's life, containing the acting events and deducing events. Apparently, most films are incapable of showing a broad period of time of the protagonist. In contrast, storytelling is generally used by film makers to present parts of a character's story, including nondiegetic factors like flashback and the change of order. As a result, audiences actually view the plots which are generated from storytelling instead of the story when they are watching films. In the opening scene of *North by Northwest*, Roger Thornhill and his secretary Maggie were walking out of a building in large crowds. With the movement of camera, audiences could realize that the place was in New York and the time was about mid-50s. Through the discussion between them, Hitchcock established the protagonist Roger Thornhill, who was a successful manager of an

advertising company. Subsequently, audiences could deduce information like Thornhill had finished working for a long day, he was not married and he cared about his mother. The information had not been acted out, but audiences can understand them and these deducing events are crucial for later appreciating. Once audiences possess the basic information about Thornhill from hypothesizing, like he could drink a lot and his fleeing through driving the car when he was initially captured are acceptable to them. Also, in the end of the third act of the film, when Roger and Eve were lying in bed and the train was travelling into the tunnel, the plot ended but the story that Roger and Eve would live enjoyable life continued, which demanded audiences' inference. This scene is an aftermath, which allows audiences to recall things that happen earlier. The difference between story and plot in this film provides audience with deeper comprehension toward characters and helps to build round characters.

2.2. Narrative structure of love and success storyline

Most of the film directors prefer to combine love and success story in their films, which increases the complexity. In *North by Northwest*, there were two storylines: success and love story. The entire story happened in four days and night, and this highly-concentrated structure made every event in the film valuable. The success story concentrates on the events of Roger Thornhill's searching for George Kaplan, who was an invented character by USIA. In order to make his searching journey more difficult, Hitchcock created lots of obstacles in his way. When Roger was investigating true identity of Tencin, he was mistaken as the assassin and was chased by police; when he arrived at the auction, he was surrounded by gang of antagonist; when he was sneaking out of Vandamm's house, he was captured by housewife. These hindrances attract audiences and establish short-term goals for protagonist to achieve. From the perspective of the love line, the love story changes according to Roger's opinion toward Eve. The love story began when they first met on the train and was concealed when she pretended to be enemy. After being informed that Eve was the agent of USIA, the love story continued and converged with the success story in the third act. Tools of storytelling were widely applied by Hitchcock in the storylines. Roger Thornhill's matchbox was a planting and payoff in the film. Initially Thornhill used it for smoking, but when he was trying to warn Eve that her identity was exposed, he threw the matchbox which contained his writing to Eve. In addition, elements of the future were effectively showed in the film to suggest the upcoming plots. For instance, when Roger imitated Eve's script on the paper, the word auction was an element of the future which implied that Roger would go to the auction party to search for answer. The repeat appearance of same motif in the love storyline makes the film more consistent. In the romance story, Roger put his hands in different positions

when he was kissing with Eve in two plots due to the fact that he later mistook Eve as the mistress of Vandamm. The consistent of narrative structure and the converge of two storylines make this suspense film entertaining and cause magnificent impulse on audiences. Without a solid and complicated story structure, film loses its foundation and is unlikely to be successful. The love and success story structure and tools of storytelling in this film are repetitively imitated by directors today to improve their story.

2.3. Change between restricted and unrestricted narration

Narration is the method of presenting the content of story, and stories can be narrated in dissimilar perspective. Omniscient narration, also called unrestricted narration, is the method of telling a story which provides the audiences more information than characters have. Omniscient narration is often employed by directors in films which contains a wide range of places and copious characters. However, restricted narration is a means that follows the maturity of main characters and ignores the development of other characters to some extent. Restricted narration can motivate audience to generate curiosity toward the plot, and surprise them when it comes to the end. In *North and Northwest*, the story changed between unrestricted and restricted narration, not only creating the intense atmosphere, but also giving audiences necessary information. When Roger Thornhill encountered Eve in the train, restricted narration prevents audiences from recognizing that Eve was the agent in Vandamm's gang. Audiences are also bewildered about the special assistance of Eve, posing a suspense in the plot. In the middle of the second act, the plot about the discussion between professor and his colleague in USIA was unrestricted narration. By this means, audiences comprehend that George Kaplan was an inexistent character and Roger Thornhill was pursuing an illusory person. The change between restricted and unrestricted narration in *North by Northwest* causes hierarchy of knowledge: audiences know more than Thornhill but less than USIA. By using this means, Hitchcock produced the atmosphere of suspense in the film, making its story more persuasive for audience to accept.

2.4. Brief summary

In this part of the thesis, through the utilization of two storylines, tools of storytelling and the change between unrestricted and restricted narration, Hitchcock increased the complicity of the narration and built a solid foundation for the film which produced obstacles and conflicts, and in turn reinforced the dramatic tension.

3. FILMING TECHNIQUES

3.1. *Optical POV and three lenses*

Hitchcock was a director who concentrated on camera shots, and some of his filming techniques were repeatedly presented in most of his films. One of the most extensive filming techniques used by Hitchcock was optical POV. Optical POV can efficiently show the perspective of a character, and see what he sees. This filming technique restricts the view that audiences can see, and provides them with more profound cognition toward the character. POV also restricts the knowledge that the character has [2]. In *North by Northwest*, when Roger Thornhill was standing on the street to wait for Kaplan, the optical POV depicted the attack of plane. However, because of the use of POV, audiences encompass the same amount of knowledge toward the circumstance as Roger Thornhill, and neither audiences nor Roger knew the purpose of the plane beforehand. Audiences are likely to pay attention to the behavior of Roger Thornhill and feel the thrill and tense as Roger did because of POV, and therefore the audiences' connection with Roger Thornhill could be increased. Audiences begin to concern Roger's future and experience the dramatic tension that Hitchcock provided them. Moreover, Hitchcock made use of POV in the plot when Thornhill expected to warn Eve with the matchbox which was a motif that mentioned earlier. Through low angle camera shot, Hitchcock unfolded that Eve was in lower position and her life was at stake. Rather than letting audiences view the perspective of Eve, POV only concentrates on Roger's view. When Eve stiffened, audiences could realize she was aware of the matchbox through the POV from Roger' view. In the scene where Roger was peeking through the window of Vandamm's house, POV captures the conversation between Vandamm and Leonardo. Through the view of Roger, audiences find out that Eve's identity was discovered and they can directly experience Roger's anxiety. These scenes demonstrate one function of POV that is letting audiences experience the emotions that the character has. The technique of three lenses also enhances the dramatic tension in this part of the film. Three lenses technique involves three kinds of camera shots: The first one exhibits the character, while the second one shows the perspective of character, and the third one reflects the character's reaction to what he sees. The first camera shot is usually close-up and close shot, and the second camera shot is optical POV which contains medium shot and long shot, meanwhile the last one resembles to the first camera shot. When Roger Thornhill saw the plane flying toward him, three lenses technique raises the surprise and conveys the eagerness of survive to audiences.

3.2. *Crosscuts*

Crosscutting is a method by editing one scene to another different scene, providing audience information like time

and space, cause and effect. By crosscutting scenes in *North by Northwest*, Hitchcock sacrificed the consistence in space, but improved the cause and effect between scenes. However, crosscutting was not employed in any scenes in order to exemplify the conflict and suspense. When Roger Thornhill answered the phone call from Vandamm's gang in the hotel, instead of utilizing crosscut, Hitchcock chose to enhance the dramatic tension with camera movement. The camera followed the steps of Thornhill into the elevator, and the camera shot suddenly revealed that they were in the same elevator with Vandamm's people. Without the use of crosscutting, Hitchcock initially encouraged audiences to believe in hope, but later made them realize the hope vanished and hope was replaced by fear. Actually, crosscutting was essential in most scenes in the film. When Eve and Roger were climbing down the Capitol Hill, crosscutting made audiences aware that bad guys were still chasing them and the crisis was not resolved. By crosscutting, Hitchcock controlled the pace of the film and improved the authenticity of the plot.

3.3. *Sound effect in film*

Hitchcock was fluent with the use of sound. In *North by Northwest*, silent and simultaneous music were prominent. Simultaneous music is the music that coordinates with the scene, and it expresses similar emotion to the character's mood. The transition from silent to simultaneous music surprises audiences and represents the appearance of an important event. In the UN building, when Roger was talking with Tencin, there was no music and the only sound was the discussion. Suddenly, the assassinator killed Tencin with a knife and the simultaneous music began with Tencin's exclamation [3]. The silence before the killing was a suspense, and when the music began, the emotion of thrill was augmented.

3.4. *Brief summary*

Hitchcock was an expert of employing filming technique like POV, crosscutting and sound to control audiences' reaction and increase the dramatic tension in different plots that affects the perception of audiences. Without the support of filming technique, the dramatic tension cannot be well established by narration.

4. UTILIZATION OF SUSPENSE

4.1. *Construction of suspense*

In tools of storytelling, suspense is one of the most significant methods to deal with the plots. Suspense exploits audiences' curiosity toward the progress of character and story, and generates conflicts which cannot

be solved readily. The founding of suspense not only attracts audiences to pay attention to the story, but also has the function of controlling the narrative structure of the film. There are generally three basic factors to build up suspense: conflict, formidable antagonist and an open end [4]. When conflicts become more and more intense, the story develops and strengthens suspense gradually. A formidable antagonist can set the protagonist in dangerous situation, therefore promotes audiences to wonder the life of protagonist. When a film has another open end, if the protagonist cannot address the problem, his life will be miserable. Audiences understand this point but are not capable of viewing the end of the story, so suspense is founded. Hitchcock once mentioned the famous bomb story, which argues director can manage the suspense in film to maximize the thrill and anxiety of audiences. Hitchcock made this story practical in his films. In Hitchcock's films, like *Psycho* and *North by Northwest*, he utilized filming technique like long shot and sound effect to facilitate the construction of suspense beyond conflict, formidable antagonist and an open end. In *North by Northwest*, the mystery Kaplan did not appear throughout the film but most conflicts happened because of him. When Roger Thornhill was in really serious conflicts, he mostly was in high altitude like on the cliff and on the top of Capitol Hill. Vandamm in this film was a formidable antagonist, who created difficult obstacles for Roger and always put him in danger. If Roger could not save Eve from Vandamm, another end that Eve was murdered and Roger lived his life in regret might replace the happier one. These basic factors of suspense determine the effect of suspense and support audiences to continue watching.

4.2. Suspense symbol MacGuffin

MacGuffin is a device that is necessary for the development of plot and character, but irrelevant to itself. Hitchcock did not invent this tool, but adopted and spread it broadly. MacGuffin was mentioned by Hitchcock in a story: there are two men on the train to Scottish Highlands, one man says, 'What's that package up there in the baggage rack?' The other man answers, "Oh, that's a MacGuffin." The first man asks, "What's a MacGuffin?" "Well," the other man answers, "It's an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands." The man is puzzled, and says, "But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands," and the other one answers, "Well then, that's no MacGuffin [5]"! This story intends to tell audiences MacGuffin does not exist but is merely a tool to direct the way that story progress, attract audiences' attention, and connect the audiences with characters. In *North by Northwest*, USIA created the non-exist man George Kaplan and Roger Thornhill was forced to search for the real identity of him. Initially, audiences are triggered to explore who was Kaplan, and after Roger overcame difficulties like escaping the auction party and arrived at the airport, they are informed that Kaplan and secret did not exist. Kaplan and the secret are MacGuffin. In Hitchcock's idea, the identity of Kaplan and the secret are

not important, but the process of exploring them is important. Likewise, Rebecca in the film *Rebecca* and Madeleine in film *Vertigo* are also invented and are MacGuffin.

4.3. Value of suspense

Hitchcock made inestimable contribution to thriller films, promoting them to independently develop. Without the suspense that Hitchcock established in his thriller films, thriller films were not able to get rid of the constrain of horror films [6]. There are several patterns of suspense in Hitchcock's films, such as providing audiences unique perspective, changing the sequence of time and space, and using filming technique to reinforce suspense. Through the use of these patterns, Hitchcock innovated the structure of traditional thriller films and demonstrated the value of suspense. Suspense has the value of bringing mental analysis into films as well as the value of revealing the complication of human's nature. These values make suspense become one of the most commonly employed method by Hitchcock.

4.4. Brief summary

As the master of suspense, Hitchcock had his unique ways of constructing suspense and spread suspense through MacGuffin. His patterns of using suspense add value to his films, and create the mental tension that significantly strengthens the dramatic tension in the film.

5. DISCUSSION

The dramatic tension is the way that directors keep audiences concentrate on the story, and it is a mental force, generated from visual art. The penetration of two opposite forces that creates conflict and tense is the process that dramatic tension forms in films [7]. With the proper use of dramatic tension, audiences can be more engaged in the development of plots. In most of Hitchcock's movies, dramatic tension is an essential part that serves as the propulsion of plot and creates the artistic style. In his films, dramatic tension is mostly set up by the integration of narration, filming technique and suspense. With the complexity of the story, and the internal and external conflict of the character, the story presents the dramatic tension. The filming techniques also help provide audiences the sense that Hitchcock's films are mysterious and filled with conflicts, transition and surprise, consolidating the dramatic tension. For example, when the detective was climbing up the stair to find Norman's mother in *Psycho*, Hitchcock utilized long shot to extend the anxious feeling of audiences and moved the camera from the angle that was parallel to the stair to extreme bow angle, in order to create the stark contrast between this full shot and the upcoming close up of the detective's face. In

addition, the use of suspense to reveal the internal conflict of character was often applied by Hitchcock in his films, and through the establishment of MacGuffin, he constructed the dramatic tension which is supported by narration and filming technique. Hitchcock's dramatic tension in film is distinctive to others, and his innovation points are: the unexpected transition in character's personality/identity; the crucial utilization of MacGuffin and suspense and the restriction in plots caused by optical POV.

Hitchcock had remarkable contribution to the development of film, and his use of dramatic tension had valuable for today's film workers. Even in today's film production, Hitchcock's method still has its significance that film workers can learn from. First of all, film workers can learn how Hitchcock integrated art and commercial films. Every film has its artistic and commercial aspect, and by focusing on audiences' attitude and improving artistic quality, film directors can blend the artistry into the entertainment of audiences. Hitchcock's films like *North by Northwest* have topics which attract audiences, scenes which are thrilling and entertaining, and dramatic tension which brings audiences visual impact. By these means, Hitchcock successfully mixed the artistic and commercial aspect of film. Moreover, film makers today can learn to imitate the "pure film" production by Hitchcock [8]. Pure film only depends on scene, sound, mise-en-scene and montage to present its story. For example, in Hitchcock's film *Rear Window*, the POV camera shot mostly shot from the same position in protagonist's house throughout the film, which was an innovation of pure film at that time. With the characteristic use of pure film, Hitchcock made the dramatic tension in the film highly appreciative. Finally, film makers today can learn to analyze the mental aspect in film through filming technique just like Hitchcock did. In his films, camera shots which peek at others are widely utilized. In this way, he revealed the mental and moral aspect of his characters.

6. CONCLUSION

Even though Alfred Hitchcock was a director in 20th century, his films significantly boost the growth of thriller films. The most outstanding technique of Hitchcock's films is the suspense. Hitchcock was indeed a master in suspense, who could bring audiences into the intense journey and give them deep impression about the story and characters. The uniqueness of his suspense is that the suspense concentrates on human's mental state and presents audiences with people's internal conflicts. What is more, Hitchcock's style is unique and can be distinguished immediately. In his films, story moves forward based on characters, and the atmosphere is thrilling but entertaining. Most importantly, every scene, every character and every transition effectively enhance the dramatic tension. Through the intricate narrative structure, filming technique and utilization of suspense, Hitchcock set up the dramatic tension. The innovations of dramatic tension in Hitchcock's films are the unexpected transition in

character's personality or identity, the crucial use of MacGuffin and suspense, and the restriction in plots caused by optical POV. Film workers can learn from Hitchcock that how he integrated art and commercial films, and imitate the pure film produced by Hitchcock as well as analyze the mental aspect in film.

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