

IB DIPLOMA – VISUAL ARTS EXTENDED ESSAY

# Master of Suspense: Alfred Hitchcock

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**How does Alfred Hitchcock visually guide viewers as he creates suspense in films such as "The Pleasure Garden," "The Lodger," "Strangers on a Train" and "Psycho"?**

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## INTRODUCTION

How can we feel suspense through the viewing of something fictional, through story and experiences not of our own? This essay examines the question of how the Master of Suspense, Alfred Hitchcock, visually guides viewers in order to create suspense in films such as “The Pleasure Garden,” “The Lodger,” “Strangers on a Train” and “Psycho”.

Suspense is exciting, daring, enticing, addictive and entertaining. Suspense is the feeling of uncertainty and tension about the outcome of certain actions. An audience feels suspense when they are aware of the circumstances of a scenario but unable to interfere or have control of any of the results; they are left to uncertainty. Questions are raised regarding why audiences enjoy the thrills of suspense, why we are so entertained by its effect and stimulation. In the Arts, it is a challenge to create suspense; it requires the understanding of suspense and the understanding of human psychology. Through the compelling visual storytelling and composition, Alfred Hitchcock communicates suspense through audience manipulation. The analyses of some of Hitchcock’s pictures (*The Pleasure Garden*, *The Lodger*, *Strangers on a Train* and *Psycho*) reveal how he utilizes this artistic medium to achieve audience manipulation. Visual filmic elements such as composition, color, motifs and innovative techniques were major tools that Hitchcock employed to manipulate his audiences; he did not just achieve this in one film but many. The components in the early films in *The Pleasure Garden* and *The Lodger* were still reflected and apparent in later films such as *Strangers on a Train* and *Psycho*. Many gothic elements in *Psycho* allow its viewers to look at the film from more exceptional perspectives and go through catharsis. These films showed that the details that Hitchcock has considered were effective in their purpose of stimulation. As an auteur, Hitchcock was able to construct his scenes with scrutiny, and these pictures have created suspense through specific planning and critical thinking that were purposefully aimed at provoking the experience for the audience through visual means - a skill that Hitchcock has experimented and excelled with.

Alfred Hitchcock is considered an inspiring director in cinema history for the deep emotional guidance with his audience and his career as an auteur in his films. When I watched his movies for the first time, the way the plot develops and unravels astonished me; the tension built arouses your consciousness and gives you goose bumps. The way he engaged his audience and built suspense is fascinating and intriguing; he would leave his audience with emotional thrills. His influence on contemporary films is evident in films such as *Eagle Eye* (2008), *Source Code* (2011) and *Shutter Island* (2010), where ‘Hitchcockian’ elements are involved such as observation, mystery and loss of identity. This research essay will analyze some of Alfred Hitchcock’s most influential pictures including *The Pleasure Garden* (1925), *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog* (1927),

## EARLY SILENT FILMS

Although Hitchcock was given directorial opportunities prior to *The Pleasure Garden* (1925), they were cancelled or unfinished, so *The Pleasure Garden* is probably considered his first feature-film debut<sup>9</sup>. This silent film focuses on two chorus girls Patsy Brand (Virginia Valli) and Jill Cheyne (Carmelita Geraghty) who performs at the Pleasure Garden Theatre. As



Jill's career blooms in the business, their individual relationships with men became problematic. Jill and Patsy's partner (Levett) both took on the path of indulgence and disloyalty resulting in an unfortunate end for Levett. In the end, Fielding (Jill's fiancé) and Patsy begin their lives together. *Figure 2* shows one of the opening shots in the film; it shows the chorus girls running down from a spiral staircase advancing to the stage for performance. This interesting opening shot introduces the film as if it is a sort of fantasy or a sort of flip-book<sup>10</sup>. Visually, the repetition of the hurrying chorines creates a sense of immediacy, generalizing the chorus as one. Hitchcock managed to open the film in a fast-paced motion that cuts in to the performance of

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<sup>9</sup> Spoto ch. 1

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*

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↓ Good analysis of this part of the film.

Good use of critical research, followed by good analysis on the part of the student. → chorus and to a fascinated audience with a pair of binoculars (shown in *Figure 3*). As Donald Spoto suggested in his book, these fundamental shots in *The Pleasure Garden* reflects a lot of what is said to be ‘Hitchcockian’. These elements include the theatrical setting, the ‘camera’ observing an observer, the rapid cuts, and the dizzy, inharmonious staircases<sup>11</sup>. Furthermore, dramatic character development is evident throughout the whole film. Hitchcock uses these complicated relationships to move the plot to its climax with intimate character shots throughout the whole film. The use of shots where the characters stare into the camera gives the audience a more personal experience by breaking the fourth wall; Hitchcock utilized this to convey the character’s emotions. The use of long shots with sparing title cards gives the audience a more visual experience rather than a story relying on excessive dialogue; each line of dialogue served its purpose.

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<sup>11</sup> Spoto ch. 1

Another one of his major silent films was *The Lodger* (1927), it was in this film that Hitchcock really showed the audience his ‘style’. He, himself, said “*It was the first time I really exercised my style*” and later “*You might say The Lodger was my first picture.*”<sup>12</sup> Hitchcock had his reason for saying this; in fact, it was a film that truly reflected the foundation of his style and vision. The film is about the search for a serial-killer known as ‘The Avenger’, who targets young blonde women.

The film opens with this shot shown by Figure 4. Although silent, this shot still succeeded in ‘screaming’ to its audience. The blue tint and noisy image mixed with an epic soundtrack really displayed Hitchcock’s vision to visually convey an

expression without speech. The blue tone gives the scene a cold-blooded, distant sensation as the orchestral strings ‘screams’ for the blonde. In addition, the tilted angle gives the shot a disoriented and mysterious chill, further enhancing the atmosphere it conveys to its audience. Hitchcock uses this composition to overwhelm and provoke the audience in the theatres, while setting a mood for the film.

Not only is this an example of good analysis, it sets the tone for further discussion relevant to the essay question.

<sup>12</sup> Spoto ch. 1



As the story progresses, we meet the blonde heroine, Daisy Bunting (June Tripp) – a mannequin model who lives in a modest home with her parents<sup>13</sup>. Hitchcock induces suspense as soon as the audience experiences the presence of the Lodger (Ivor Novello). The atmosphere and mood of the film changes dramatically as the Lodger was introduced. As shown in Figure 5, the anonymous Lodger enters from the dark, smoky, mysterious night. In this shot, we can see how he is concealed within thick hazy night. The door acts as another frame, creating a frame within a frame, alienating the Lodger. This further suggests that he is an isolated outsider of unknown origin and adds to his mystery. The scene builds suspense as the angles of the camera moves from a wide shot to close-ups, bringing us closer with the Lodger.

Hitchcock further exercises his innovative camera techniques with one of the most celebrated scenes: the overhead pacing scene (shown in Figure 6). As the Bunting family downstairs picks up on the disturbing pacing from upstairs, the camera cuts to an angle directed upwards through the ceiling. Hitchcock used this opportunity to create a shot where he dissolved the shot into another shot with Ivor Novello pacing on a piece of glass. This illusive shot displayed Hitchcock's sense of creativity and innovation. This effect was the first of its kind during the period, and Hitchcock utilized it inventively. In addition, this also increases the dramatic irony to build suspense, as the viewers are hinted that there is something peculiar and menacing about the Lodger.

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<sup>z</sup>



With this film, Hitchcock also exercised expressionism. Spoto mentioned how Hitchcock could have related his opening (screaming) shot with Edvard Munch's famous painting *The Scream*, which was produced in the same period<sup>14</sup>. During the 1920s, expressionism was prominent and prevalent. The artists during this time not only operated expressionism, but also experimented. Hitchcock experimented with shots involving expressionist lighting, acute mirror reflections, harsh shadows, and inharmonious staircase shots<sup>15</sup>. This shot (Figure 7) strongly reveals elements of expressionism. The cross created by the shadow of the window sharply engraves on the Lodger's pale face suggesting a sense of purification of the Lodger, hinting and creating suspense as if The Lodger might be the murderer after all. Hitchcock used this expressionist film to make an impact and claim his place in the film industry.

Interesting observations and commentary, but it would have been better if the candidate had referred more clearly to research into some of the elements of Expressionism. Since it is mentioned, a side-by-side comparison of Munch's *The Scream* with the above-mentioned film still would also have been helpful.

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<sup>14</sup> Spoto ch. 1

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*



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**THE AMERICAN FILMS FROM THE 1950s ONWARDS***Strangers on a Train (1951)*

*Strangers on a Train* (1951) is a film produced by Hitchcock when he is well settled in America. By the 1950s, Hitchcock has further advanced his style in his thrillers. However, *Strangers on a Train* is probably one of his most notable works with its central theme, characters, plot, and visual elements, it was another masterpiece by Hitchcock.

The film sparks off with the meeting of two strangers Guy Haines (Farley Granger) and Bruno Anthony (Robert Walker) on a train. Their meeting led to Bruno proposing a deal of exchanging murders, thus led to the introduction of the theme of crisscrossing, or ‘doubles’. Guy rejects his proposal but Bruno carries on with it. The interference of Bruno in Guy’s life poses issues for Guy. In the end, Bruno gets killed by the carousel in the amusement park holding the key evidence to Guy’s innocence.

This description of the film is somewhat clumsily handled.

Hitchcock’s visual composition and use of motifs are evident. The lighter shown in Figure 8 is the main evidence that could be used to

prove Guy’s innocence or guilt. This object was introduced at the first meeting of the two men. The crisscross of the tennis racket symbolizes the main theme of crisscrossing and doubles. Moreover, it also suggests a spark for evil and misdeeds. This is where Bruno suggests the crisscross murder, and this is where Guy’s life drastically altered and darkened. In addition, the idea that Bruno is the alter ego of Guy is apparent as well. Although Bruno’s proposal is ridiculous and villainous, Guy knows that he will benefit from these murders.

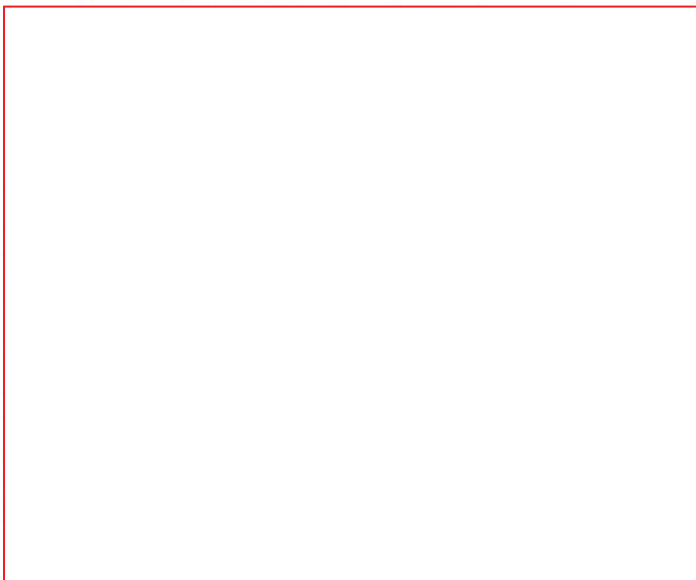
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Figure 9 occurs when Bruno was about to commit the murder on his part of the deal (to kill Guy's wife Miriam). These shadows are formed on the walls in 'The Tunnel of Love' from the boat ride in the amusement park. Miriam is on the first boat with two male friends while Bruno trails behind with another boat. We see that, as Bruno approaches Miriam's boat,

his shadow overpowers and 'swallows' Miriam's shadow, creating a sense of menace, danger and fear; thus it creates suspense.

Following the previous scene, the scene of Miriam's murder is portrayed through the view of the reflections of her glasses. Hitchcock utilized this shot to distort the image and display the significance of the glasses. The distortion may symbolize Bruno's psychotic mind and the darkness of the image again expresses ill-will and uncertainty. Furthermore, this shot conveys the horror that is happening in this scene, as we watch through the reflection of a murder. The glasses itself can also suggest the truth, as it is the tool



for vision, for seeing. The murder is being observed by the glasses, and what is seen in the reflection holds the truth that the film is based on. Alfred Hitchcock once said "*Film your*

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*murders like love scenes, and film your love scenes like murders.*"<sup>16</sup> This scene, shown by Figure 10, is an excellent example echoing this quote. Without knowing that Bruno is strangling Miriam, we can look at the scene and say this could be a love scene; a scene that involves two characters at an intimate distance with just as much emotional tension as a pair of lovers would have. Hitchcock's visual composition and storytelling in this film heightens the audience's emotional tension and suspense. The audience's dramatic irony of Bruno's intention allowed suspense, and that suspense is further enhanced through the use of shadows and reflections.

### *Pyscho (1963)*

*"We all go a little mad sometimes. Haven't you?"* – Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins)

*Pyscho*, is probably Hitchcock's most popular thriller. This film was an influential film not only in the thriller/suspense film genre, but also in the horror genre. It marked the impact of Hitchcock's filmmaking. The film follows the story of a woman, *Marion Crane* (Janet Leigh) in her 20s. Due to her desperation, she ran away with the \$40000 that her boss asked her to bank. Her running away led her to Bate's Motel where *Norman Bates* (Anthony Perkins) was introduced. She stays the night but apparently *Norman's* psychotic mother comes in to murder *Marion* in the bathroom. Later, the investigating detective, unfortunately, ended in the same way – by getting killed by the *Mother*. Towards the end, with a twist, we find out through *Marion's* sister, *Lila*, that Norman Bates was actually psychotic and responsible for these murders.

*Pyscho* surely presents itself like a gothic tale with its abundance of mirrors. Mirrors and reflections are seen repeatedly throughout the whole film. This gothic prop not only suggests split and dual-personalities but also the idea of self-awareness and the reflection of self-conscience. *Marion's* reflection in mirrors were seen when she is carrying out and deciding upon misdeeds. The audience sees her through the reflection in the hotel mirrors when she

<sup>16</sup> *Alfred Hitchcock : Quotes*. n.d. IMDb. Website. September 2013.

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steal the money; however, she contemplated before the mirror before her final decision. The rearview car mirror was also observed continuously as she is driving away from the city, escaping from where she stole the money. Her image is split through these mirror reflections reminding the audience of her dilemma, moral judgement and wrongdoing. Even *Norman*

*Bate's* image is reflected and split to hint his dual-personality. From this figure we can see how his reflection in the window doesn't really reflect his expression. His other personality is there merely watching the situation haunting the audience, foreshadowing

the psychotic acts that the *Mother* carries out. Further use of mirrors to manipulate the audience occurs when *Lila*, *Marion's* sister, find herself seeing a double reflection in the *Bate's* house. The image was cut so that it suddenly frightens *Lila*; therefore, it frightens the audience too. This discovery of double reflection leads directly to the climax where we realize that actually it is connected with the double-personality *Norman Bates* houses. The conflict of these split concepts is also experience by the audience

as we are repeatedly confronted with moral decisions and dilemmas between who's good and who's evil. We may sympathize with *Norman Bates* when cleans his *Mother's* mess, but in the end, we discover he was actually the *Mother*. These ideas involve the audience's moral judgement and thus, construct emotional suspense within.

Many visual elements stimulated the build-up of suspense and the climatic twist. Hitchcock,

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This discussion of the relationship between mirrors and moral dilemmas is quite good and potentially indicates an excellent link between analysis and discussion. In order to achieve higher marks, it would have helped to have clear evidence of how the discussion links with the candidate's research of critical sources.



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again, utilized several innovative shots to express ideas and manipulate audiences. Figure 13 shows the scene where Norman spies on Marion from his office through a peep-hole. Visually, we see the light shine through and glow in Norman's eyes, and then Hitchcock takes the audience to his point of view by showing what he sees. Hitchcock knows that the audience needs to see what Norman sees, and he gives the

viewers what they want to see. This early scene introduces the audience manipulation that Hitchcock is gradually developing. From the close-up of his spying eyes, we cut to the wide point of view (POV) shot that consists of a vignette that represents the hole.<sup>17</sup> This shot also echoes his very first film, *The Pleasure Garden*, where we are the camera observing an observer. After *Norman* does the watching, *we*, the audience, do the watching too. This visual transition introduces the theme of voyeurism, as we observe Marion head into the bathroom where the unfortunate event takes place, and the tension builds.

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<sup>17</sup> Spoto ch. 33

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Figure 14 shows another scene where visual composition allowed suspense. In this well-known shower scene where *Marion* was murdered, the ominous appearance of the silhouette of the *Mother* heightens suspense. This scene truly defines suspense. When the Mother appears, the audience is forced to think of warning Marion, but they have no power to do so. This is the essence of suspense – not letting the audience interfere and merely making them observe the consequences. The menacing dark silhouette is key to the horror and uncertainty. We cannot see the face of the mother, but only the outline of her and the fatal weapon. Visually, the audience

is pulled to the edge of their seats, and they desire an explanation to the identity of this ‘*Mother*’. The backlit lighting also helps the construct of the silhouette, enhancing the suspense. These were all planned and designed by Hitchcock purposely to induce suspense and question. *Psycho* was considered Hitchcock’s boldest film, and the evidence for that is his use of visual language.<sup>18</sup> *Psycho* was a film first of its kind, with the graphic violence, murders and terrifying horrors.

<sup>18</sup> Müller, J. 2011. *Taschen's 100 all-time favorite movies*. Los Angeles, CA: Taschen.



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**INFLUENCE ON CONTEMPORARY FILMS**

Contemporary director Martin Scorsese has been influenced by ‘Hitchcockian’ elements shown by his films. One of his most notable works that was said to be ‘Hitchcockian’ is *Shutter Island* (2010)<sup>19</sup>. The gloom atmosphere with apparent detectives trying to investigate a case relating a missing person and murderous act echoes many elements of Hitchcockian filmmaking. Visually, the film reflects elements of Hitchcock’s filmmaking. The immediate connection that we are presented with is a simple showerhead shot that directly mimics the shot of the showerhead in *Psycho*. This shot might not be the key element to the connections between the two films; however, it is a crucial identification of Scorsese’s homage to Hitchcock.

Through *Shutter Island*’s dark and somber toned mystery, we can relate it to more mystery thrillers by Hitchcock. The concept of accusation and blame throughout the whole film could relate to the theme in *Strangers on a Train*. The tall lighthouse poses as the climatic setting for the protagonist as he discovers the apparent ‘truth’. The winding staircase of the lighthouse echoes those in *The Pleasure Garden* and his more

popular *Vertigo*, presenting a disorienting setting. In both, *Shutter Island* and *Vertigo*, the climatic twist occurred on these tall structures. The idea of a loss of identity and personality sparks throughout the whole film suggesting components of uncertainty and mystery. Scorsese successfully created a suspenseful thriller with Hitchcockian elements that stimulated the audience and surprised them with a plot twist that begged for more questions, instead of answers.

Giving one example like this of how one famous director has consciously paid tribute to another great director does not really show how Hitchcock has influenced contemporary cinema. This section does not, however, significantly distract from the main argument of the essay.

<sup>19</sup> Pulver, A. 2010. *Martin Scorsese: master of the Hitchcock tribute*.

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## CONCLUSION

The visual elements that lie within Alfred Hitchcock's first film can still be seen in his last few films. The use of composition in *The Pleasure Garden* and characters can echo those of his latter films. Hitchcock's use of his visual contents strongly impacts the experience of his audience. His innovative camera composition from the 1920s could still be seen in films in the 50s and 60s. The angled opening shot and harsh shadows in *The Lodger* show Hitchcock's idea of expressionism. Darkness and shadows is also further portrayed in *Strangers on a Train* where the character, Bruno, is a symbol for evil. There is one scene where, the shadow of a gate is printed on Bruno, suggesting darkness, evil or even restriction like a jail. Visually, these films stimulated the engagement and emotional experience of the audience, not only through the build of tension and suspense, but also the use of significant visual elements such as color and composition. In *Psycho*, certain scenes were presented and expressed in a perspective that allowed the audience to question their own morals and conflicting dilemmas. The use of motifs such as mirror-split personalities demonstrates Hitchcock's audience manipulation. His filmmaking was not only pioneering for his time but also influential for contemporary films, as evinced by the connection between *Psycho* and *Shutter Island* by Martin Scorsese. His idea of suspense is composed through very intimate connection with the human emotion – how to surprise it, how to terrify it, how to manipulate it, and he has mastered this skill as exemplified by his films. In many ways, he has successfully utilized the visual language to master the art of suspense and connect with the human mind. Hitchcock was an auteur who made his films with precision and well-planned scenes.

Some of the works listed in this bibliography have  
not in fact been clearly cited in the main text.

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This is an exercise and that while the analysis and argument are good, for an EE with the criteria this would need clearer reference to - and commentary on - critical research.