

The Research on the Functions of Misleading on Suspense Setting -- Taking Hitchcock and the Psycho as Examples

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Abstract. Hitchcock is considered as one of the most crucial film directors in history, since he has directed a series of successful suspense films and created many theories about them. Therefore, doing research on his film will help deepen the cognition in suspense movies in the field of movie studies. This article aims to explore Hitchcock's suspense setting skills in film narratology. The author takes the Psycho, which is one of Hitchcock's representative works as an example, and uses literature reading as well as some film theories to analyze the methods in suspense setting by Hitchcock. The article can be divided into four parts. The first part is the introduction. The second part is the introduction of Hitchcock and his Psycho. The third part shows analyses on Hitchcock's suspense setting in Psycho. The last part is about Hitchcock's effects on the following directors. Through the four parts' analyses, the author discovered that Hitchcock's suspense setting has a feature to use certain sounds or paintings to mislead the audience's conjecture to the plot. The author calls this "misleading" and finds that there are still few system theories to describe it. The author makes some analyses about the misleading in suspense setting in Psycho in this article and hopes it can help following researchers when doing further research.

Keywords: suspense, misleading, Psycho, Hitchcock.

1. Introduction

Alfred Hitchcock is a British and American director, screenwriter and movie producer. He is known as one of the greatest suspense film directors in 20th century. Hitchcock directed dozens of movies during his life, most of them are thriller or suspense movies, including Rear Window, North by Northwest and Dial M for Murder. He got high praise for his attractive works in the field of movie. The Psycho is Hitchcock's representative work. It was directed in 1960 and got 15million dollars in booking office after it had come to screens. The Psycho is considered as one of the most successful films by Hitchcock, it tells a story about a girl called Marion being killed by a schizophrenic maniac, and then her sister and boyfriend took part in the gradual investigation and finally revealed the truth of the killing. In Psycho, Hitchcock spent much time on suspense setting. Suspense is an important element in literary works. The so-called suspense is a kind of writing skill that the author makes an arrangement for the plot of the work that is pending, and the outcome is difficult to judge, thus making the reader have a strong interest in the subsequent development of the plot. With the rapid development of the film and television industry, film is no longer regarded as a simple way to record images. Film creators pay more and more attention to the art of storytelling. Montage splicing techniques endow film with richer connotation, and plot suspense is also widely used in film and television creation practice, making the story in film and television more dramatic, and then more and more film and television works focus on the aesthetic value of suspense [1]. Suspense setting plays a vital role in film narratology. Film narratology is a basic theory in film study. Film narratology is a theory that studies the elements and structure of film expression according to the principles of literary narratology or semiotics. Following the traditional novel narratology, film narratology mainly studies the plot arrangement, action motivation, character and aesthetic characteristics of the story, and pays attention to the skill level of the film drama.

This article mainly focuses on the suspense setting method in Psycho. The article can be divided into four parts. The first part is the introduction, and the second part is the overview of Hitchcock and his Psycho. The third part shows analyses on Hitchcock's suspense setting in Psycho, and this part

has two subparts. The first subpart is about analyses of the suspense Hitchcock has created in *Psycho*. The author makes some shot-by-shot analysis to help the reader better understand the famous suspense part in this film. The second subpart contains the analyses of a crucial method used in suspense setting—misleading. The author takes some examples to show how Hitchcock used comprehensive techniques including sounds and pictures to mislead the audience. The fourth part is about Hitchcock's effects on the following directors.

2. Hitchcock and the Psycho

2.1. Generalization of Hitchcock and His Film Style

Alfred Hitchcock, who was born in London in England in 1899 and died in 1980, is known as a British and American director, screenwriter, movie producer as well as actor. He is also considered as one of the most successful directors, especially in thrillers and suspense films. After he had made his first movie called *Number 13* in 1922, he directed dozens of movies in total, including *The Lodger*, *Dial M for Murder*, *Rear Window* and so on. These have established his status as the famous thriller and suspense movie director and has brought him with many honors. Hitchcock won the 13th Best Picture Academy Award in 1940 and the 15th Best TV Series -- Drama of Golden Globe Award in 1958. He was granted the Academy Honorary Award in 1979 and the knighthood in 1980. Even after he had died, Hitchcock was voted the first of the 100 greatest directors in history by the British magazine *Total Film*.

Hitchcock enjoys a high praise in the field of TV and films, mainly because of his distinctive style, which is also one of his most crucial contributions to movie directing. His film *The 39 Steps* in 1935 has laid the foundation of spy thrillers [2], while *Psycho* in 1960 marked that psychological thriller has become a subtype horror film [3]. He was also the father of literary thriller film. Hitchcock did well in creating suspense. He always strengthened the horror atmosphere by editing and using the cooperation of sound and image. His structure of film is not only dramatic in plots but also not lack of black humor, and is called the Hitchcock Pattern by some people. He created and improved the art of creating suspense. Apart from the narratology skills, Hitchcock showed great concern for the human spiritual world as well. As a director who is good at understanding the audience's psychology, he skillfully uses the lens language to integrate the suspense plot, psychological science, and personal thinking on the real society into the film. Therefore, he is not only a psychological master, but also a philosophical master in the film.

2.2. The Introduction of Psycho

Psycho, which was directed by Hitchcock and mainly acted by Anthony Perkins and Janet Leigh, was shown in America in April 16th, 1960. The film is about a schizophrenic called Norman killed a staff called Marion who had stolen \$40,000 from the customer and was distrusted and investigated by her boyfriend and sister. They finally found out the scary and incredible truth that Norman had two personalities including his and her mother's, which led to the series of murders. The whole film was filled with suspense, and *Psycho* had a vital position in thrillers. *Psycho* is not only one of Alfred Hitchcock's most skilled works, but also the pioneer of psychological horror thrillers. The value of this film lies in that it opens up a film type, and the criminal behavior caused by mental problems has become the theme of the film since then. Compared with the horror film that frightens the audience by hiding behind the door, the analysis of human psychology and spirit in *Psycho* makes it a classic. Many of the shots in *Psycho* have become the classics in film history. One of the examples is the plot of bathroom murder. Without any straight shots of stabbing, it created the horror atmosphere by using the editing of sound and image. This play has not only become one of the most frightening scenes in film history, but also been included in the textbooks of the film academy as a classic example. The other features of *Psycho* are its uses of suspense and misleading. These will be talked in the following part. *Psycho* had a great influence on thrillers and has been imitated by some following directors.

3. Analyses of the Use of Misleading in Suspense Setting in Psycho

3.1. Analyses of the Suspense Setting in Psycho

3.1.1 The "bomb under the table" Theory by Hitchcock and Its Use in Psycho

When it comes to suspense setting, the author would like to begin with a theory by Hitchcock himself. It is called "the bomb theory". It tells a story that a bomb is planted on the bottom of a table which is surrounded by several people without noticing it. The audience know the bomb is planted yet don't know when and how it will explode. As a result, the audience will be nervous and keep focusing on the plot, so the bomb has become one of the elements in the film which is called suspense. He gave the audience a God perspective to let them know the truth that people in the film did not know. When the danger like bomb gradually approached the character, the audience had already identified with the character, eager to let the character escape as soon as possible or the bomb would explode again after suffering for a period of time. The pleasure of watching the film caused by this continuous restlessness and panic was far greater than the fleeting fright [4]. This theory was used in Psycho for several times. For instance, when Marion was taking a shower in Norman's hotel, the door was opened by someone without her notice. This is one example of the use of "bomb theory". As Marion didn't know what was happening, there was a sense of being peeped and this will make audience be worried about Marion's safety and curious what would happen next.

3.1.2 Examples of Suspense Setting in Psycho

Apart from the bomb theory, there are still many methods in suspense setting. Hitchcock's representative works are suspense films. He did well in using all kinds of skills to create suspense. The author takes three famous plots in Psycho and makes some shot-by-shot analyses to show how Hitchcock created suspense.

The first scene that the author wants to share is the scene about Marion contending with the police officer and the car shop owner, from 00:14:00 to 00:23:16. Before this plot, Marion had stolen \$40000 from the customer of her boss and had run away. When Marion rested in the car on the side of the highway was asked by the police officer, there are several close shot to their faces to show the conflicts between them. A close-up shot is given to the money in the envelop to emphasize its importance as Marion was finally able to go, the director used a medium shot showing Marion looking at the officer following her car with worry as well as a close-up shot to the review mirror reflecting the police car to show that Marion was still followed by the officer. Together with the tense background music, they created an atmosphere to make the audience feel nervous. They will guess that the officer has already found the truth and wonder what will happen next. In this way was the suspense created. When Marion got to the car shop, the director used some dialogue to show that the car shop owner also distrusted her. This will make the audience think she might be exposed. There are some subjective shots as well to imitate Marion's view of the officer to create a sense of fear, also emphasized the existence of the officer, dropping a hint that he may be the key witness. After Marion had got into the restroom, there was a close-up shot to the money again to show its importance. When Marion left the shop, a full shot was taken to show the position of the three main character, also to describe Marion's trepidation. This may make the audience guess that the officer and the shop owner would talk about Marion and discover something was wrong, and the following plots may about the confrontation between Marion and the two people.

The second scene that the author wants to share is the scene about Marion staying in the hotel and being killed when taking a shower. It is at about 47th minute in the film. The author chooses a series of shots to analyze how the suspense was set. Most of the shots in this scene are medium or close shot to show the position of Marion and the killer and give a limited detail to the killer to create suspense. According to statistics, there are 942 shots in the whole film, including 104 shots with lens duration shorter than one second, accounting for 11.04% of the total shots of the film. In the section where Marion was killed by the murderer, there were 44 shots in total, and 40 shots with a lens duration shorter than one second, accounting for 90.91% of the total shots in this section. It can be said that

Hitchcock used extremely fast cut to show the whole murder scene in this section, which created a nervous and exciting visual spectacle for the audience [5]. In addition to the above functions, these short shots may also use to avoid showing the feature of the killer. Because of the lack of figure, the audience may guess: who was the murder? Why did he or she kill Marion? and this created a suspense attracting audience to go on.

The third scene is about Norman taking "his mother" into the fruit cellar. This scene is close to the climax when Sam finally got to the hotel. At that time, both Marion and the detective were missing. Marion's boyfriend Sam and her sister had a suspicion that Norman or his family was responsible for this. Norman knew that they are coming for "his mother" and decided to hide her in fruit cellar. Like the second scene, Hitchcock still avoided to show the front face of Norman's mother. The chief had told Sam that Norman's mother had died, yet in this scene the audience can see Norman carried a woman downstairs. The director chose to shoot from the top, so the audience still fail to see the figure of the woman clearly. However, there were two people in this scene and the shape of the person in Norman's bosom shew that this is a woman. Hitchcock created a deep suspense by avoiding showing the face of Norman's mother and used a series of insert shots to make the audience believe that this character existed [6]. This also created a strong contrast with the last scene when Marion's sister discovered that the woman was a skeleton in fact.

Through these suspense settings, Hitchcock successfully built a sense of misery in the middle of the film as well as a sense of shock in the end of the film. This series of methods are also called Hitchcock's suspense.

3.2. Analyses of Misleading Settings in Psycho

3.2.1 Analyses of Use and Effects of Misleading Plots

Misleading can be seen as an important skill in suspense setting, especially in this film. As for misleading, there are few professional theories found to describe it so definitely, yet it can be regarded as a method of creating suspense and some theories about narration will be used when describing it. In the author's words, the misleading is to use certain shots and dialogue to highlight some people or things to make audience reckon that the people or things are the keys of the plot. However, that is just a "smoke bomb" which aims to cover the real point.

In some degree, the misleading plots can be seen as covering the main suspense with a little suspense. In the film Psycho, the main suspense is who is the murderer who killed Marion, which can be regarded as the main contradiction of the whole film and will gradually strengthen the role of conflict with the tense plot, which is the emotional context of the whole work. However, in the 47th minutes, the suspense generated by the audience was another one -- whether Marion's escape would success, whether she would be caught by the police on the way, and what would happen later. When the answer was about to be revealed by the creator, an accident occurred -- Marion was suddenly killed. Until this time, people will find that they were just caught in a little suspense, and this little suspense in each segment is just to stimulate the audience's tension and constantly enhance the theme [7].

3.2.2 Examples of Misleading Plots in Psycho

Misleading was used frequently as a method of creating suspense in Psycho. The author chooses some plots to analyze. In the first half of the movie, the director used a large amount of time to show Marion's actions, not only to create suspense, but also aim to mislead the audience. One example is the first 47 minutes, just as the author has shown. Apart from the suspense, there is also misleading about the main character and the key clue. As for the main character, in the scenes, the plots are all about Marion. The director showed her life, how she stole the money, who she met during escaping, and what the people she met thought. The audience may regard Marion as the main character and image how she will get away with the money next. Yet she was suddenly killed in the following plot. All the deductions made before were overturned. As for the key clue, there are numerous plots and close-up shots about the money. When Marion was in the lady's room in the car shop and in the room

of the hotel, the director reused some close-up shots to highlight the money. Close ups tell the audience that they should pay close attention to what is on the screen. An extreme close-up shot, also known as a detailed shot, helps the audience focus on a specific area of the character. Extreme close-up can add a sense of mystery to the plot. It may also mislead the audience and be used to deceive others [8]. In this plot, Hitchcock successfully misled the audience by using the close-up shots. The audience may reckon the key clue is the money. However, then the money was sunk into the swamp by Norman even without noticing. Until then the audience realized that the film was about the murder. Hitchcock came up with another theory called MacGuffin, it means something that does not exist. It represents a topic or a simple plot and idea, and the suspense and plot generated from it. That is, someone or something does not exist, but it is an important clue to the development of the story. This is one of Hitchcock's most commonly used film expressions. MacGuffin is a word invented by Hitchcock, which means a lion catcher applicable to the Scottish Highlands. However, there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands, so this kind of lion catcher does not exist. Hitchcock used the logic of the lion catcher to simply illustrate his creation skill of suspense film, that is, to place a virtual "lion catcher" in the film [9]. Hitchcock even used a story to describe it: two passengers were in a train. One asked the other what was in his package. The other one replied that it was a MacGuffin used to kill lions in Adirondack Mountains. The first passenger argued that there were no lions in Adirondack, and the other one replied so there was no MacGuffin. Marion and the 40000 dollars are considered as an interruptive MacGuffin. Some researchers also regard them as Red Herring, which is a skill to distract audience's attention by some things [4].

Meanwhile, in the famous part of the film—the murder in the bathroom, there is also a use of misleading. As the author has written in the part of suspense, the director used a series of cuts to describe the murder. Most of the shots in this scene are medium or close shot to show the position of Marion and the killer and give a limited detail to the killer. When Marion was taking a shower, the door was opened by someone without her notice. After the shower curtain had been opened, the murderer's face was hidden in shadow. When the murder happened, although the audience can see the killer, his face was still covered by water, while other shots just shot from above. This will lead to a mystery to the identity of the killer. In these shots, the only feature of the killer which was shown is the long hair. It can be seen when the murder was happening. When the murder left the room, there was a clear shot to his or her back to show that he or she had chignon. This may drop a hint that the murderer was a woman. According to previous plots, Norman said he lived with his mother and her mother disliked Marion. The audience may guess that the killer must be Norman's mother, and this is an example of misleading. Most of the audience will insist that Norman's mother was the killer until the truth was revealed in the end of the film, when the audience finally finds that she was a skeleton in fact. This part successfully misleads the audiences that the murder may be Norman's mother and when they see the following part the police chief said she had died for decades, they will feel very confused. Some audiences may think they made some mistakes in understanding the plot, while others may guess that the chief was lying for some reasons. Suspense is thus created unconsciously.

Through these misleading plots, Hitchcock distracted the attention of the audience and made them wonder about the plot. Hitchcock always believed that the lens was to show what it wanted to show. In terms of operation skills, ingenious techniques may not fully demonstrate the originality of the whole film. A scene in the most attractive scene depends on the assumption of an effective narrative story [10]. He created suspense through misleading his audience with these bewildering plots and hid the real point, also called effective narrative stories in his words, behind riddles.

4. Effects of Psycho in the Field of Films

In conclusion, the main skill used in film narratology in Psycho is suspense, and one of the main methods to create suspense is misleading. They were used from the beginning to the end, and for this film, there is another trait that the two parts exist side by side and play a part together. In the two

scenes that have been mentioned, the suspense was always consisted of misleading and led to misleading. When the audience find a suspense and follow it with the thought that they are approaching the truth, they are in fact trapped in misleading. This interesting phenomenon can not only be seen in the film *Psycho*, but also can be found in other films by Hitchcock, which makes it be regarded as a typical style of Hitchcock. The use of suspense and misleading by Hitchcock in film narratology has influenced lots of following directors in different ways.

Hitchcock's film skills have far-reaching influences in the field of films. This can be explained from two aspects. Firstly, Hitchcock was highly appreciated by film practitioners from directors to film critics. He got all the credit in history of great directors. Hitchcock has become a symbol of thriller or suspense movies. Up to now, people always remember him when it comes to suspense films. In addition, he also has many substantive effects on plot settings. Hitchcock created some subtypes of thriller films including spy thrillers and psychological thrillers. His setting of "key" in *Psycho* is of great significance to the field of film. Hitchcock's shooting skills have made many latecomers imitate or pay homage to him and his innovative thinking is more worthy of learning and studying [11]. Apart from this, his film style has influenced a lot of following directors. For instance, Brian De Palma, who is the director of *Mission: Impossible*, directed *Sisters* by imitating Hitchcock. Some researchers argue that some of Martin Scorsese's thriller films are also partly affected by Hitchcock's works. When evaluating *Vertigo* by Hitchcock, famous American director David Fincher said: "why do I like it? Because it is too abnormal. I think that the *Vertigo* is an expression of necrophilia". There is no doubt that Hitchcock's film does affect a lot in the field of movies, whether reputationally or substantively.

5. Conclusion

As a master of thriller and suspense films, Alfred Hitchcock plays a crucial role on film history. As a famous representative work of Hitchcock, *Psycho* is not only one of his most skilled works, but also the pioneer of psychological horror thrillers. The value of this film lies in that it opens up a film type, and the criminal behavior caused by mental problems has become the theme of the film since then. Compared with the horror film that frightens the audience by hiding behind the door, the analysis of human psychology and spirit in *Psycho* makes it a classic.

In this film, Hitchcock used many methods to create suspense. This makes *Psycho* a great example to analyze Hitchcock's suspense setting style. This article aims to analyze how Hitchcock set the suspense. During the research, the author discovered that in *Psycho*, Hitchcock always used comprehensive approach to mislead the audience to make wrong conjectures in order to create suspense. Since few system theories about misleading settings are found, the author believed that it is important to do research on this part to fill the academic gap. Therefore, this article was written. The article can be divided into four parts. The first part is the introduction. The second part is the overview of Hitchcock and his *Psycho*. The third part shows analyses on Hitchcock's suspense setting in *Psycho*. This part has two subparts. The first subpart is about analyses of the suspense Hitchcock has created in *Psycho*. The author makes some shot-by-shot analysis to help the reader better understand the famous suspense part in this film. The second subpart contains the analyses of a crucial method used in suspense setting—misleading. The author takes some examples to show how Hitchcock used comprehensive techniques including sounds and pictures to mislead the audience. The last part is about Hitchcock's effects on the following directors.

This article fills the academic gap in the research of suspense setting in *Psycho* in part. However, it still has room for improvement. For instance, comparative analyses can be added to select a variety of works of Hitchcock for comparison to obtain characteristics. Some other thriller or suspense films by Hitchcock such as *Rear Window*, *North by Northwest* and so on can be selected to compare with *Psycho* to analyze the suspense setting. Adding qualitative research to get feedback from other movie audiences on the effect of the movie plot may also an option to do finer research on the effects of Hitchcock's suspense setting. For example, the following researchers may issue some questionnaires

to see which part of Hitchcock's suspense impresses the audience most to explore the psychological influence of suspense setting. The author hopes that there will be more researchers taking part in the suspense setting skills by Hitchcock.

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