



Alfred Hitchcock's Pure Cinema



Students should be able to:

- discuss Hitchcock's concept of Pure Cinema and analyse examples of its application.



"The medium of pure cinema is what I believe in. The assembly of pieces of film to create fright is the essential part of my job." Alfred Hitchcock (Wheldon, 1964).

Pure cinema is at the heart of Hitchcock's filmmaking.

The concept of Pure Cinema, as Hitchcock defined it, originated in the days of silent cinema when filmmakers had to find the means to tell a story visually, without any dialogue. Hitchcock felt that the coming of sound was in some ways a backward step and he wanted to avoid making films that he felt could be described as, "photographs of people talking." (Wheldon, 1964). Through the techniques of Pure Cinema, he aimed to create emotion on screen through camera technique, lighting, mise-en-scène, editing and the expressive use of music and sound.

The director explained, "What I like to do always is to photograph just the little bits of a scene that I really need for building up a visual sequence." (Gottlieb, 1995)

Key examples of how Hitchcock constructs a scene of extraordinary visual power using the principles of Pure Cinema are:

- the opening scene of *Rear Window* (1954);
- Scottie's first sight of Madeleine in *Vertigo* (1958);
- and
- the Shower Scene from *Psycho* (1960).

Alfred Hitchcock explains how he constructed the entire film *Rear Window* according to the principles of Pure Cinema. "Pure cinema is complementary pieces of film put together, like notes of music make a melody. There are two primary uses of cutting or montage in film: montage to create ideas – and montage to create violence and emotions. For example, in *Rear Window*, where Jimmy Stewart

is thrown out of the window at the end, I just photographed that with feet, legs, arms, heads. Completely montage. I also photographed it from a distance, the complete action ... Bar room fights, or whatever they do in Westerns, when they knock out the heavy or when one man knocks another across the table which breaks – they are always shot at a distance. But it is much more effective if it's done in montage, because you involve the audience much more – that's the secret to that type of montage in film.

And the other, of course, is the juxtaposition of imagery relating to the mind of the individual. You have a man look, you show what he sees, you go back to the man, you make him react in various ways. You see, you can make him look at one thing, look at another – without his speaking, you can show his mind at work, comparing things - any way you run there's complete freedom. It's limitless, I would say, the power of cutting and the assembly of the images." (Gottlieb, 1995)

In his famous book on Hitchcock, French film director, Francois Truffaut, and Alfred Hitchcock discuss *Rear Window*:

Truffaut: "I imagine that the story appealed to you primarily because it represented a technical challenge: a whole film from the viewpoint of one man, and embodied in a single, large set."

Hitchcock: "Absolutely. It was the possibility of doing a purely cinematic film. You have an immobilized man looking out. That's one part of the film. The second part shows what he sees and the third part shows how he reacts. This is actually the purest expression of a cinematic idea."

Truffaut: "...the exposition of the film is truly remarkable. You open up with the perspiring face of James Stewart; you move on to his leg in a cast, and then, on a nearby table, there is a broken camera, a stack of magazines, and, on the wall, there are pictures of racing cars as they topple over on the track. Through that single opening camera movement we have learned where we are, who the principal character is, all about his work, and even how it caused his accident."

Hitchcock: "That's simply using cinematic means to relate a story. It's a great deal more interesting than if we had someone asking Stewart, 'How did you happen to break your leg?' and Stewart answering. 'As I was taking a picture of a motorcar race, a wheel fell off one of the speeding cars and smashed into me.' That would be the average scene. To me, one of the cardinal sins for a scriptwriter, when he runs into some difficulty, is to say, we can cover that by a line of dialogue. Dialogue should simply be a sound among other sounds, just something that comes out of the mouths of people whose eyes tell the story in visual terms." (Truffaut, 1968)

References: Wheldon, H. Hitchcock, A. (1964). Interview with Alfred Hitchcock. Monitor (first broadcast 5th July 1964), BBC. Available at http://www.bbc.com/1/mediacentre/1964/07/hitchcock_1964_07_05.shtml [Accessed 20th Apr. 2016].

Gottlieb, S. (ed) (1995). Hitchcock on Hitchcock. University of California Press, p. 288.

Truffaut, F (1968) Hitchcock, London: Collins Chapter 11, pp 319-332

