

Screenwriter's Café
Alfred Hitchcock 1939 Lecture - Part II
By Colleen Patrick

First I'll review what I covered in Part I of my analysis of Alfred Hitchcock's 1939 lecture for New York's Museum of Modern Art, a talk in which he revealed the creative process he and his chief collaborator, his wife Alma, applied to their filmmaking.

Hitchcock started out by explaining to a modest audience of filmmakers and spectators—remember he had not yet become famous in the U.S. at this time—that he wrote the basics of his film story on a large one-page outline. He insisted that the basic premise of the story must be very short and simple—something that could be relayed in one line, if possible, by the average audience member.

He counted on theatergoers' word of mouth for the success of his films, and wanted ticket buyers to be able to tell friends and family what the film was about in a strong, clearly identifiable sentence.

From that stark basis, however, Hitchcock intertwined complex characters amidst the most unlikely situations and locations he could devise.

His goal? The marriage and balance between movement, character, and action to lay the foundation for a solid story, compelling the viewer to, as he put it, “stay awake” during the film. After writing as much as a hundred pages of blended plot, character development and their intricate interaction in narrative form, which he called the treatment, the dialogue was added.

Hitchcock disdained the overuse of dialogue. He believed every word should matter—and should reveal something about the characters or advance the story.

Perhaps one reason he had such sensitivity to each utterance is that he almost never wrote it himself, so the words could be seen as nearly an intrusion to the story and characters he had already so carefully crafted. He hired dialogue writers—although of course he always had the final word, as it were, regarding what each character said.

Although there are stories about Hitchcock's disparaging remarks about actors, in some cases Hitchcock respected the actor playing a certain role so much that he allowed him or her to write their own lines! This did not happen often, but when it did, it was not treated as an odd circumstance because Hitchcock was one to do what served the best interest of the film, even if it deviated from his usual work habits.

He was also careful not to overuse melodrama. Melodrama was the mainstay of silent films, where Hitchcock began his filmmaking career in Great Britain.

Melodrama is a dramatic form in which the exaggeration of emotion and effect are produced with plot or action emphasized at the expense of character.

For Hitchcock, character was the locus on which his films were based. But he also believed characters needed an extremely strong story with which to deal or they could not develop. He reasoned that if characters don't continually reveal more about themselves as his taut tales unfurled, audiences would not become more attached to them, and would therefore lose interest in the film.

The more trouble and consternation his characters faced, the more unusual the setting in which he placed them, the more complex their choices, the tighter Hitchcock could squeeze his plot vice grip around them, and the less time in which they had to face all this, the greater the suspense.

The greater the suspense, in Hitchcock's eyes, the better the film. There are two types of suspense he liked to incorporate—objective and subjective. By using both, he happily doubled the suspense dose for his anticipating audiences.

Hitchcock describes these two types of suspense. "In the old days," he said, "it was the race to the scaffold. Griffith did it, you know, in *Orphans of the Storm*, *The Knife*, and that sort of thing. But I feel that today we can have two types of suspense. We can have suspense like the old chase, which I would call objective suspense, and then there is a subjective suspense, which is letting the audience experience it through the mind or eyes of one of the characters. Now that is a very different thing."

Another way he made sure his audiences were drawn into the exact story he wanted them to follow emotionally was to narrow his storytelling focus.

"You see, I am a great believer in making the audience suffer," he told his audience that spring day just before starting work on his first American film, *Rebecca*, for producer David O. Selznik. "By which I mean that instead of doing it, say as Griffith used to do it, by cutting to the galloping feet of the horse and then going to the scaffold—instead of showing both sides, I like to show only one side."

How many scripts have you read that felt tepid—watered down by the writer's need to show both sides of a story?

Hitchcock continued, "In the French Revolution, probably someone said to Danton, 'Will you please hurry on your horse,' but never show him getting on the horse. Let the audience worry whether the horse has even started, you see. That is making the audience play its part."

So you see, Hitchcock doesn't want you to start worrying about what happens halfway through the scene, he wants you to be concerned from the first frame!

He continued, “The old way used to be that the audience was presented with just an objective view of this galloping horse, and they just said they hoped the horse got there in time. I think it should go further than that. Not only ‘I hope he gets there in time,’ but ‘I hope he has started off,’ you see.

“That is a more intensive development. Of course, that is simply dealing with the treatment of what is the convention of suspense.”

How does all this get tension get started?

Today it’s called the “inciting incident.” In 1939, Hitchcock referred to it as the “springboard situation.”

“You might take a sympathetic character who gets himself into some sort of trouble,” he explained, “whatever it might be. The rest of the film, then, is, ‘Will he get himself out of that situation?’”

Despite later deviating from what appeared to be sympathetic characters in such work as *Psycho*, Hitchcock always tried to entice his audiences to care about or identify with his central characters.

One method he used was to hire well-known actors, actors for whom audiences already felt an affinity and cared about before they walked into the theater. He felt proper casting played as great a role as any of the other elements that combine for a successful film. Not just actors who performed well, but actors who were known to audiences as well as perceived in a specific way by them.

He pointed out, “We have another subject—audience identification, and it is so great that I don’t think I have time to deal with it here. I might say that it is a very, very important point.

For example, you probably get more suspense out of an audience worrying about a known figure than some unknown person. It is quite possible that an audience will have convulsions at the thought of Clark Gable being shot or killed, but if it is some unknown actor, they will say, ‘who the hell is he, anyway?’ That is one important aspect of suspense.”

For better or worse, Hitchcock was invariably a commercial filmmaker. Despite appearances of breaking rules, he actually worked around them, whether they were censorship or technical issues. Some believe this was because when he was a boy, Hitchcock’s father was an unforgiving, unrelenting bully. His father went so far as to have the little boy who would one day become perhaps the world’s most popular filmmaker put in jail overnight to frighten him beyond reason. The reason? Young Alfred was late coming home from school by half an hour one afternoon.

Some Hitchcock aficionados believe that Hitchcock's life was one of inner frustration because he lived in constant fear of his father's retribution despite their separation and his father's death, and would not venture to express his inner feelings or urges. So he let his films express his darker and sexual sides.

One of the other secrets to Hitchcock's creating suspense successfully through story, character, casting, movement, action and dialogue: The title of his films.

"Take a film like *Mutiny on the Bounty*," said Hitchcock. "Suppose it had not had the word 'mutiny' in the title, but that it was called *The Good Ship Bounty*. You would have told the audience nothing. With its real title, however, the audience in the cinema is waiting from the moment the picture starts, wondering when the mutiny is going to start.

"That applies again and again with titles. A lot of people are very unconscious of that fact. They do not realize how much suspense the audience is enjoying through a thing like that. But to get to the suspense for a film as a whole, as I have said, a title can give it."

No one is more keenly aware of this than Stephen King, whose title for the film adapted from his work, *The Shawshank Redemption*, was seen by him (and others) as the reason this fine film failed at the box office. There are numerous other examples of titles that were the reason a film soared or bombed at the BO.

Some writers think that excluding the audience from their story's "secret" is a way to maintain suspense. Hitchcock thought just the opposite. Give the audience an abundance of information so they feel included in the storytelling. Then they don't feel tricked or ripped off when the truth or the puzzle solution is unveiled.

"I have always found that, generally speaking, what I would call letting the audience into the secret as early as possible. Lay all the facts out, as much as you can, unless you are dealing with a mystery element."

He described a problem he had with the film he just completed, *Jamaica Inn*, in which he was faced with a story that worked in its original book form, but did not translate well for its film adaptation because too many facts were concealed in the original telling.

The story's most influential character was brought into the audience's awareness only in the last third of the story. Before that, he was basically a shadow figure, to go largely unnoticed.

"The problem there was, as I saw it," said Hitchcock, "(is) that one would have to have a very important actor to play this character, because of what he had to do in the last third of the picture. The Question was, how could one possibly have an important actor playing in an apparently unimportant part in the first two-thirds, when the characters are talking about a mysterious and influential figure?"

In other words, a lesser known actor than Charles Laughton, whom Hitchcock cast in the role, would never stand out in the first two-thirds of the film. But Laughton would be noticed by audiences, even as a shadow figure in the background because he was so well known. And here Hitchcock hits on a theme that guided all his work. The difference between surprise—a superficial storytelling technique—and suspense, which draws the audience into the film at both visceral and entertaining levels.

Hitchcock explained, “Well as you know in the ‘who-done-it’ story, but with a difference, that the part was so strong a prominent actor had to be cast for it, because he took possession of the whole film at the end. The question was that (as the book told the story) you had neither suspense nor surprise. You certainly had one moment of surprise thought, when Charles Laughton (a major star at the time) turned out to be whatever it was.

Naturally then the (book) story had to be changed. It is one occasion when journalists say, “Those film people have ruined another good story by changing it around.” But one can really hold one’s head up here, and say that it has the whole middle of the story, so that you saw this figure behind the scenes and how he manipulated the wreckers (the other characters).

“We had to invent new situations. We couldn’t just show what he did and how he did it, but had to have new situations, showing him up against it, investigations going on by the detectives of the period—if they had them in 1820. The entire middle had to be changed so that it became a suspense story instead of a surprise story.”

Scrutinizing Hitchcock’s words spoken more than 60 years ago was exhilarating.

I confess, when I found the transcript, I thought I would be writing a comparison of the way he thought in 1939 and perhaps how he changed over the years, or drawing a comparison of good writing/filmmaking techniques today compared with those of 1939, noting their distinguishable differences.

After analyzing the speech and writing about it for you, I was left to wonder why more writers and filmmakers don’t heed his advice today. I know I shall.

Excerpts from this lecture were used by Colleen Patrick with permission from The Cinema of Alfred Hitchcock, © 1963 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Special thanks to US screenwriter Arthur Schurr for bringing it to Colleen’s attention. Errors of omission or commission on the original transcript were corrected by Colleen Patrick.