

# Violence and Suspense in Films of Alfred Hitchcock

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**Undergraduate thesis / Završni rad**

**2024**

*Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj:* **University of Zadar / Sveučilište u Zadru**

*Permanent link / Trajna poveznica:* <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:162:965557>

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*Download date / Datum preuzimanja:* **2025-02-03**



**Sveučilište u Zadru**  
Universitas Studiorum  
Jadertina | 1396 | 2002 |

*Repository / Repozitorij:*

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**Ana Romić**

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Violence and Suspense in Films of Alfred Hitchcock

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Zadar, 2024.



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Zadar, 1. rujna 2024.

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## 1. Introduction

Alfred Hitchcock, born on August 13, 1899, is widely regarded as one of the most prominent film directors of all time, also known as the master of suspense, something which most critics and filmmakers around the world can agree on. From the moment the knife glistened in *Blackmail* (1929) to the sound of a piercing scream in *Psycho* (1960), Hitchcock kept audiences worldwide at the edge of their seats. As a master conductor of films, he orchestrated every notion, every colour, every gaze, using suspense and violence with such precision not just to horrify, but to disturb, tantalise, trick, and seduce, turning the mundane into macabre, making the audience expect a horror hidden in every nook and cranny. In his films, something eerie can be felt unfolding in the shadows, concealed behind closed doors, hinted in the background, tension rising in the silence before the scream, bird wings ominously stretched across the sky, or the slow turning of the doorknob in the middle of the night. His genius was not only what could be seen on screen, but also in the unseen, what could just be hinted at in order for the audience to fill in the blanks with their imagination. He is called a master of suspense for a reason, the creation of palpable anticipation of what could happen, how many possibilities are hidden behind a gaze or at the end of a staircase. His depiction of violence does not only unfold in physical form but within the psyche of his characters. His films made viewers anticipate horror not just from the antagonists, but from the protagonists as well. He controlled every look, every motion, and every fibre of the character's clothing to shape them into the perfect image he had in mind.

Firstly, this paper is going to analyse the evolution of violence throughout Hitchcock's career, and how he depicted violence in his films. Then the paper will briefly touch upon his title 'master of suspense', and how he received such an illustrious nickname. Afterwards, the paper will go into a detailed analysis of four Hitchcock's films; *Rear Window* (1954), *Vertigo* (1958), *Psycho* (1960), and *The Birds* (1963), the analysis of the main characters, the motives behind their actions, interpretation of the symbolism in the films and why the films were

innovative and popular. The last three chapters will focus on the main motifs Hitchcock uses in his films, and the motifs will be explained in detail by using examples from the four aforementioned films.

## **2. Evolution of Violence in Hitchcock's Films**

What started his career was his engineering school, which helped him to learn all the intricacies of mechanical drawing, which later on helped him in making a scene (Chandler 32-47). Immersed in theatre, music and films, he slowly paved his way towards the world of film, despite his family's protests because they wanted him to continue the family's business. His first step into the world of film started when he became an art director for *Three Live Ghosts*, a comedy directed by George Fitzmaurice in late 1921, then afterwards he art directed *The Man from Home*, *The Spanish Jade*, *Number Thirteen* and *Always Tell Your Wife*. *The Number Thirteen* was his first real debut; however, filming was shut down before it was finished, which deeply affected Hitchcock. Britain had a problem with its production company, so such fate befell a lot of British films in those ages.

The first film where he was an actual director, not just an art director, and a co-writer, was *Woman to Woman* (1929) (McGilligan 53-60), a drama film about triangular relationships. Hitchcock was a fan of love triangles from the beginning, even his first short story called *Gas* had a love triangle, which is an interesting fact considering he had never been in a relationship up to that point. To set the foundation of violence, Hitchcock often liked to use erotic rivalries between his characters; in other words, using the character's jealousy, obsession and envy to provoke the characters into doing something dangerous and violent, as can be seen in *The White Shadow* (1924), *The Ring* (1927), *The Manxman* (1929), *The Paradine Case* (1947), *Notorious* (1946), *Rope* (1948), *Vertigo* (1958), *The Birds* (1963) and many more examples. He calls the depiction of violence in his films 'frightmares' (Chandler 28), a type of fear that is believable, that the viewers can understand easily, and even sympathize with.

When Hitchcock's films were starting to be analysed, they were looked through the scope of Freud's view on human sexuality (Humbert XI), when a boy, between the ages of 3 and 6, starts to view their father as a rival, and unconsciously becomes attracted to their mother, however, further analysis of Hitchcock's films proved otherwise. Of course, the audience could see where critics are coming from considering how mothers in his films were depicted, especially in the film *Psycho* (1960), where the main character mentally becomes his mother. Hitchcock himself often spoke in his interviews about the strained relationship he had with his mother. Another thing that critics tried to find in his films is the religious symbolism. Although Hitchcock himself thinks that the reason for putting suspense in his films stems from the discipline he received during his education in a Catholic school, he stated several times throughout his career that his films carry no such notion (Chandler 58-61). In several interviews with his friends and colleagues, they stated that Hitchcock just enjoyed shocking people, which might have driven him to include elements of surprise in his films, whether it was through sudden deaths and murders to psychopathic killers, morally complex characters, and innovative camera work.

## **2.1. Depiction of Violence**

What early critics of Hitchcock's work, such as Truffaut, Chabrol, Rohmer, and Godard also argued about is what drives Hitchcock to depict violence in his films (Humber XI). Is it some transfer of guilt as a Catholic filmmaker, and is every violent act somehow connected to religion? What drove Hitchcock to depict violence was a popular theme amongst experts discussing his work, since he was one of the most prominent practitioners of cinematic violence. Critiques loved to pin on Hitchcock this presence of Christianity. Hitchcock himself often mentions his education at St. Ignatius College, a Catholic school for boys, stating that it had a profound effect on him and invoked a strong sense of fear (McGillian 24). However, his films depict a variety of violent tendencies, not only relating to religion, such as jealousy, voyeurism, sexual deviation, and homicidal tendencies. Hitchcock exposes the fundamental flaws of the



human nature, even in his protagonists. Hitchcock indeed has movies with religious messages, such as *I Confess* (1953) and *The Wrong Man* (1956), but considering how many films he made, it is unreasonable to say that all his films limit the concept of human nature simply due to religious motifs. Every time someone would take his films too seriously, Hitchcock would say to them '*It's only a movie.*' (McGillian 90).

## **2.2. First Successful Film**

His first onscreen murder happened in *The Pleasure Garden* (1925), a silent drama film he helped adapt in Munich to prove himself as a new director. He explored theatre performances for this film, whose influence can be seen in the film. However, it had some problems because the film stock was confiscated at the border, sponsors were pulling out and the stars of the film demanded expensive treatment. Nevertheless, the film was a success and showed the beginning of his true style, using crime, plot twists, danger, murder and suspense. After this film, Hitchcock went on to direct every onscreen murder in his films by himself.

After *Pleasure Garden* (1925), Hitchcock went on to his next film *The Mountain Eagle* (1926), which was only released after his third film *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog* (1926) (Chandler 58-102). This was due to the major success *The Lodger: Story of the London Fog* had. Even though the distributors to which Hitchcock presented the film did not like it, he still went with it and that exact film gave him nicknames such as 'boy wonder of British films' (McGillian 90) and a 'brilliant young director' (McGillian 92). This film is about a serial killer loose in London, accused innocent, fear of authority, a sense of isolation and loneliness, and complicated relationships, a perfect mixture of a Hitchcockian film recipe.

The serial killer in *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog* (1926) targets only blondes, which was also the start of 'Hitchcock's blondes', one of his most famous signatures in films throughout his entire career. He presumably stated: '*Blondes make the best victims. They're like virgin snow that shows up the bloody footprints.*', however, this statement was not verified (Harrington). This film could also be a nod to the famous serial killer Jack the Ripper.

Considering how Jack the Ripper was plastered all over the media and the location of murders took place near Hitchcock's residence, maybe the killer did have some influence on Hitchcock's work in terms of murder, class and sexuality (Haeffner 16-17), considering Jack the Ripper was a supposedly a high-class gentleman who killed women from lower classes, to be exact, his victims were prostitutes. After this film, one of his signatures also became how a woman is put through male cruelty, such examples can be seen in *Blackmail* (1929), *Rebecca* (1940), *Suspicion* (1941), *Notorious* (1946), *Under Capricorn* (1949), *Vertigo* (1958), *Psycho* (1960), *Marnie* (1964), etc. His villains tend to have privilege, their cruelty being hidden behind good manners, class, wealth and humanitarian concern.

### **3. Master of Suspense**

Suspense is 'anxiety arising from an uncertain situation' (Adair 52), and Hitchcock did not only master the feeling of suspense, but he also elevated it to a whole new art form. He focused more on the power of suggestion, rather than explicit violence. Such an example could be seen in *Psycho* (1960), during the famous shower scene, the point of the knife not penetrating Marion's skin is for the audience to fill the gaps themselves, to imagine the most gruesome ending they can. This is something called an 'intellectual montage', planting an image into the audience's mind with the audience themselves filling in the blanks (Haeffner 38). The sound score of screeching violins, combined with the screams of the leading actress Janet Leigh made this one of the most famous scenes in film's history.

Another example of masterfully building up tension can be seen in *Rear Window* (1954), where the suspense is built through the character's confinement and limited perspective. We can only see what the protagonist sees, so when he feels the tension, the viewers feel it too. The audience also feels additional tension from the uncertainty of whether what the main character is seeing is actually happening or is it rather all in his head. Did the crime actually take place or was it all due to the character's boredom? The suspense is accumulated slowly, rather than

from graphic violence or a direct confrontation, making the audience participate in the character's paranoia.

Another technique Hitchcock uses is the manipulation of time and space. He was immediately aware that the best way to build suspense was to push the scene to the brink and let the audience feel every second of it. Such an example can be seen in *The Birds* (1963) when the character Lydia walks through the farmer's house. She is slowly driving to his house, and viewers can see something bad has happened, because of the broken tea cups, the trashed house, broken windows, dead birds, the dead silence, only hearing the echo of Lydia's footsteps throughout the hallways, until at the final look the audience is met with a shocking and unnerving sight of the farmer who met his tragic end. A similar technique can be seen in *Rope* (1948), one of Hitchcock's most experimental films (Olsen). In this film, Hitchcock uses long, uninterrupted takes to maintain the constant feeling of anxiety (Spoto 148-159). The film looks as if it was filmed in one take, which invokes the feeling of tension as the audience is stuck in the same room with the characters, sharing their anxiety while the camera strolls around the place, giving hints where the dead body could be. Hitchcock's masterful use of claustrophobia heightens the tension of the scene, making it feel almost unbearable and leaving the audience with an overwhelming sense of being trapped.

The MacGuffin technique is something that Hitchcock loved to use in his films, which is the art of nothing and 'the most absurd'. Some of Hitchcock's films that use this technique are *Saboteur* (1942), *Notorious* (1946), and *North by Northwest* (1959) (Digo). In simpler terms, it is the essence of sending the hero of the story on a wild goose chase, drawing the audience's attention to something that seems important, but it actually is not, the real action is somewhere else entirely. Considering Hitchcock is a jokester, it is no surprise that he uses such technique for his artwork. With it, he creates a complex narrative structure that keeps the viewers guessing, never knowing whether behind that corner something sinister or something unimportant lies. The MacGuffin technique is not a source of suspense, but Hitchcock uses it

to build suspense around characters, unbeknownst to the audiences until the very end. Although some critics say that Hitchcock used this technique because he had nothing to put in the scene, what Hitchcock himself claimed is that playing with nothing is one of his many tricks, perfecting the scene so the audience themselves can fill in the 'nothing' (Haeffner 44-56).

He also played with suspense throughout his films, usually putting ordinary people through tough ordeals and protagonists that dance on the invisible line of what is good and what is bad. They are not just simply carriers of the plot, they have fears, flaws, and desires, and they often make mistakes, such as Scottie in *Vertigo* (1958). When he was finally able to face his fears, it cost him the love of his life. The suspense is seen throughout the psychological struggle of the character, his dealing with his past trauma and the deceit which Hitchcock unravels throughout the film. The audience is focused on this character, seeing his struggle and anger.

One of many of his signature techniques is the usage of a subjective camera. His usage of the point of view shots and close-ups on his character's faces, showing the audience the character's fears, desires, and delusions, make the viewers see all the elements that are agitating the characters. Hitchcock loved such usage of subjectivity because it was the best way of transferring those emotions to the viewers.

#### **4. The Analysis of Films *Rear Window* (1954), *Vertigo* (1958), *Psycho* (1960), *The Birds* (1963)**

##### **4.1. *Rear Window* (1954)**

*Rear Window* (1954) is a mystery thriller film that follows L. B. 'Jeff' Jefferies, played by James Steward, whose character is a photographer confined to his apartment due to having his leg broken. The film was adapted from the short story *It Had to be Murder*, written by Cornell Woolrich. Critics, and Hitchcock himself, agree that this film, in addition to *Psycho* (1960), is one of his greatest works. The success of the film was not only due to Hitchcock's genius but also due to his popularity. By the time he made *Rear Window* (1954), he had already

established a strong reputation amongst his fellow filmmakers. The film also benefited from excellent casting and great source material, which allowed Hitchcock to work his magic, especially since the writer and director shared similar ideas and creative visions, although they had never met (Fawell 16-41). The main themes of the film are the power of the gaze, voyeurism, confinement, male ego, Hitchcock's use of mind games on the viewers, and the power of one's imagination.

L.B. Jefferies, the main character of the movie, is in simple terms, a voyeur. He sits by his window for most of the day, watching all the neighbours in the courtyard. The film keeps the audience entertained, so much so that they forget they are the voyeurs themselves, intruding on the neighbours alongside Jefferies. Viewers are stuck with him in his apartment. The protagonist is limited in his movements, and so is the audience. Jefferies, just like the viewers, can only sit and watch. Where the main character and the audience differ is the way the audience views Jefferies. Viewers go back and forth, seeing Jefferies in his apartment, and then seeing what Jefferies sees through neighbours' windows, therefore creating this sort of reality where the audience questions Jefferies's sanity. Did Thorwald actually murder his wife or is it just Jefferies's imagination running wild due to boredom? Because the audience never sees the actual murder taking place, just like Jefferies, they only hear her screams, glass shattering, seeing Thorwald washing a knife, Thorwald exiting his apartment several times with a briefcase, and then later on, men carrying out a trunk. Such noises and actions are suspicious but do not necessarily mean murder.

Hitchcock used an excellent point of view here, playing with rooms, sounds, and lights, showing as much as he can but still only showing enough so that he can still create suspense. One scene where Hitchcock manipulates its audience is when Jefferies talks with detective Doyle about the possibility that his neighbour did in fact murder his wife. Doyle, of course, is sceptical about this, and Jefferies himself is not too sure about his theory. Throughout this scene, Hitchcock uses visual elements to try to convince the viewers that Thorwald is not a murderer.

Doyle has total control over the conversation, which can be visually seen as he is 'towering' over Jefferies, and is seen physically larger than him, even though both men on a regular base, have similar body frames. Throughout this scene, the camera is mostly focused on Doyle and his perspective of the situation. Hitchcock does this to trick the viewers, make them question the protagonist, and not let them guess what happens next.

Hitchcock loves to play mind games with his audiences and that is what makes his films suspenseful. Hitchcock himself can be seen in one of the apartments, where a man plays a piano. While Jefferies and Lisa are discussing the morality of peeking at others, Jefferies states that his windows are also open for anyone to peek into his life, therefore that makes it okay. Given that Hitchcock is in an apartment across, this could mean that he also sees the viewers, showing them what to see and what to think, and the whole time while the viewers are looking out, he is looking in, playing the audience like a piano.

In addition to the murder plot, something else that these windows can represent is a correlation with Jefferies's personal life. We can see a happily married couple who moved in together, which is something that Jefferies said he does not want with Lisa, his girlfriend. The dancer in the window is having fun and the usage of her legs while dancing is emphasized, giving the viewers a stark contrast against Jefferies, who is bound to his wheelchair, enduring the tedious monotony of his daily life. Miss Lonelyhearts sets up a whole date for herself, trying to at least entertain herself, while Jefferies does not even do that, he just sits and wallows, in hopes of something interesting. She can also represent what happens when you reject another's company for too long. Lars Thorwald represents an unhappy marriage, which is maybe something that Jefferies fears, seeing as he does not want to marry Lisa, even though he cares for her. Maybe he has a fear of confinement, which is something marriage can be, seeing that he is a successful photographer who travels to exotic places, and marriage can hinder that. Lisa can also be seen stuck in the confinement of the gender stereotypes of the times, where she

expresses her desire to join Jefferies on his travels and adventures, only to be met with mocking misogynistic remarks from him.

The constant theme throughout this film is that Jefferies does not get the full picture of people's lives, just a glimpse. For example, Miss Torso, the dancer, is viewed by Jefferies as this rather loose woman who brings many men over, while Lisa defends her and compares her to herself, stating that there is more than meets the eye. The ending reveals that Lisa had a special someone in her life and that she was only entertaining the company of those other men to advance her career.

#### **4.2. *Vertigo* (1958)**

*Vertigo* (1958) follows a former San Francisco police detective, John Ferguson, nicknamed Scottie, played by James Stewart, an actor who also took the main role in the aforementioned movie *Rear Window* (1954), dealing with the turmoil of life after quitting the force. This film is stated to be Hitchcock's favourite film (Chandler 289), and we can see why, considering this film contains all the signatures he liked to use throughout his work: the unexpected plot twist, the symbolism of colours, and his favourite 'vertigo effect'.

*Vertigo* (1958) follows the narrative of desire, how such desire can lead a person to do things beyond reason, innocent victims, doubles and a transfer of guilt (Humbert 95). The film starts with Scottie chasing a criminal and due to unfortunate circumstances ends up hanging by the edge of the building. A police officer tried to assist him, only to fall to his death, which traumatised Scottie well enough to be terribly afraid of heights and acquire acrophobia. This event leads Scottie to become this sort of damsel in distress type of character, the same type of character which can be seen in Jeff from *Rear Window* (1954). In the course of the film, Scottie is hired by Gavin Elster, his old friend, who wants him to track down his wife Madeleine, who he believes is possessed by Carlotta Valdes, a woman who committed suicide because her lover crossed her. The said woman is believed to be Madeleine's great-grandmother, and Gavin tells

Scottie that he fears his wife will follow the same path of harming herself. Scottie reluctantly agrees, not knowing what Gavin has in store for him.

While tracking Madeleine, Scottie has this unexplainable attraction towards her, slowly developing a romantic obsession. Throughout the course of the film, the audience can see that Scottie stopped thinking about the job that he was supposed to do for Gavin, but rather he found himself immersed in Madeleine's strange persona who is attracted to death. Every time Scottie looks at Madeleine, he sees her through this fairy tale-like filter; whenever he sees her, she is surrounded by a soft colourful view, as if he is seeing a work of art, which is in a way true, considering he is seeing fake Madeleine throughout this 'artistic' creation orchestrated by Elster. Taking into consideration that Scottie has been fighting his acrophobia which has him feeling helpless, saving Madeleine from her supposed 'drowning' increased his attraction towards her, because he can save her and feel needed and heroic, which is something he could not feel the night his colleague died.

Elster meticulously crafted Madeleine's persona, in order for him to have a witness and a scapegoat for his wife's murder, knowing Scottie could never climb the church tower because of his acrophobia and vertigo. Elster hired a woman named Judy, whom he wanted to pretend to be his wife, to corroborate his story that his wife became 'possessed' and committed suicide by throwing herself off the church tower, while the actual Madeleine's demise was under the hands of Elster, who broke her neck.

After Madeleine's death, Scottie accidentally spots Judy and stalks her because she reminds him of Madeleine. Judy, who in a turn of events, developed feelings towards Scottie during her deceit with Elster, gives in into Scottie's desperate attempts to meet her, even though originally she planned to leave. Scottie in the back of his mind knows as soon as he met Judy that she is in fact Madeleine, more accurately that she played Madeleine when she met Scottie. He is a former detective after all. Nevertheless, Scottie uses her, or albeit forces her to become Madeleine again, and by doing so, he slowly becomes angrier and angrier at Judy for deceiving



him. When Scottie meets Madeleine, he slowly falls in love with her, but on the screen, viewers can see that Madeleine does not share the same sentiment. Only when Judy is herself again is the moment we see her love towards Scottie and the depth of her love when she is willing to dress like Madeleine for him and follow him to the church tower, even though she is scared. Both of their infatuations got off on the wrong start – Scottie’s self-delusion and self-absorption and Judy’s fear and dishonesty (Humbert 98).

Scottie slowly becomes Elster, exploiting Judy to bring back his ‘dead’ lover, showcasing how he, the same as Elster, took away a woman’s freedom and power through the violent subjugation of the victim. Madeleine’s clothes, mostly white, black and grey, her soft make-up, and her blonde hair make her something similar to a blank canvas, which Scottie can project on, while Judy on the other hand wears strong colours and strong make-up, meaning that she already has her sense of self. While Scottie forces her to become Madeleine, she in order for him to love her, loses herself step by step.

Scottie has this weird attraction towards death, due to his posttraumatic symptoms after his colleague fell to his death, and maybe that is why he felt so eerily attracted towards Madeleine, who was also attracted to death. Hitchcock himself stated that Scottie has a desire to have sexual relations with a dead woman (Humbert 97-103), which can be seen being represented in the film, but not in an obvious way. The colour green is also used as a symbol for death in the film. When he first sees Madeleine, she has a green shawl and later drives a green car. When he sees Judy for the first time, she is wearing a green ensemble, making him feel like he has just seen a ghost. Judy’s room in the Hotel Empire is green on their last night together, giving Judy’s room an eerie green glow, and maybe giving the viewers a subtle announcement of Judy’s future demise. When Judy’s transformation into Madeleine is complete, she steps out of the bathroom and a green light surrounds her, like the ghost of actual Madeleine came to life and what is left of Judy’s personality is fully gone. When she kisses Scottie and a green backdrop surrounds them, she sealed herself with that kiss and became a

dead person for Scottie. The moment Scottie falls in love with Judy is the moment she submits her entire identity to him.

The first crack of Scottie's illusion of perfection he sees in Madeleine is visible when Midge puts her own face on the portrait of Carlotta, making him horrified. This was Midge's joke, but it was also her way of trying to win Scottie's attention, considering he never looked at her with desire. Maybe his disinterest in Midge was because Midge was her own person, aware of herself, and content with life, and was not a picturesque damsel in distress like Madeleine. When the illusion fully cracks and Scottie realizes the deceit Judy and Elster pulled on him, he becomes enraged, leads her to the church tower and forcefully makes her confess the entire ordeal, leaving her vulnerable and under his power. She falls to her demise after being startled by a shadow, which turns out to be a nun of that church. This symbolizes how she completes the cycle of being a fallen woman, meaning she lost a piece of herself when she helped another man take the life of an innocent woman, and then lost herself completely by subduing herself to Scottie and becoming Madeleine, killing off what is left of her own being.

Vertigo can suggest not only his fears but a whirlpool of desire, control and fear. Scottie is cured of vertigo only when he realises the truth and confronts Judy, but at the expense of Judy's life (Humbert 105-115). The film ends the same way it began – Scottie being indirectly responsible for someone's death, be it the police officer's death in the beginning who just wanted to help, or Judy's death when she simply wanted his love. What made Hitchcock's films most intriguing was the fact the villains were not just villains, but also very complex characters. The protagonists in his films often lack a clear-cut moral compass and frequently dance on the line between protagonist and antagonist, blurring the lines between right and wrong – a state often driven by trauma and unresolved personal issues.

#### **4.3. *Psycho* (1960)**

*Psycho* (1960) is a horror film that follows a woman named Marion Crane, played by Janet Leigh, who works at the bank and decides to do something opposite of her usual

personality; steal 40 thousand dollars from a rich sleazy oil investor Cassidy, in order to help out her lover with alimony payments. While on the run, she encounters bad weather, which forces her to stop at the Bates Motel. What she did not know was that this motel would seal her fate. She meets Norman, an attractive young man, seemingly shy and passive, who runs the hotel. Later, throughout their conversation, Norman's intensive and predatory look while talking about his taxidermy hobby startles Marion and you can see the shock in her eyes. A stuffed bird was behind Norman's head, with its wings open, as if in the middle of attacking its prey suggesting that is how Norman feels about Marion. A nice touch here was that her last name was Crane, which is a type of bird, symbolizing Marion's fate that she would come to her demise under the hands of Norman. He even states during her mealtime that she eats like a bird.

After dinner, Marion is planning to take a shower, and we can see Norman peeping on her, indicating through the power of the gaze that he is attracted to her. When she finally takes the shower, Marion is happy, finally washing away all the tension she felt throughout that day, only to be met by a woman's figure, her face hidden, stabbing her repeatedly. What made this film popular is this shower scene, because the audience follows someone who they presumed to be the protagonist of the story, only for her to meet her tragic demise around the 47<sup>th</sup> minute of the film, which completely shattered the usual narrative of films. This scene is what really set the mark for future horror films, using shock value by murdering the main character, many scene cuts making the viewers feel the same disorientation as Marion, and violin sounds amping up the tension, leaving the audience in shock and distrust of other characters. The scene ends with Marion dead on the bathroom floor of the motel, as camera cuts from the whirlpool of water in the bathtub drain to Marion's lifeless eye, making it one of the most famous scene transitions. The symbol of the shower drain can also be a symbol of vertigo, where blood and water mix, symbolizing the mixture of desire, control and fear. Desire stemming from Norman, in his attraction to Marion, control stemming from Mother, in her desire to control Norman, and fear of Marion, being the innocent victim of a homicidal maniac.

The revelation of the killer was also something that made the film popular. Hitchcock changed the original look of the character from the novel version; in the book that goes by the same name, written by Robert Bloch, Norman was originally an ugly, fat, old man (Humbert 117), but in the film the actor portraying him, Anthony Perkins, is a handsome young man, charismatic, shy and well mannered. This was possibly in order to add to the shock value, making the revelation of the killer much more striking, because usually when the audience sees a weird and unattractive character, they become immediately suspicious of them.

Norman Bates, the heart of *Psycho*, is portrayed with this unsettling charm and vulnerability. He is an embodiment of contrast, one minute he is stumbling on his words, too shy to enter Marion's room, and in the next scene he is completely dominating her in conversation, as a flash of concern and fear can be seen in Marion's eyes. Before the dinner scene, Marion quickly realizes that Norman has a domineering mother, but when she tries to give him advice about it, he immediately strikes her down, making the viewers realize that this is an extremely sensitive subject for him.

In the final acts of the film, we realize that Norman and 'Mother' are the same person. Norman's psyche took his father's death hard, which made him more reliant on his mother, and in turn, his mother reliant on him. However, when his mother finds a lover, Norman feels rejected, replaced, and thrown aside, and in a fit of rage murders them both with strychnine, a painful type of poison. Although there are implications that his mind broke when his mother found a lover, the logical theory is that Norman was born with a 'broken' mind, because his mother's murder was meticulously planned, executed, staged as a suicide, and he even managed to steal her corpse. Such behaviour indicates that he already had some sort of sociopathy combined with delusions. Considering he loved his mother greatly, matricide broke him completely, because he could not handle the loss. As psychiatrist said at the end; '*He was never all Norman, but he was often only Mother...*' (*Psycho* 1:45:05) as his way of dealing with her death, because by becoming Mother he kept a piece of her alive.

Not only suspense, violence, murder and psychological impairment can be found in *Psycho*, but also dark humour, such as the line: '*Mother... my mother... uh, what is the phrase? She isn't quite herself today*' (*Psycho* 33:54), which of course, is a nod to the main character's psychological problems of double identity. Just after that line he states that he hates apologizing for other people, confirming yet again that he sees his mother as a totally separated persona from himself, even though we find out it was him all along, impersonating her, from the voice all the way to the way she dressed. Hitchcock loved this idea of mixing comedy and horror in his films, which he claims stems from his memories from World War I (McGillian 26).

#### **4.4. *The Birds* (1963)**

*The Birds*, a film classified as a horror and thriller with the elements of science fiction, came out in 1963, a follow-up to *Psycho*, which was his massively successful film. This was the longest time Hitchcock went on without making a film, he usually released a film every year ever since he started his film career in 1922. What caused this delay is the enormous technical challenge this film represented. With a combination of complex composite photography made by film's photographic advisor Ub Iwerks, stunning background paintings by Albert Whitlock, and thousands of gulls and crows trained by Ray Berwick, it is clear why this particular film took longer than the others. However, this film is one of Hitchcock's least accessible films, due to the fact it was not popular even amongst his biggest fans (Spoto 438-475). Evan Hunter himself, the man who wrote the script for the film was not pleased with the result. However, the film ended up in the top ten thrillers of all time, according to the American Film Institute (Raubichek, Srebnick 1-25). Although the film did not achieve the success it hoped for right away, this could have been due to several factors: Hitchcock's refusal to compromise during filming, the unusual displacement of a 'human monster', or his decision to significantly alter Daphne Du Maurier's original storyline.

The original storyline begins with Nat, a bird watcher, who is the first one to notice the difference in the behaviour of birds. He attributes this to the cold harsh winter that is slowly

creeping up into their small town. Even when the birds are attacking his children, he still concludes that it is the winter's fault and that the birds are just seeking shelter, but the cold winds make them unhinged. He warns the others, but they do not take him seriously. He barricades his house to protect his family. The story ends on a dark note, their televisions are no longer working, and stations from the other countries grow silent on the radio, meaning the birds have taken over. Nat sits on the ground floor of his house, smokes his last cigarette, and questions the reasons behind the birds' intention to end mankind (Maurier). The film on the other hand does not have such a bleak and dismal ending. It ends on a vague dark note, but the fate of humanity is not sealed.

*The Birds* (1963) carries themes of accused innocent, scapegoat, fearful mother, and triangular desire. In comparison with others, the most interesting fact about this film is that there is no music score which creates a sort of eerie feeling, making the scene more real and intense. There is not a single music score throughout the film. We can see the lack of sound immediately at the beginning of the screening, where a list of people who worked on the film is being shown, while in the background birds are flying around and all a viewer can hear is the sound of birds, there is no music or any other additional sound. Even if the title was different, this beginning of the film would give the viewers a hint about what would cause the grim fate of the characters. Another such instance is when the film has its first death. Lydia, upon entering the farmer's house, finds him lying dead on the floor, all evidence around the room pointing that the birds did this to him. Even during such a scene, there is no music, giving the viewers this uncanny, sinister, spine-chilling sense of what these creatures are capable of doing. Hitchcock liked to use in his films 'diegetic sounds' (Haeffner 53), a type of sound that has its source from the film, for example the sound of the television when a character turns it on, a sound of the radio and other sounds which the character is listening to.

The main character is a stunning blonde woman named Melanie Daniels, played by Tippi Hedren. The movie is mostly from her perspective, a person whose character arc goes

from being a witty prankster to a scared and defenceless woman, experiencing somewhat of a catatonic state. Even though her love interest in this situation is Mitch Brenner, the relationships seem somewhat lacklustre. Nevertheless, their relationship is not the main storyline of the film, rather it is the sheer terror they endure from the birds.

Birds on the other hand, as characters, are constantly discussed throughout the story, their species, and how they differ in size and looks. Human characters in the film develop relationships throughout the birds, be it Melanie buying lovebirds as a prank for Mitch, or Melanie and Annie developing a friendship while she is delivering the birds, even though Annie also has feelings for Mitch. Here we have a possibility for drama and arguments due to this triangular relationship, but Melanie and Annie remain civil towards each other. This is probably due to the fact that Mitch's and Annie's relationship ended due to his overbearing mother, Lydia.

Hitchcock likes to put mothers or some sort of maternal figures in his films; however, he usually makes these types of characters overbearing, delusional or unhinged. Such examples could be seen in his works like *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), *Saboteur* (1942), *Notorious* (1946), *Strangers on a Train* (1951), *Psycho* (1960), and *The Birds* (1963). *The Birds* did not stray too far into the problems with the maternal figure, mostly since it would have almost no connection with the original story by du Maurier. Lydia, played by Jessica Tandy in the film, is Mitch's mother (Dick). Lydia treats Melanie as an intruder, someone who poses a threat to the relationship she has with her son. If the story was looked at from a metaphorical point of view, one could say that birds represent Lydia's feelings. First, the birds killed the farmer, who might have represented a potential future partner for Lydia. Next, the birds attack Annie, who is a threat to Lydia considering Annie could take Mitch away from her. Their relationship fell apart due to his mother's possessiveness. In the script for this film, Hitchcock refers how the massive effect a parent can have on their child (Humbert 3). The next who was attacked was Melanie, and his mother could see they had something more than a casual fling going on, therefore she

was the next target for the birds. However, this concept does not explain the fact why some other people were attacked, such as innocent children. Considering the farmer's eyes were pecked out by the birds, it could be a symbol from Oedipus, where Oedipus blinds himself after realizing he was married to his mother. It can be said that the bird attacks are Lydia's way of keeping 'the nest' safe.

The bird attacks seem to revolve around Melanie, the film's main protagonist. She is a modern woman of the 1960s, enjoys attention, is desirable, witty, and a bit of a prankster. The bird attacks also seem to be specifically tied to Melanie; they begin around the time she comes to Bodega Bay. The first attack can be seen when a seagull strikes Melanie while she is going after Mitch on a boat, which could represent an attack on her because she is pursuing him. After Melanie decides to stay in town for Cathy's party, a seagull flies into Annie's door and dies. Next, she is accused by the townspeople that she is the cause of the sudden changes in the bird's behaviour, which could imply a way of society rejecting the modern woman. Near the end of the film, Melanie is brutally attacked by the birds, which could symbolize that Melanie is someone who needs to be put in a passive image of a woman, someone who is helpless and scared, someone who needs to be rescued, a real damsel in distress. Only when she is a mere empty shell of a woman due to her trauma, only then we can see her getting along with Lydia, the overbearing mother figure.

The bird symbolism can also be seen not just throughout the attacks, but other instances involving the animals. The first bird symbolism would be the lovebirds she buys for Cathy, Mitch's little sister. Those two birds were the only birds that did not turn against humans at the end. This can imply that by tying ourselves into the constraints of marriage, we can keep ourselves safe from the destructive aspects of human nature. *The Birds* (1963) is one of the rare Hitchcock's films where the violence does not have a catalyst, it happens abruptly, without any reason. In other films that have been analysed in this paper, we can see why the violence happened, in *Rear Window* the main character is experiencing violence because he witnessed a



crime, in *Vertigo* the main character experiences violence due to deceit, and in *Psycho* the violence occurred due to the total breakdown of one's mind. The violence in other films represents itself through human nature, while in this film it represents itself as just nature. What is more, the violence does not only affect the guilty or the main characters, but it affects everyone living in the area.

Today's critics claim that the violence behind the birds' attack was due to environmental changes, pollution to be exact, but it is unlikely that this was where the theme of such violence was aiming for, it is more likely that the birds were a response to human evil. Some religious symbols can also be viewed through some scenes, for example when the town drunk quotes the Bible, stating the end is coming (Humbert 13), indicating some sort of divine punishment for the characters' sins, although the characters have done nothing, possibly foreboding a punishment for the entire human race.

## **5. Psychological Violence versus Physical Violence**

Violence is not something that just evokes physical pain, but also psychological damage, and both can leave lasting damage on an individual. Violence can also be a seemingly innocent interaction, as we can see in *The Birds* (1963), in the scene where Melanie decides to hand deliver the lovebirds to Mitch and by doing so, she breaks into his house, while seemingly innocent action, it was a total violation of Mitch's privacy, considering those two are barely acquaintances. Hitchcock knew how to set the scene to perform both types of violence, creating a complex emotional audience's engagement with the film.

The best example of psychological violence in the four mentioned films can be seen in *Rear Window* (1954) and *Vertigo* (1958). *Vertigo* centres on Scottie, who has some emotional issues due to the loss of his colleague and his own close call with death. Although there is physical violence, the main theme is emotional manipulation, internal conflict, destructive power of obsession, and desire to control. *Vertigo* could be used as a metaphor for emotional

instability, psychological turmoil and mental deterioration. His seemingly business approach to following Madeleine soon turns to stalking and lustful obsession, transforming him from a hurt man into a predator. Later on, his obsession becomes more out of control, and he uses psychological form of violence and gaslighting to make Judy into Madeleine, dehumanizing and manipulating her, ultimately making him lose her, and making her lose her own life.

*Rear Window* on the other hand does not have as many direct confrontations as *Vertigo*, most of the tension is created in the mind of Jeff, the main protagonist. His exciting career in photography, which enabled him to travel all over the world, was cut short for a while as he was recuperating from his broken leg. His interest in neighbours slowly becomes an obsession, making him invested in their lives, and what they hide behind the curtain. Tension is built up using the unseen and Jeff's unreliable mind. Until it was confirmed at the ending, the viewers were not sure if they were seeing just Jeff's delusions which stemmed from his boredom and confinement, or was it actually real, considering the audience, the same as Jeff, had limited views.

Physical violence on the other hand is best depicted in *Psycho* (1960) and *The Birds* (1963). In *Psycho*, there is a deranged serial killer, murdering women he is attracted to, and the physical violence is direct, sudden and brutal. Although the gore in *Psycho* is not visible, the audience can see just enough in order to paint the most gruesome picture. Music, the murder scenes, and the breakdown of the traditional storyline added to the depiction of violence, making it all the more macabre.

*The Birds* has its human monster displaced, which was unusual for Hitchcock's films, considering he liked to show the complexity of the human mind. In *The Birds* he used the animals as the carriers of violent actions, creating a whole new aspect of fear. "*Fear of the dark is natural, we all have it, but fear in the sunlight, perhaps fear in this very restaurant, where it is so unexpected, mind you, that is interesting.*" (Chandler 28). Birds, seemingly innocent creatures, when people see them, they do not believe they can do them any harm with such

fragile bodies, but Hitchcock uses them as an object of terror. The fear in the sunlight he mentioned can also be seen in this film because the location is Bodega Bay, a sunny seaside village in California. The violence here is more extensive due to the fact that was not an individual attack, but rather no one was safe. The violence was unexpected, unpredictable and unexplained, adding to the terrifying aspect of the film.

One individual did have a more gruesome scene than others, Lydia's neighbour Fawcett, one of the rare characters that had met his demise so brutally in Hitchcock's films. Hitchcock wanted to make this scene impactful, which he succeeded (Humbert 16). Lydia's truck made no dust while she was driving it to the farmer's house, the whole place was calm, with no bird in sight. As Lydia walks up to the house, she sees the perfectly smashed teacups and starts to suspect something is wrong. She goes to the farmer's bedroom and while looking around the room, she first notices the dishevelled state of the room, two dead birds, and finally the body of the farmer. What was the most shocking in this film is the depiction of the gruesome ending, showing us the farmer's eyes after they were pecked out and even a close-up of his eyes. Such gruesomeness was not seen in either of the other three films that have been discussed in this paper. Such a grisly ending and Lydia being a witness to it could represent her deepest fears about being abandoned.

There is also one more instance where the violence in *The Birds* is not physical, it is when the townspeople are imitating the birds (Humbert 14), isolating Melanie, again portraying violence as something that does not have to be physical, but still can bring pain, and in this case emotional pain due to isolation and abandonment from all those around her, even though she has done nothing wrong.

## **6. The Suspense of the Gaze**

Hitchcock loved to use 'the gaze' as a symbol throughout his entire film career. Actor Richard Todd, best known for his role as Robin Hood, and the work he did with Hitchcock on *Stage Fright* (1950), stated that with working with Hitchcock he realized how expressive eyes

can be (Chandler 227), and he used that to his advantage. The expressiveness is evident in *Psycho*, particularly in the scene where Marion is pulled over by the police officer. Hitchcock uses the officer's reflective sunglasses as a clever prop, allowing Marion to see her own face in them, creating a sense of a cold, judgemental mirror reflecting her inner turmoil.

Hitchcock uses the gaze to showcase the character's interests, and obsessions to build up suspense. Marion's suspicion rises steadily after she steals the money, and she slowly becomes more paranoid about other people's gazes, making her feel suffocated. The only time she felt relaxed was when she was in her room, thinking no one could see her, although Norman had some other plans. When Norman peeks through a hole in the wall to spy on Marion, the camera shifts directly to his eye, the tight framing and the close-up intensifies the discomfort and the suspense of the scene.

*Vertigo* uses the gaze as a male gaze of obsession, to show the audience his desires, need to control and his fixation on Madeleine. There are many point-of-view shots, seen from Scottie's point of view, how he sees Madeleine as this picture-perfect woman, always surrounded by this sort of fairy-like colours, even when she is in the graveyard. That points to how Scottie sees her, through these 'rose-coloured glasses', not seeing her for who she really is.

The most notable film for the usage of the gaze technique is *Rear Window*, which is based on the main character's voyeurism. What started as just being bored and looking out the window, ended up as peeping on people's intimate aspects of life, questioning the morality of Jeff's gaze. What started as an innocent observation soon became invasive surveillance. The gaze becomes a sense of power and intrigue in Jeff's closed-off life, maybe operating as an extension of his work as a photographer. The viewers can see as much as Jeff can see, indirectly making them voyeurs themselves. The power dynamics shifts when Jeff's gaze is returned by Thorwald, who stared directly at him, making Jeff realize what he was actually doing to other people, and making him completely dominated by Thorwald's gaze.

In *The Birds* however, the gaze is something completely different. It has no explanation; it just reflects nature's indifference. Wide shots were used in the film, for the viewers to see how humans are small when compared to the power of nature. The representation of the eyes could be seen in architecture, if one considers the windows being the eyes of the house. While Mitch is covering the windows with boards blinds the house, audience can witness Lydia's sudden violent dramatic outburst, maybe due to her being traumatised by witnessing the farmer's demise. Melanie's catatonic state at the end of the film, ignoring her surroundings, basically being blind to everything around her, could be connected to the 'blinding' of the house. She only shows emotions again once she is outside the house, under the cruel gaze of the birds.

## **7. Fatal Attraction**

Throughout the analysis of the four aforementioned films, it can be visible that there is a recurring motif of fatal attraction. Fatal attraction, as the name alone implies, is an attraction between two or more individuals since Hitchcock also loved the motif of the love triangle that ends in a tragedy. *Vertigo* is the best example of such a motif, where Scottie's obsession pushes Judy to her death. His simple observation under the request of his friend turned into a dangerous psychological spiral where Scottie developed a need to control and mould Judy, to fit his unrealistic ideal, which did not even exist considering that Madeleine's persona was created by Gavin. The fatal aspect is not only visible through her death but also through Judy's loss of her own being, under the mental collapse of Scottie, driven by illusion and control.

Fatal attraction can also be visible in *Psycho*, where Norman, manifesting the personality of his deceased, controlling mother, kills every woman he feels attracted to. His conflicted desire stems from his dissociative identity disorder, where he himself wants to act on his desires, but the mother part of him forbids it, implicating that she forbade him to have romantic connections when she was alive. Therefore, the character of Mother is jealous of the other women Norman is attracted to, leaving her with the only way to resolve this – killing

them. Even after his mother's death, Norman represses his desires, but desires always find a way to manifest themselves, and in this case, they did in the most violent manner due to Norman's previous psychological instability. A fatal attraction can also be seen through Oedipal theory, due to Norman's unhealthy attachment to his mother and his jealousy over her new lover, which made him increasingly violent and unable to form any romantic connections with anyone.

## **8. Conclusion**

Alfred Hitchcock, a genius film director, paved his own way through the film industry simply by using his imagination, originality and experimentation with films. He left a huge mark on the film industry, especially in the genres of thriller, suspense, and horror. He developed a unique approach in portraying violence and suspense with a deep understanding of film's visual techniques, provided characters with complex personalities, and showcased a clever use of symbolism throughout his films, that later became his signature. He was not afraid to experiment with his film, broadening his horizons, which is why his films were popular throughout his career, and even today. Through the analysis of *Rear Window* (1954), *Vertigo* (1958), *Psycho* (1960), and *The Birds* (1960), it is noticeable how his work is ingenious due to the fact that he used similar techniques but each of them composed into such an original idea, leaving the audience experiencing something new every time. It is visible how throughout his career he developed more film techniques, elevating them to new art forms, and creating his own personal recipe for a successful film. He liked to play with the unseen, with the 'nothing', with sounds, lights, camera angles, symbolism, and human psychology. His work was intricate, not leaving out any details. The characters he created were complex, sometimes dancing on the line between good and bad, not being completely one or the other. His title as the 'Master of Suspense' is deserved, stemming from his innovative ways into tricking the audience and leaving the viewers at the edge of their seats. He manipulated the viewer's perspective, blurring the lines between the character and the audience, successfully capturing the audience's

attention. This is why Hitchcock's film resonate even today, and he has inspired many filmmakers throughout the decades.

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## VIOLENCE AND SUSPENSE IN FILMS OF ALFRED HITCHCOCK: Summary and Key

Words:

This paper deals with the work of a British film director Alfred Hitchcock, and how violence and suspense in his films were presented and changed through the course of his career. The body is divided into six sections, analysing the development of depicting violence and how he became the master of suspense, while the main focus is on four films – *Rear Window* (1954), *Vertigo* (1958), *Psycho* (1960), and *The Birds* (1963), which are thoroughly analysed. The rest of the sections connect these four films through the main motifs.

Key words: Alfred Hitchcock, violence, suspense, *Rear Window*, *Vertigo*, *Psycho*, *The Birds*, obsession, voyeurism, tension, control, murder, gaze, fatal attraction

NASILJE I NAPETOST U FILMOVIMA ALFREDA HITCHCOCKA: Sažetak i ključne riječi:

Ovaj rad se bavi karijerom britanskog filmskog redatelja Alfreda Hitchcocka te kako su nasilje i napetost prikazani u njegovim filmovima i kako su se mijenjali tijekom njegove karijere. Rad je strukturiran u šest dijelova koji analiziraju razvoj prikazivanja nasilja i kako je postao stručnjak u stvaranju filmske napetosti, dok je glavni fokus na četiri filma – *Prozor u dvorište* (1954), *Vrtoglavica* (1958), *Psiho* (1960) i *Ptice* (1963), koji su detaljno analizirani. Ostali dijelovi povezuju ova četiri filma kroz glavne motive koji se pojavljuju u njima.

Ključne riječi: Alfred Hitchcock, nasilje, neizvjesnost, *Prozor u dvorište*, *Vrtoglavica*, *Psiho*, *Ptice*, opsesija, voajerizam, napetost, kontrola, ubojstvo, pogled, fatalna privlačnost