

Narrative Suspense in Edgar Allan Poe and Alfred Hitchcock

Elaine Indrusiak
(Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Brasil)

Abstract This article explores the construction of narrative suspense in Edgar Allan Poe's and Alfred Hitchcock's works. Central to their creations is a dual narrative structure that builds tension by articulating two stories in one. Narratological analyses of Poe's tales and of Hitchcock's thrillers indicate that their suspense does not stem from gothic *topoi*, but from plots skilfully wrought to manipulate the readers/viewers' attention. The first part of the article introduces the concept of narrative suspense. Next, structural principles defended by Poe and Hitchcock are presented. The last two parts discuss narrative techniques in the works by both authors. Given the authors' influence within their respective media, the analysis has implications for studies of the short story and of the suspense thriller as a narrative genre.

Summary 1 Double Articulation: the Core of the Short Story and of Narrative Suspense. – 2 Poe and Hitchcock: Masters of Reader/Viewer Manipulation. – 3 Narrative Suspense in Poe's Gothic Stories. – 4 Hitchcock's Classic and Contemporary Narrative Suspense. – 5 Conclusions.

Keywords Edgar Allan Poe. Alfred Hitchcock. Narrative suspense. Short story. Gothic stories.

1 Double Articulation: the Core of the Short Story and of Narrative Suspense

As with most mental states, suspense is difficult to define, being usually associated to uncertainty, expectation, apprehension and anxiety. The etymological meaning of the word points to interruption, to the idea of 'being suspended'; therefore the art of suspenseful storytelling demands more than mysteries that play solely on people's curiosity – it requires a skilful manipulation of the reader/viewer for the arousal of lingering sensations and impressions. Alfred Hitchcock has long been appointed 'master of the suspense', and affinities between his work and Edgar Allan Poe's tales have fed numerous critical commentaries and scholarly works of varying depths and lengths.¹ Poe and Hitchcock are at the centre of any contem-

1 For a thorough list of studies on the Poe/Hitchcock connection, see Perry 1996 and Perry 2003.

porary conception of the suspense, but while much attention has been paid to themes and imagery favoured by both artists, not much has been explored in terms of formal and structural characteristics that allow for 'suspension' to occur in their artworks. As detective Dupin demonstrates in *The Purloined Letter*,² one might say that the obviousness of the common contents in these celebrated artists' works might have clouded one's perception of narrative devices employed by both authors in creating suspense, one of the three narrative universals appointed by Meir Sternberg (1992). Drawing from Poe's and Hitchcock's texts, I intend to demonstrate the recurrence of a dual narrative structure in some of their works, one that is at the core of what I call 'narrative suspense', endorsing Ricardo Piglia's rationale in his "Theses on the Short Story" (2011).

In his essay, Piglia (63) proposes that a short story always tells two stories. Depending on the balance the author keeps between these two narrative lines and the tension it generates, tales fall into one of two categories, classic or contemporary short stories. Poe's formula sets the model for classic short stories: 'Story One' hides 'Story Two', which is told through allusions, fragments and ellipsis; when Story Two is finally revealed, the reader is surprised. The modern or contemporary short story, however, brings the two narrative lines to the fore without ever resolving the tension between them. Certainly, layers of significance may be found in all types of artistic texts, but these two narrative levels proposed by Piglia should not be mistaken for allegorical or metaphorical content; the enigma is simply a story told in a mysterious way. Therefore,

[t]he strategy of the tale is placed at the service of that coded narration. How to tell a story while another is being told? This question synthesizes the technical problems of the short story. Second thesis: the secret story is the key to the form of the short story [...]. The classic short story à la Poe told a story while announcing that there was another; the modern short story tells two stories as if they were one. Hemingway's 'iceberg theory' is the first synthesis of that process of transformation: the most important thing is never recounted. The secret story is constructed out of what is not said, out of implication and allusion. (64-5)

Though only an investigative tour de force would allow us to determine the applicability of Piglia's theses to the whole genre of literary short stories, his exemplification renders the theses plausible and draws attention to a narrative structure recurrently implemented by the writers he analyses. Moreover, when it comes to Poe's case, not only do Piglia's theses shed

2 All references to works by Poe are taken from G.R. Thompson's 2004 edition of *The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe* (Poe 2004).

light on the writer's fictional texts, but they also complement his highly influential critical work, the foundation of the 'theory of the effect', a collection of principles drawn from his essay *The Philosophy of Composition*, published in 1846, and from some of his literary reviews. According to Charles May, though the short story has considerably evolved due to contributions from Piglia's 'modern' writers and their followers, Poe's influence cannot be overestimated, because

[s]ince no theory of the short prose tale had been developed when Poe was writing, he borrowed theoretical ideas from those genres that did possess a critical history, such as drama and poetry, and applied them to the gothic tale form that was popular during his time. The following generic elements are the most important ones Poe made use of: (1) the conventionalized and ritualized structure of the drama; (2) the metaphoric and self-contained unity of the lyric poem; (3) the technique of verisimilitude of the eighteenth-century novel; (4) the point of view and unifying tone of the eighteenth-century essay; and (5) the spiritual undercurrent and projective technique of the old romance and the gothic story. When you add to these the notion of prose assuming the spatial form of painting, which Poe suggested in the 1842 Hawthorne review, you have the basis for a new generic form. (May 1994, 14)

Given Poe's relevance to the Western tradition of short stories, his use of narrative suspense, i.e. the twofold narrative structure identified by Piglia, may have influenced countless writers both directly and indirectly, since literary texts are known to establish intertextual relations regardless of authorial intention. Likewise, many storytellers who favour other genres or other media may have been equally inspired by Poe, whether by reading his own work or those by authors who have incorporated his narrative techniques. As I intend to demonstrate in what follows, Hitchcock is one of such cases.

2 Poe and Hitchcock: Masters of Reader/Viewer Manipulation

Tracing influences does not necessarily call for an inspection of one's library, but when a filmmaker of the early days of cinema confesses to having been an avid reader of, and to having been deeply touched by a writer's biography and fictional work, the likelihood of direct influence grows exponentially. Even though Alfred Hitchcock never adapted a text by Poe, affinities between their works were pointed out in some of the earliest critical accounts to the filmmaker's oeuvre. Hitchcock himself acknowledged the similarities between his work and Poe's. Yet, despite confessing his admiration for the writer's works, in the essay *Why I'm Afraid of the*

Dark he downplays the influence appointed by critics on the grounds that Poe was a Romantic *poète maudit*, while he was a contemporary commercial filmmaker. Anyone vaguely familiarised with intermedia studies and with the romantic undertones of contemporary culture will soon realise how unsubstantial Hitchcock's argumentation was.

Hitchcock's incapacity to perceive the extent and depth of Poe's influence might be either a classic symptom of "anxiety of influence" (Bloom 1973) or a natural consequence of readings focused on what Poe wrote *about* rather than on *how* he did it. If Hitchcock's knowledge of Poe's work was restricted to his fiction, then the limitation is quite understandable; had he read Poe's critical works, however, he would have found great affinities with his own ideas. In his celebrated interview to François Truffaut, Hitchcock stated:

You know that the public always likes to be one jump ahead of the story; they like to feel they know what's coming next. So you deliberately play upon this fact to control their thoughts. (Truffaut 1985, 269)

In 1842, however, Poe had already defended that same degree of authorial control in his "Review of Twice-Told Tales and Mosses from an Old Manse":

In the brief tale [...] the author is enabled to carry out his full design without interruption. During the hour of perusal, the soul of the reader is at the writer's control. (Poe 2004, 692)

Unlike Hitchcock, Poe did not have a Truffaut to elicit and praise his skills in storytelling and reader manipulation. Appreciated by French critics for his symbolism and popular among worldwide fans of horror stories, Poe's recognition has hardly been that of a narrative genius. Despite recent efforts by scholars such as Benfey (1993), Peeples (2002) and Zimmerman (2005) in proposing thorough form and structure-oriented readings of Poe's fictional prose, for several reasons (see Peeples 2004, ch. 3) it seems it will take a while to undo the damages of so many reviews and studies that have reinforced Aldous Huxley's opinion that

[t]he substance of Poe is refined; it is his form that is vulgar. He is, as it were, one of Nature's Gentlemen, unhappily cursed with incorrigible bad taste. To the most sensitive and high-souled man in the world we should find it hard to forgive, shall we say, the wearing of a diamond ring on every finger. Poe does the equivalent of this in his poetry; we notice the solicism and shudder [...]. It is when Poe tries to make it too poetical that his poetry takes on its peculiar tinge of badness. (quoted in Peeples 2004, 64)

In the essay *From Poe to Valéry*, T.S. Eliot, another form-oriented and highly demanding critic, seems to agree with Huxley. Yet, by examining

Poe's works through the eyes of his French enthusiasts, Eliot notices a much more elaborate poetics emerge not only from Poe's poems, but also from his prose fiction and criticism, concluding that *The Philosophy of Composition* "has not been taken so seriously as it deserves" (Eliot 1949, 333). Though Eliot states that Poe's most famous essay delineates a method for poetic creation that, if properly applied, should have resulted in a far more sophisticated product than *The Raven* (which the author of *The Waste Land* does not regard as a "thoroughly good job", 331), he still believes the text to be a gateway to the understanding not only of Poe's principles and techniques, but also of those poets who may have perfected them under his influence. After all,

[n]o poet, when he writes his own art poétique, should hope to do much more than explain, rationalise, defend or prepare the way for his own practice: that is, for writing his own kind of poetry. He may think that he is establishing laws for all poetry; but what he has to say that is worth saying has its immediate relation to the way in which he himself writes or wants to write: though it may well be equally valid to his immediate juniors, and extremely helpful to them. We are only safe in finding, in his writing about poetry, principles valid for any poetry, so long as we check what he says by the kind of poetry he writes. (Eliot 1949, 333-4)

It is interesting to note that, though he dislikes Poe's literary accomplishments, Eliot is aware of the incomplete reading English-speaking critics had of his oeuvre. Richard Wilbur, on the other hand, not only celebrates Poe's style, but urges for a closer reading of his prose fiction, a significant shift from previous form-oriented criticism, which favoured Poe's poetry. Without disputing over some of the difficulties posed by Poe's "fruitcake style", Wilbur states that

[w]e must give Poe the trustful attention that we're used to giving John Donne - we were all told in school to read John Donne very carefully. Nobody said that we should do that with Poe. I think that if he's read word by word, he turns out, at his best, to be a very rich and intentional writer. (Wilbur, Cantalupo 2003, 79)

Perhaps the best way to learn how to read Poe more carefully is to follow Eliot's advice and go back to *The Philosophy of Composition* and Poe's other influential critical texts. Being an analysis of the methodic creation of a poem, *The Philosophy of Composition* does not offer much guidance in terms of narrative construction to a prospective short story writer. Apart from defending brevity at all costs as well as a careful choice of words that mean and sound in accordance with a pre-designed final effect, the text does not explore many structural aspects, such as narrative voice, focalisa-

tion, order of events and manipulation of time. However, if we apply Poe's defence of and search for *le mot juste* to some of his best accomplishments in fictional prose, we may find not only mathematically designed plots, but the repetition of narrative devices and structures. In other words, a careful analysis of Poe's oeuvre points to a narrative formula, and before deeming this statement as derogatory, one should keep in mind that not all recipes are simple and easy to follow. Besides, as DeLoy Simper puts it, Poe's critical writing provides solid "argument for conscious and planned artistry" (1975, 228) as well as theoretical principles that suggest parallels with Hitchcock's method of film-making.

It is no secret that many of Poe's tales and poems revolve around a somewhat limited number of themes and motifs found in *The Raven* and appointed by the poet as the most suitable to bring about the effect of "intense and pure elevation of the soul" (Poe 2004, 678). It is also a well-known fact that he rewrote many of his short stories, publishing alternative versions of the same texts in different magazines. Though one might speculate that such alterations and republishing of previous stories were made so as to lessen the poet's dire financial situation, it is quite likely that the prolific writer and editor would obsessively revise his work in order to attain that which Simper named "the well-wrought effect" (1975, 226). That same obsessive attitude may be found behind Hitchcock's remake of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934, 1955), as well as in his frequent revisiting themes, motifs and narrative constructions of earlier films as a means to perfect and maximise the effect of his narratives on the public. Again, allusions to this common feature may be found in many passages of both artists' critical works. Hitchcock, for instance, claimed to be

against virtuosity for its own sake. Technique should enrich the action. One doesn't set the camera at a certain angle just because the cameraman happens to be enthusiastic about that spot. The only thing that matters is whether the installation of the camera at a given angle is going to give the scene its maximum impact. The beauty of image and movement, the rhythm and the effects - everything must be subordinated to the purpose [...]. My main satisfaction is that the film had an effect on the audiences, and I consider that very important. I don't care about the subject matter; I don't care about the acting; but I do care about the pieces of film and the photography and the sound track and all of the technical ingredients that made the audience scream. I feel it's tremendously satisfying for us to be able to use the cinematic art to achieve something of a mass emotion. (Truffaut 1985, 103 and 282)

Such statements verge on uncanniness when compared to Poe's own synthesis of a theory of the effect:

A skillful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents – he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tend not to the outbrining of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. And by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction. The idea of the tale has been presented unblemished, because undisturbed; and this is an end unattainable by the novel. (Poe 2004, 647)

Hitchcock's identification with Poe's ideas was such that even in pondering about the affinities between films and literature, he believed the short story to be the genre most akin to his cinema, a revelation made back in 1941 in an interview to Beth Twigg:

To my mind the nearest parallel to the feature motion picture as an art form is neither theater nor the novel but the short story. In a play there are intermissions. There are lapses of minutes to weeks in the reading of a novel. But short stories and films are taken in all at one sitting. There are no breaks to give the audience digestion time. The plot in both cases must spin directly to a climax, and speed is essential to directness. Implicit, indeed. So the short story and the screen play have unity and speed in common, and one thing more – each, in my opinion, requires a twist ending. (Twigg 2015, 62)

Therefore, Hitchcock's own words indicate his adherence to a 'cinematic theory of the effect'. Moreover, as I will demonstrate, his concept of suspense, the very foundation of his work, is aligned to Meir Sternberg's functional approach and mirrors Poe's narrative techniques, particularly the dual narrative structure identified by Piglia.

3 Narrative Suspense in Poe's Gothic Stories

Before moving into a more detailed account of Poe's narrative techniques, it should be noted that he did not make use of narrative suspense in all of his tales, since his oeuvre includes a variety of texts with different artistic goals. In fact, though different groupings have been proposed as a means to organise his texts, even a cursory analysis of his diverse fictional prose indicates three broad categories he explored with different stylistic re-

sources and for different purposes: the tales of ratiocination, founders of detective literature; those of allegory and satire, usually aimed at social and literary criticism; and those generally regarded as the gothic tales. Of course, as most categories in literary studies, these are not clear-cut, hence 'contaminations' occur. Still, I believe this classification may help us identify more accurately which part of Poe's huge and diverse body of work deeply influenced Hitchcock's filmmaking. The first category is filled by the Dupin narratives and a few other stories revolving around puzzle or mystery solving, such as *The Gold-Bug*. The second comprises some of Poe's less popular pieces today, for our detachment from the context to which they wittingly point considerably impairs interpretation; examples of these would be *Loss of Breath*, *The Man That Was Used Up* and *King Pest*. However, irony being a marked trait of Poe's writing, hints of satire and allegories are often found in stories of the other two groups. Finally, the third category brings some of Poe's most popular works; it is precisely the one that has left its marks not only on Hitchcock's cinema, but in most Western short story writers. It is also in this group that we find the tales in which Poe most proficiently exercised the unity of effect defended in his own critical texts and the dual narrative structure identified by Piglia. Stories such as *The Black Cat*, *The Tell-Tale Heart*, *The Fall of the House of Usher* and *Ligeia* are grouped in this third category. These tales are usually called suspenseful, and the fact that they share gothic themes and atmosphere suggests that the appellation is related to these common traits.

However, what I intend to point out is precisely the fact that much of what has been said about Poe and about suspense stories is based on the fallacy that such texts are suspenseful *because* they play on readers' fears and superstitions. In fact, it is the narrative structure that creates tension, regardless of the nature of the events. This fallacy arises from the fact that the word 'suspense' does not belong exclusively to the field of narrative studies. It is often used as a near synonym to mystery, thriller and horror, especially in film categorization. Part of this misnaming may be attributed to the indeterminacy of the state of mind associated to suspense, as previously referred. In addition to that, the cultural industry often exploits this near synonymy in marketing works that manipulate audiences' curiosity, fears, taboos and superstitions, a practice that further blurs lines between these (possibly) separate genres.

In order to avoid such imprecision, I propose to use the phrase 'narrative suspense' that stresses the intrinsically structural nature of Poe's and Hitchcock's take on the genre. Similarly, Meir Sternberg (1992) raises 'suspense' to the category of a narrative universal, while differentiating it from surprise and curiosity, the other two master roles of narrative texts, according to his functional theory of narrative. Certainly, choices of theme may add tension to suspense narratives, but anyone who has already come across a poorly built horror story knows that the impact of a text depends

more on *how* the story is told than on *what* it tells. The fact that macabre predicaments also appear in some of Poe's allegorical tales is an indication that theme alone does not build suspense. As Poe points out in *The Philosophy of Composition*, tone is of paramount importance in building an effect; even ordinary incidents may be used to build extraordinary effects if the proper tone is applied. Conversely, the most gruesome incidents may be rendered as casual and amusing if told in a tongue-in-cheek tone, an exercise repeatedly made by Hitchcock and his collaborators in the TV series *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* and in the theatrical trailers of his feature films, for example. Unlike poems, however, short stories and films establish their tones by means of structural features other than those appointed by Poe as crucial to the effect in *The Raven*. Therefore, in attempting to investigate how suspense is created in narratives, narratological analyses may help reveal the strategies used to create the indispensable tense tone as well as to manipulate reader/viewer response.

As previously mentioned, a closer reading of Poe's works reveals recurrent narrative traits, particularly in the gothic tales. In his analysis of *The Cask of Amontillado*, James Phelan (2007) emphasises the rhetorical nature of Poe's narrative, a trait found all over his oeuvre. Poe's narrators are textbook examples of unreliability ranging from fallibility to outright untrustworthiness (on 'unreliability' see Olson 2003). In their "purposive communicative acts" these narrators tell or write down events their excited minds claim to recollect as having involved them, often addressing an external narratee in attempts to prove their sanity, and make sense of puzzling incidents or "unburden their tormented souls" (Phelan 2007, 203). Being memories, these stories are mostly told in homodiegetic analepses and with a skilful manipulation of time that subtly switches between acceleration and deceleration, and forces the reader to focus on those events that the narrator's partial or biased judgment deems most relevant but that may blur, cloud or distort an otherwise perfectly logical and banal sequence of events, a fact at times pointed out or hinted at by the narrators themselves:

Hereafter, perhaps, some intellect may be found which will reduce my phantasm to the common-place — some intellect more calm, more logical, and far less excitable than my own, which will perceive, in the circumstances I detail with awe, nothing more than an ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects. (Poe 2004, 349)

Associated to the use of gothic *topoi* that play on people's superstitions and fears, the narrative construction translates a feverish mind's take on reality. Surely, the events in *The Black Cat* would still sound fantastic if the cats in the story were white, but external focalisation would probably convert the seemingly supernatural story into a tragic yet all too plausible

account of a man who tortures all those who love him (and himself) once he realises he has become corrupt and degraded, i.e. a person who does not deserve love and should be severely punished (which will not happen unless his crimes go beyond simply torturing and killing *cats*). Therefore, it is the narrative structure of the tale, particularly its fixed focalisation, that creates tension and puzzles readers, not the nature of the events told. The effect obtained during “the hour of perusal”, then, is a crescendo of tension over perfectly ordinary occurrences, not the sudden revelation of something fantastic or supernatural, a narrative construction that matches Hitchcock’s amusing yet accurate definition of suspense:

There is a distinct difference between ‘suspense’ and ‘surprise’, and yet many pictures continually confuse the two. I’ll explain what I mean. We are now having a very innocent little chat. Let us suppose that there is a bomb underneath this table between us. Nothing happens, and then all of a sudden, “Boom!” There is an explosion. The public is *surprised*, but prior to this surprise, it has seen an absolutely ordinary scene, of no special consequence. Now, let us take a *suspense* situation. The bomb is underneath the table and the public *knows* it, probably because they have seen the anarchist place it there. The public is *aware* that the bomb is going to explode at one o’clock and there is a clock in the decor. The public can see that it is a quarter to one. In these conditions this same innocuous conversation becomes fascinating because the public is participating in the scene. The audience is longing to warn the characters on the screen: “You shouldn’t be talking about such trivial matters. There’s a bomb beneath you and it’s about to explode!” In the first case we have given the public fifteen seconds of *surprise* at the moment of the explosion. In the second we have provided them with fifteen minutes of *suspense*. (Truffaut 1985, 73; italics in the original)

It seems quite clear, then, that the two masters of narrative manipulation shared the same ideas concerning the nature of suspense and how to obtain it: you tell one story while another is being told, and you manipulate your reader/viewer by alternating facts from those two story lines and by playing with narrative time, expanding unimportant passages to build tension and accelerating those events that, given proper attention, might reveal too much of the second story before it is time to bring it up. Therefore, the core of the short story as proposed by Piglia lays the foundation for the narrative suspense practiced by Poe and Hitchcock.

According to Louise Kaplan (1993, 46), Poe’s fiction is highly deceptive, for the writer believed that imaginative literature worthy of that name hides its deepest meaning in an *undercurrent*. As a result, the text itself becomes a puzzle to be assembled by the initiated reader. At surface level, the narrator controls the reader’s focus, imposes his point of view and

suggests cause-effect relationships between events that may seem to be simple coincidences. He also reports his feelings and impressions as facts, which are rarely counter-balanced by those of other characters and thus become misleading forewarnings. In short, he manipulates the reader into acknowledging the extraordinary nature of those events told by his traumatised, deranged or intoxicated mind. At a deeper level, however, clues indicate another story line running parallel, one that often contradicts the narrator's impressions, providing a far more rational and plausible view of the events narrated. By pulling this secondary thread, these clues make emerge a completely different understanding of the tale. Since there are no switches in the narrative voice, the clues are provided by the narrators themselves, either unintentionally – such as in the exacerbated tone of some passages, which result slightly ludicrous, therefore unbelievable – or in their honest attempt to grasp reality beyond their altered mental states, such as in occasional and brief switches in focalisation to comment on other character's actions and reactions.

As in *The Black Cat*, also the narrator of *The Tell-Tale Heart* gives us clues about his motives for committing his crime: he says he is not mad but admits he has a disease that has sharpened his senses, especially hearing; he claims to *know* what the old man feels when awoken by noises, he knows his victim hears the death watches inside the walls, and, above all, he loves the old man but cannot stand the sight of his blind eye. Greta Olson argues that the paradoxical nature of the events in the story forces the reader to choose “the therapeutic strategy of reading against the grain” (Olson 2003, 103) by attributing mental instability and a pathological untrustworthiness to the source of the narration. Yet why would readers be so quick to judge this narrator? Why would they simply disregard, in the very first paragraph of the text, the narrator's claim to sanity? Perhaps most readers would do so simply because this is a Poe story of the gothic type, one that is usually accompanied by a paratext that points to the supernatural, the abnormal and the gruesome.

However, Poe's masterful use of the dual narrative structure constantly poses an invitation to decode or decipher a peculiar sequence of events (Benfey 1993, 27). Everything that seems obvious or clear in his writings should be taken with a grain of salt. That which is easily grasped in his tales constitutes what Piglia names “story one” and it usually comprises the supernatural, fantastic and horrid elements. But the experienced Poe reader accepts the challenge to assemble the puzzle, to find ‘story two’ in the interstices of the conventional gothic story. In so doing, this detective-reader cannot afford to be quick in assessing the narrator's (un)reliability. It is quite revealing what a reader finds in Poe once s/he neutralises the paratext and all the assumptions one tends to project on tales said to be only gothic. In the case of *The Tell-Tale Heart*, by giving the narrator the benefit of the doubt, a whole new and far more reasonable story emerges.

Would it not be plausible that, like the old man, the narrator also has had his hearing sharpened by increasing visual impairment, and the sight of his friend's condition both saddens and scares him, for it foreshadows his own future, making him *nervous*, as he claims to have been? Under these circumstances, the growing noise of the beetles inside the walls becomes unbearable, not only for their intensity but for the association the narrator has made with his terrible crime. Therefore madness may not be the cause of the crime, but it may turn out to be its consequence.

Plausible as it may be, this is just another possible reading of the short story, one that certainly does not override the (many) previous and equally reasonable ones, such as Alber, Iversen, Nielsen, and Richardson's revealing 'unnatural' approach (2010). So much dissent about a seemingly simple tale only reinforces Piglia's theses, for no one questions what the narrator tells at surface level, as fantastic as that may be, nor there seems to be much variance in the interpretations of this 'story one'. What generates so much curiosity and probing is that which is not clearly stated, but which is implied and alluded to throughout the narrative by several scattered clues that can only be detected in the attentive reading Wilbur (2003) urges for. These clues are pieces of a puzzle that, once assembled, reconfigures the whole text or, as Hemingway (1971) would put it, reveals the actual size of the iceberg.

4 Hitchcock's Classic and Contemporary Narrative Suspense

Added to the catalogue of similarities between Poe's and Hitchcock's works and opinions, the British director's cinema relies heavily on puzzles, a fact that earned him some bad reviews before his reputation as an auteur was established.³ As Thomas Leitch (1991) demonstrates, Hitchcock's games were not only frequent but also diverse, ranging from 'find the director' and other uses of his own filmic persona to a complex and striking deconstruction of generic conventions. As in most good tricks, there is more than meets the eye behind those gimmicks. A close reading of Hitchcock's films reveals some of these games to be strategies at the service of narrative suspense, in other words, the same dual narrative structure Piglia finds at the core of the short story. In addition to that, a diachronic perspective allows us to notice the evolution of the director's mastery over this technique. A skilled adapter, Hitchcock chose to shift from theatrical sources to prose fiction quite early in his career (Leitch 2011, 13). This shift from dramatic to narrative sources corresponds to the director's identification

3 It is an interesting coincidence that both Poe and Hitchcock had to be acclaimed by French critics and artists to earn recognition in America.

with the thriller as his signature genre, a defining moment for his authorial voice and his narrative style. *The Lodger* (1927) has been regarded by critics and by Hitchcock himself as the first truly Hitchcockian film. Though it brings in many of the themes the director would recurrently explore later in his career, it is in narrative technique that it really innovates. According to William Rothman (2012, 7), *The Lodger* establishes Hitchcock's identity both thematically and stylistically with ingenious and intricate uses of *découpage*, the trademark of his filmic writing. Already in this early silent masterpiece Hitchcock exercises his skills in narrative suspense and public manipulation:

The Lodger is the model for the self-conscious Hitchcock narrative that acknowledges its own indirectness and its practice of withholding information. In it, the author's relationship with the viewers comes to the fore. The film's story about its lodger is also a story about the camera; the camera's presentation of the lodger is also its presentation of itself. [...] *The Lodger* is also not a conventional detective story. We cannot glean the lodger's secret by careful attention to clues strewn about the narrative. The author has planted clues to the lodger's mysterious nature, but they do not allow us to deduce his story; all they reveal is how well Hitchcock keeps a secret. (Rothman 2012, 17)

Like Poe's narrators, Hitchcock's camera calls attention to itself, to its points of view and, at times, to its own unreliability, as in the famous 'false flashback' scene in *Stage Fright*. This "double dealing game", as David Richter puts it (2005), was received as a cheat by the film's original audience, but it seems to have been domesticated by contemporary viewers, who seem to have grown accustomed to deceitful narratives. The director's camera-narrator tells us where and when to direct our gaze, but its motivations in so doing are never quite explicit. By presuming that consciously made narrative options are simply 'natural' ways of telling a story, viewers often miss the second story line the author keeps subtly pointing to. In *Rear Window*, for example, the busybody camera gives us a glimpse of the neighbourhood and then pans over Jefferies's apartment to tell us what is happening *in* there. It is only after Jeff is awake, fearful of the inevitable next steps of his love life, that the camera sympathises with his point of view, focusing on the bored and eventually tragic married life of the Thorwalds rather than on beautiful Miss Torso, a much more plausible object of voyeuristic observation not only for her physical attributes, but also for the position of her windows, right across from Jefferies's own. The fact that the camera can and does move outside the apartment yet chooses to remain inside, next to Jefferies, for most of the film is clear indication that it has another agenda, one that goes beyond solving the mystery around Mrs. Thorwald. Its motivations become clear

when it decides to close the narrative by showing us a very comfortable Lisa Fremont switch her reading from *Beyond the High Himalayas* to a *Harper's Bazaar* issue while Jefferies sleeps, a perfect visual synthesis of the development she had throughout the story right before Jefferies's sceptical eyes. It is this insistence of the camera that remains close to the events of its interest, rather than following Thorwald and solving the murder case once and for all, that significantly enhances the tension between the two stories and creates suspense out of what would otherwise be a much simpler mystery film.

The same pattern may be observed in many other Hitchcock's films, with varying degrees of success. Like *The Lodger* and *Rear Window*, *The Wrong Man*, *Psycho*, *The Birds* and *Vertigo* also deal with the technical difficulties of telling two stories in one, many times resorting to a filmic equivalent to Poe's fixed focalisation, which results in a biased or partial account of events. However, not all of Hitchcock's suspense films display Poe's 'classic' formula. *The Birds*, for example, follows the same narrative scheme identified by Piglia in contemporary short stories, in which the two stories are told simultaneously and the tension between them remains unresolved. Though Hitchcock did not explicitly address this aspect of a dual narrative creating suspense, in his discussions about filmmaking, he certainly hinted at it when he defended the use of the so-called 'MacGuffin', a narrative gimmick employed to divert the viewer's attention from the development of the second story line:

when he told me how idiotic he had thought our gimmick was, I answered, "Well, all it goes to show is that you were wrong to attach any importance to the MacGuffin. *Notorious* was simply the story of a man in love with a girl who, in the course of her official duties, had to go to bed with another man and even had to marry him. That's the story". (Truffaut 1985, 168-9)

In *The Birds*, the MacGuffin is raised to the status of protagonist, lending its name to the film. However, despite the title, that which the narrator keeps pointing to is not the story of the birds and why they became aggressive; it is the story of a woman who falls in love with a man and manages not only to win his heart, but also that of his jealous mother under extraordinary circumstances. As in Poe, Hitchcock's 'second stories' are seldom quite as thrilling as the superficial ones (how can reality compete with fancy?). Yet, according to Julio Cortázar, "even a stone is interesting when it is the object of a Henry James or a Franz Kafka" (1993, 152) - and of a Poe and a Hitchcock, I would add. Numerous interpretations have been proposed to both the *The Birds* and "the Birds", as stated by the title of Morris's article (2000), and, like those different readings of Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*, many of them are appropriate. Unlike Poe's tale, however,

the enigma of the film does not lie in the second story, but in the first one, the story at surface level and blatantly referred to in the title, but never fully explained or concluded. With a nightmarish yet at times humorous tone, Hitchcock creates gripping suspense out of an unlikely situation whose absurdity is remarked by the very characters in the story and gets away with a jaw-dropping open ending after having bolted viewers to their seats for over two minutes of ‘ristle-tee, rostle-tee, now, now, now’, a highly effective adaptation of Poe’s manipulation of narrative time. Hitchcock’s boldness in allowing the open ending of his film indicates that he departs from Poe’s classic style of narrative suspense to experiment with more modern and subtle narrative constructions in which tension is built and never released with a surprising denouement. Though one might believe this to be a sign of the director’s maturity as a storyteller, the culmination of a long career, his interview to Truffaut reveals that the desire for a plot with unreleased tension had been in his head ever since the making of *The Lodger*:

in a story of this kind I might have liked him to go off in the night, so that we would never really know for sure. But with the hero played by a big star, one can’t do that. You have to clearly spell it out in big letters: “He is innocent”. (Truffaut 1985, 43)

It is reasonable to conclude, then, that the forty-year span between Hitchcock’s first wishes for open-endedness and its accomplishment do not stand for a switch in narrative orientation. It was the time it took him to become independent as director and producer of his own projects, therefore free to bend and play with Hollywood conventions. However, despite this freedom, Hitchcock, like Poe, always had the audience in mind, so his experimentalism was often curbed by a certain didacticism that ensured no viewers would be left behind in following his narratives. Though *The Birds* stands out among the director’s films as his most overt violation of this general rule, the didactic touch may be found in his most celebrated masterpiece, *Psycho* (1960), where an ‘ex-machina’ psychiatrist explains Norman Bates’s pathology in layman’s terms. In the light of Piglia’s theses, the function of the psychiatrist was to make sure the second story would be properly understood by audiences that, back in 1960, were not as used as we are to such abrupt, surprising and disturbing audiovisual revelations of Poesque doppelgangers. It should be noted, though, that this bit of didacticism, soothing as it may be to the average movie-goer, might be another double-edged Hitchcockian trick. As Rothman puts it,

[i]n a Hitchcock film it is always a mistake, however, to assume the veracity of a psychiatrist’s explanation. At the end of *Psycho*, for example, one assumes at one’s peril that the psychiatrist gets it right, that it really

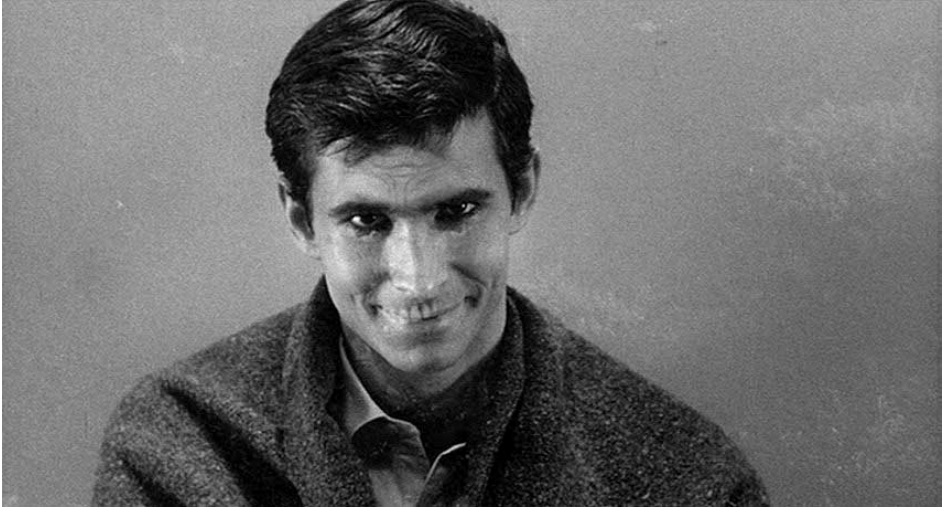


Figure 1. Norman and Mother superimposed in *Psycho*. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. © Universal Pictures, USA, 1960

is 'Mother', not Norman, who has filled him in on the situation; thus, we err if we simply take for granted that it is 'Mother' who is casting that villainous grin directly to the camera. (Rothman 2014, 125)

After all, why would a director so strongly committed to visual storytelling, a champion of formalist montage who reluctantly added sound to his films out of circumstantial impositions, append such an awkward scene in which the previous events, all masterfully *shown*, are explained verbally? If clarification is needed, why did he not provide it visually through a flashback sequence? Such a verbal supplement is perplexing in *Psycho*, which is a film completely controlled by Hitchcock, who would not have to make concessions to studio bureaucrats of the kind of the 'collage ending' added to *The Wrong Man* that (artificially) attenuates the tragedy of its protagonists, the Balestreros.⁴ Yet, it is precisely Hitchcock's belief in the supremacy of the visual over the auditive in film narratives that suggests that behind the psychiatrist's verbal explanation there may be a totally different story, one that will not be told verbally, but which is definitely hinted at by the superimposition of Anthony Perkins' disturbing smile and 'Mother's' image.

⁴ Donald Spoto (1992, 257) states that the information that Rose Balestrero recovered after two years in the sanatorium and that the family moved to Florida, where they lived 'happily ever after' was false and was imposed on Hitchcock to attenuate the tragic ending, unbecoming in a commercial film. Hitchcock is said to have vehemently objected this interference, but to no avail.

The impact of the visual image (fig. 1) undoes the reassuring tone of the medical explanation and of 'Mother's' statement that she "couldn't hurt a fly". The dissociation between visual and auditive tracks, a highly effective and clever trick used by Hitchcock in his very first 'talkie', *Blackmail* (1929) and perfected along his career, mirrors the dual narrative structure implemented to conceal the story of Bates's double personality, generating tension, a disquieting effect that lingers beyond the denouement. Like Poe's description of Ligeia, Hitchcock's visual account seems at odds with what is being told verbally, signalling to the attentive viewer that the detailed and realistic portrait hides much more than meets the eye.

5 Conclusions

Poe's and Hitchcock's systematic use of narrative suspense does not account for a new genre; it is only a strategy for building tense, twofold narrative structures. Though both authors perfected this strategy in stories of scary and mysterious nature, they also exercised it in works of much lighter tone, texts that do not address superstitious, unnatural or disturbing themes and images, demonstrating that narrative suspense neither depends on, nor derives from gothic *topoi*, but simply works beautifully when associated to them to instill fear and alarm. According to Ricardo Piglia, this strategy is at the core of the short story, both behind Poe's shocking and surprising denouements and Chekhov's impressionist fictional prose. Despite Hitchcock's attempts to downplay Poe's influence on his work, by building narrative suspense in his films, he approaches the structure of the short story and in so doing, approaches Poe. Similarly, narrative suspense in film is not restricted to Hitchcock's oeuvre. A list posted on the International Movie Database appointing "The best Hitchcockian movies not directed by Hitchcock" (2014)⁵ gives us clear indication that the British director's narrative style has become central to the thriller, as central as Poe is to short-story theory, criticism, and practice. Therefore, many so-called Hitchcockian films might be also viewed as Poesque, for their use of narrative suspense as a strategy to balance narrative complexity and puzzling entertainment, an effort deeply rooted in the rich tradition of the short story, regardless of the presence of gothic *topoi*.

5 URL <http://www.imdb.com/list/ls071418428/> (2019-02-20).

Bibliography

- Alber, Jan et al (2010). "Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology: Beyond Mimetic Models". *Narrative*, 18(2), 113-36. DOI <http://doi.org/10.1353/nar.0.0042>.
- Benfey, Christopher (1993). "Poe and the Unreadable: *The Black Cat* and *The Tell-Tale Heart*". Silverman, Kenneth (ed.), *New Essays on Poe's Major Tales*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 27-44.
- Bloom, Harold (1973). *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cortázar, Julio (1993). *Valise de Cronópio*. São Paulo: Perspectiva.
- Eliot, T.S. (1949). "From Poe to Valéry". *The Hudson Review*, 2(3), 327-42. DOI <http://doi.org/10.2307/3847788>.
- Hemingway, Ernest (1971). *Death in the Afternoon*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Hitchcock, Alfred (1997). "Why I'm Afraid of the Dark". Gotlieb, Sidney (ed.), *Hitchcock on Hitchcock: Selected Writings and Interviews*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 142-5.
- Kaplan, Louise (1993). "The Perverse Strategy in 'The Fall of the House of Usher'". Silverman, Kenneth (ed.), *New Essays on Poe's Major Tales*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 45-64.
- KyaBakwaasHai (2014). *Hitchcockian Movies: The Best Hitchcockian movies not Directed by Alfred Hitchcock*. URL <http://www.imdb.com/list/ls071418428/> (2018-09-10).
- Leitch, Thomas (1991). *Find the Director and Other Hitchcock Games*. Athens (USA): University of Georgia Press.
- Leitch, Thomas (2011). "From Stage to Screen". Barton Palmer, Robert; Boyd, David (eds), *Hitchcock at the Source: The Author as Adaptor*. Albany (NY): SUNY Press, 11-32.
- May, Charles (1994). *The New Short Story Theories*. Athens (US): Ohio University Press.
- Morris, Christopher (2000). "Reading the Birds and *The Birds*". *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 28(4), 250-8. URL <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43797000> (2019-02-20).
- Olson, Greta (2003). "Reconsidering Unreliability: Fallible and Untrustworthy Narrators". *Narrative*, 11(1), 93-109. URL <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2003.0001> (2019-02-20).
- Peeples, Scott (2004). *The Afterlife of Edgar Allan Poe*. Rochester (NY): Camden House.
- Peeples, Scott (2002). "Poe's 'Constructiveness' and *The Fall of the House of Usher*". Hayes, Kevin (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 178-90. DOI <https://doi.org/10.1017/ccol0521793262.012>.

- Perry, Dennis R. (1996). "Imps of the Perverse: Discovering the Poe/Hitchcock Connection". *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 24(4), 393-9. URL <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43796752> (2019-02-20).
- Perry, Dennis R. (2003). *Hitchcock and Poe: The Legacy of Delight and Terror*. Lanham: Scarecrow Press.
- Phelan, James (2007). "Rhetoric/ethics". Herman, David (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 203-16. DOI <https://doi.org/10.1017/ccol0521856965.014>.
- Piglia, Ricardo (2011). "Theses on the Short Story". *New Left Review*, 70. URL <https://newleftreview.org/II/70/ricardo-piglia-theses-on-the-short-story> (2019-02-20).
- Poe, Edgar Allan (2004). *The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*. Edited by G.R. Thompson. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.
- Richter, David (2005). "Your Cheatin' Art: Double Dealing in Cinematic Narrative". *Narrative*, 13(1), 11-28. DOI <http://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2005.0006>.
- Rothman, William (2012). *Hitchcock: The Murderous Gaze*. Albany (NY): SUNY Press.
- Rothman, William (2014). *Must We Kill the Thing We Love? Emersonian Perfectionism and the Films of Alfred Hitchcock*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Simper, DeLoy (1975). "Poe, Hitchcock, and the Well-Wrought Effect". *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 3(3), 226-31. URL <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43795622> (2019-02-20).
- Spoto, Donald (1992). *The Art of Alfred Hitchcock: Fifty Years of His Motion Pictures*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Sternberg, Meir (1992). "Telling in Time (II): Chronology, Teleology, Narrativity". *Poetics Today*, 13(3), 463-541. DOI <https://doi.org/10.2307/1772872>.
- Truffaut, François (1985). *Hitchcock*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Twiggar, Beth (2015). "Hitchcock, Master Maker of Mystery". Gotlieb, Sidney (ed.), *Hitchcock on Hitchcock: Selected Writings and Interviews*, vol. 2. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 61-5.
- Wilbur, Richard; Cantalupo, Barbara (2003). "Interview with Richard Wilbur". *The Edgar Allan Poe Review*, 4(1), 68-86. URL <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41506167> (2019-02-20).
- Zimmerman, Brett (2005). *Edgar Allan Poe: Rhetoric and Style*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Cited Films

Hitchcock, Alfred (dir.) [1960] (1999). *Psycho*. Universal Pictures.

- Hitchcock, Alfred (dir.) [1963] (2000). *The Birds*. Alfred J. Hitchcock Productions, Universal Studios Home Video.
- Hitchcock, Alfred (dir.) [1958] (2001). *Vertigo*. Alfred J. Hitchcock Productions, Universal Studios.
- Hitchcock, Alfred (dir.) [1955] (2002). *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. Paramount Pictures, Universal Pictures.
- Hitchcock, Alfred (dir.) [1950] (2004). *Stage Fright*. Warner Bros, Warner Home Video.
- Hitchcock, Alfred (dir.) [1956] (2004). *The Wrong Man*. Warner Bros., Warner Home Video.
- Hitchcock, Alfred (dir.) [1927] (2007). *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog*. Gainsborough Pictures / Carlyle Blackwell Productions, Mill Creek Entertainment.
- Hitchcock, Alfred (dir.) [1954] (2008). *Rear Window*. Paramount Pictures, Universal Pictures.
- Hitchcock, Alfred (dir.) [1929] (2014). *Blackmail*. British International Pictures; FilmRise.