

# **Shock, Reaction, Revelation**

**General Sequence of Shots in Horror Films**

# The Paradox of Pleasurable Fear

- The horror genre is unusual among film genres in that these films are designed to generate fear in the viewer.
- This is a strange thing, since most people try in real life to avoid situations that evoke fear, horror, terror, and other associated unpleasant emotions.
- Director Alfred Hitchcock: "millions of people every day pay huge sums of money and go to great hardship merely to enjoy fear"--an impulse that, he admits, "seems paradoxical" (Hanich, 2012, p. 3).
- Horror is the genre that exploits this paradox.
- Film scholar Julian Hanich calls this paradox "the paradox of pleasurable fear."

# Shock Cuts

- One way that horror does this is with editing techniques.
- Hanich says a general pattern is used in most horror films.
- The technique uses the shock (or smash) cut that generally consists of three types of shots (2012, p. 133-4):
  - The shock shot, which shows a scene that shocks the character.
  - The reaction shot shows the character's reaction.
  - The revelation shot, which reveals the cause of the character's reaction.

# Quick Cuts

- Horror films can also use other editing techniques in scenes in which characters react with fear.
- Quick-cutting is one such technique.
- The quick jumping back and forth does not give the view time to focus too closely on any particular image. Thus:
  - "The aesthetic intent of revealing only glimpses...is to frighten audiences by suggesting something more monstrous than is there" (Sipos, 2010, p. 203).
- Sipos also gives classic example of the infamous shower scene in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*. The suggested glimpses were so effective viewers imagined they actually saw a bloody murder with a kitchen knife but:
  - "Today we know that Psycho was relatively goreless" (p. 203).

## *The Birds, The Shining, and Twin Peaks*

- Now we will examine three clips of different films that use the techniques described.
- All three clips use shock cuts composed of three types of shots: shock shots, reaction shots, and revelation shots.
- Also, all three clips use quick cutting to heighten the effect of terror.
- The three examples are: *The Birds* by the Alfred Hitchcock, *The Shining* by Stanley Kubrick, and *Twin Peaks* by David Lynch. (The last one is a TV show, but it has the feel of a movie.)



## *The Birds*

- The clip from *The Birds* uses the shock cut, and it has all the elements that Hanich identifies.
- First there is a shock shot. Actually there is more than one. First is the shot of the broken window and dead bird. Then a reaction shot. Then another shock shot of the window and trashed room. Then a reaction shot. Then a shock shot of someone's leg on the floor. Then a reaction shot.
- Finally there is the revelation shot of a dead body. But before there is a reaction shot, there is a series of jump cuts that zoom in on the eyeless face, further heightening the scary effect of the initial revelation shot. Then the reaction shot. (The final reaction shot is actually very drawn out and goes on for a few minutes, but the rest of it is not necessary to show here.)
- The entire clip also uses quick cutting, each shot only lasting a second or two before shock cutting to the next shot.

THE QUEEN



# *The Shining*

- This classic scene from *The Shining* uses all of the elements of the horror genre shock cut.
- Like the clips from *The Birds*, this sequence also uses a series of alternating shock shots and reaction shots.
- The shock shots show the ghostly twins. The reaction shots show Danny's reactions. The revelation shot is the shot of the murdered corpses in the hallway. The final reaction shot of the sequence has the camera on Danny covering his eyes.
- Quick cutting is also used, and again jump cuts are also employed to heighten the effects. In this case, the jump cuts appear to move the ghostly twins closer to the camera, giving the impression of them moving closer, but without showing them in motion--a creepy trick that makes the sense more menacing.



## *Twin Peaks*

- This scene from *Twin Peaks* also uses shock cutting. The only difference here is the lack of clear distinguishing features between shock shots and revelation shots.
- The shock shots show some kind of ghost or monster inside a glass box. The reaction shots show the character trying to figure out what this is.
- The revelation shots are not sharply defined in this sequence, since the nature of the threat is unclear until the characters are killed. The revelation shot only really occurs once the characters are being killed, since it is never clear to the characters what they are looking at.
- This clip also uses quick cutting to heighten the effect of terror.

# References

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