

# Silence in Hitchcock's cinematic language: the eloquence of silence

**Ángeles Marco Furrasola**

Independent researcher

angelesmarco08@gmail.com

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#### ABSTRACT

This article aims to highlight the importance of silence in Alfred J. Hitchcock's cinematic language, a fundamental element for addressing and understanding the complexity of the British filmmaker's symbolic universe. Understood in its ambivalence as a linguistic and communicative phenomenon on the one hand, and as the matrix of non-verbal language and semiotics in general on the other, and not forgetting its presence in the structure of the narrative fabric, silence is an essential part of the master's style. His style subscribes, in a very personal way, to the "aesthetics of silence" that characterize 20th-century artistic language.

#### RESUMEN

El objeto del presente artículo es poner de relieve la importancia del silencio en el lenguaje cinematográfico de Alfred J. Hitchcock; elemento fundamental para abordar y entender la complejidad del universo simbólico del cineasta británico. Y es que el silencio, entendido en su ambivalencia, como fenómeno lingüístico y comunicativo, por un lado, y, por otro, como matriz del lenguaje no verbal, en particular, y de la semiótica, en general, sin olvidar la presencia de este en la estructura del tejido narrativo, es esencial en el estilo del maestro. Estilo que se inscribe, de una forma muy personal, en la "estética del silencio" que caracteriza el lenguaje artístico del siglo XX.

## Introduction

In the pages that follow, we will briefly see how the British filmmaker weaves his cinematic universe in silence<sup>1</sup>. Unsurprisingly, Hitchcock himself observed that “the true nature of cinema does not reside in the word, but in the image” (Truffaut, 2001, p. 58), as in its infancy with silent films. Conversely, we must not forget that the British filmmaker reflected contemporary thought, Nietzsche's philosophy and Freud's psychoanalysis, which were key to the evolution of art and culture in the 20th century. He was also influenced by the avant-garde styles that emerged during the first half of the century, like expressionism and surrealism, forging in his filmography a personal “aesthetics of silence” (Sontag, 1997, p. 10), which filmmakers like Jean-Luc Godard, Michelangelo Antonioni, or Ingmar Bergman (rooted in the tradition of Nordic cinema) would see through. Silence came to be a metaphor for the culmination of the artistic and cultural process in western history, which manifested itself in all the arts, from music and painting to audiovisual arts such as cinema (Marco, 2001, p 88).

Silence is omnipresent in three areas of Hitchcock's work: in the narrative, in the linguistics and semiotics, and in the psychological, not forgetting silence in the isolation that haunts modern man and that plays a major role in his work. Each of these spheres is formed based on silence; they are intimately interconnected and converge in a superior unit that is the unsettling and silent universe of Hitchcock's style. In some way, the master's cinema shows “the crisis of language and culture that occurred throughout the last century and that will determine the revolution of contemporary artistic language”<sup>2</sup> (Steiner, 2000, p. 28).

First, silence is present in the narrative structure of his films. This is inherent to the genre of suspense, as the fabric in which information is inserted, cleverly administered by the British director, to create intrigue for the viewer. Another dimension of silence is implicit in the semiotics of the visual media that come into play in each frame, and in each sequence, as the plot develops. In this sense, we would say that silence is a special space where each of the visual symbols dwells, isolated while simultaneously connected. The camera's eye isolates the objects that the director wants to highlight, giving them a disturbing prominence in the narrative. Hitchcock shows keen symbolic intuition by recreating the symbols that make up his semiotic universe. As well as being objects (everyday or not), these symbols are the space in which the characters develop and which say a lot about their psychology and their inner world, the use of black and white—the haunting language of light and shadow inherited from expressionist filmmakers—and symbolism in the technique of color (Truffaut, 2001), among others, not forgetting the auditory dimension—apart from verbal language—that is so significant in his films. This applies to music, a fundamental element

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1 Silence as a sign or symbol, as well as a channel of communication and a form of behavior, has been one of the focuses of Semiotics, Linguistics, Pragmatics and Communication Sciences in recent decades.

2 “The excess of information imposed by the media, in the modern world, has eliminated the space of silence in the intimacy of contemporary man, reducing him to a mere automaton” (Steiner, 2000, p. 89).

in many works such as *Rebecca* (Selznick and Hitchcock, 1940), *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960) or *Vertigo* (Coleman and Hitchcock, 1958). In any case, every one of these elements that make up the grammar of the teacher's cinematographic language is in and based on silence, where they find their essence and their reason for being.

In a psychological sense, silence is hugely relevant in Hitchcock's filmography. Thanks to this silence, we know what the characters are like. We get to know the complexity of their inner world not through words, but through their silences. Consider the eloquence of those close-ups in which the director shows the protagonist, sometimes in a piercing zoom; the almost hyper-realistic shots capture the character's facial expression, through which we gain access to their mind and the agitation that occurs in their psyche, as if through a window.

Closely linked to the characters and the environment in which they move, we must underline another aspect of silence that is essential in the master's cinema: his desire to demonstrate the enormous difficulties of human communication. In this sense, we see that the characters' interactions are generally structured around non-verbal communication (including facial expressions, looks, gestural language, proxemics, and body kinetics) or are articulated based on silence itself as a communication channel. The characters say more with their silences than with their words. As a visionary, Hitchcock illustrates this, preempting the theories of communication that emerged in the 1960s in Palo Alto (California) that are still so relevant to communication and the social sciences today. In this integrated holistic theory of communication, silence and body language are given great importance in interpersonal interaction, opening up a field that was completely unexplored until that point.

### **Silence in Hitchcock's cinematic language: the eloquence of silence**

Silence is integral to suspense, a genre that the British director raised to its highest form (Truffaut, 2001). Hitchcock maintains the intrigue from beginning to end with a steady hand throughout the plot. He does it through each shot, sequence, movement of the camera and, above all, montage, when silence becomes the true protagonist in Hitchcock's syntax. This is the moment to create the magic of suspense, "juxtaposing the images so that they provoke the maximum tension and the greatest degree of intrigue in the viewer" (Truffaut, 2001, p. 237). The montage, envisioned in synthesis and, therefore, in silence, is the cornerstone of his cinematographic language. Using this technique, the master creates climactic moments throughout the story. Through a simple arrangement of highly connotative images, he creates as much psychological tension as possible by silencing everything that is not relevant. In this way, Hitchcock's visual rhetoric preempts important discoveries in the pragmatics of language and communication, as well as in the field of textual rhetoric, in the final decades of the 20th century, such as Grice's conversational inferences (1991, pp. 511-530), and Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory

(1990, pp. 5-26), and the semantic relationships implicit in Van Dijk's pragmatics of textual discourse (1980, p. 10). This research highlights the importance of silence and the tacit in every act of communication. Thus, the master's cinematographic style complies with "the conversational maxims"<sup>3</sup>, which relate to the principle of relevance, both in terms of synthetic language and the techniques used. Conversely, his symbolic discourse in images has become a source of inferences and idea connections. Synthesis, relevance and inference are the hallmarks of the British filmmaker's universe, with silence ultimately being the phenomenon that underlies all these mechanisms implicit in communication.

Hitchcock's montage technique revolves around two narrative resources: analysis and synthesis. In both mechanisms, the director plays with the time of the story (Truffaut, 2001, p. 92), moving in the space of the silence, since his films' most emblematic scenes are silent. In analysis, time expands; in synthesis, in contrast, it contracts. Both cases involve ellipsis<sup>4</sup> and silence. One montage example that illustrates the analysis technique is the death sequence of Agent Gromek (Wolfgang Kieling) in *Torn Curtain* (Hitchcock, 1966). Across various shots, Hitchcock shows the viewer, somewhat ironically, that it is not easy to kill a man. To that end, he presents a succession of images in absolute silence, showing the extreme rawness of the situation. The scene takes place on a farm, where Professor Armstrong (Paul Newman) and a peasant woman (Carolyn Conwell) try to kill a KGB agent, to no avail. After numerous attempts to kill the agent, the camera shows the oven in the foreground, from which we infer that this is the last resort to achieve their objective. In an overhead shot, the camera focuses on the great efforts of Armstrong and the farmer. They eventually stick Gromek's head in the oven until his hands go still. The woman resolutely closes the gas valve and Dr. Armstrong, exhausted, falls into a deep silence.

The quintessential type of montage in Hitchcock's movies is based on ellipsis and synthesis, both of which are articulated in silence. In addition to creating intrigue in the plot, this technique introduces the protagonists to the story, immediately capturing the viewer's attention. In *Chained* (Hitchcock, 1946), the first appearance of Devlin (Cary Grant) is from behind<sup>5</sup> at a party. However, the most expressive ellipsis, a source of relevant inferences in the plot, is when Hitchcock presents the protagonist of *Marnie* (Hitchcock, 1964). The film opens with the camera zoomed in on a yellow handbag under a woman's arm. The camera moves away, and we see her from behind walking down a platform. She stops and waits for

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3 Ellipsis, as a rhetorical device, is the bedrock of Hitchcock's cinematic language. With ellipsis, everything that is not relevant in the audiovisual discourse in which the plot unfolds is silenced. Ellipsis is also a necessary economic mechanism in communication because, as Ortega y Gasset says, "man cannot say everything he wants, either because of social taboo, or because, simply, it is impossible to say everything one thinks or feels" (Ortega y Gasset, 1996, p. 225-257).

4 There are three conversational maxims: 1. Quantity: "Don't make your contribution more informative than necessary"; 2. Relationship: "Get to the point"; 3. Mode: "Be concise and avoid being verbose" (Sperber and Wilson, 1990, p. 5-8).

5 This mechanism is used by Steven Spielberg to introduce the character Oskar Schindler (Liam Neeson) in *Schindler's List* (Lustig, Molen and Spielberg, 1993). The presentation of the character from behind has a symbolic effect, showing a split in his identity over the course of the plot.

the train. Next, in an office, several people talk about an employee who has stolen a sum of money. The owner of the company makes a detailed description of the suspect: a young brunette woman with a good figure. The next scene is silent again; the camera follows the woman from behind into a hotel room, where she empties the money from her bag. And then the camera shows us one of the most fascinating visual metaphors in the history of cinema for presenting a character: after a close-up that shows the water darkening in the sink, the woman throws her hair back and looks at herself in the mirror, smiling triumphantly<sup>6</sup>. That is when we see Marnie's (Tippi Hedren) face, radiant before the viewer's eyes, now with shiny blonde hair. Bernard Herrmann's musical band emphasizes that tremendous moment as a splendid epiphany. In this way, through very few shots, we learn about the identity of the protagonist: an enigmatic and chameleonic woman, who we infer has had a long criminal career, judging by the various identity cards that she keeps in her purse. The situation we have just described shows us how the filmmaker, in a few seconds and through a synthesis of silent shots, creates a virtual universe that pulls and subjugates us as viewers. The master's cinematographic language is highly suggestive and expressive in its essentially visual and mute nature. He sets each film up as an elaborate artifact<sup>7</sup> (Van Dijk, 1980) to stimulate vision and intelligence, and he does so in the matrix of silence, or else emphasizing the emotion he wants to convey, with music intermittent with the imagery. With each shot or sequence, not only is our nervous system put to the test but also our ability to infer<sup>8</sup> ideas, through visual and mental connections, and generate metaphorical and symbolic propositions<sup>9</sup>. Watching each Hitchcock film inspires in the viewer an uncontrolled world of sensations, emotions and ideas. We can thus affirm that the master's cinematographic language is revealed as the purest expression of the eloquence of silence. Beyond what we have just pointed out, silence in Hitchcock's movies came to be the subtle mesh in which the different semiotic structures, both visual and auditory, reached their greatest significance. Each of his films is a structure of semiotic structures. The signs—or symbols, according to Teodorov (1978)—that appear in each frame are what create the reality that the viewer perceives. In this way, the close-up of the rope that ties together the books in *The Rope* (Bernstein and Hitchcock, 1948) has a recurring symbolism: the everyday object is the murder weapon. According to Rohmer and Chabrol, Hitchcock “elevates

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6 The mirror is a recurring symbolic object in Hitchcock's movies.

7 Van Dijk uses the noun “artifact” when referring to textual discourse and the complexity that this entails.

8 The phenomenon of inferences and conversational implications in the pragmatics of language (Grice, 1991, pp. 511-530), relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1990, p. 9) and the hidden code (Hall, 1976)—all these theories of communication and the social sciences of the last decades of the 20th century point to the principle of relevance and to the tacit knowledge of man. As individuals in a society, we share a common cultural heritage—a hidden code—and we participate in implicit norms of connection and deduction, to understand the utterances of everyday language. The principle of linguistic economy in sentences, both verbal—or silent—and written, appeals to the cognition and context shared by speaker and listener. n“Human beings automatically aspire to the maximum relevance, that is, the maximum cognitive effect with the minimum processing effort” (Sperber and Wilson, 1990, p. 9).

9 Van Dijk (1980) studies the cognitive implications that explain the processes of understanding the textual artifact.

the anecdotal to the quintessence in which background and form are united in an indivisible unit” (Rohmer and Chabrol, 2006, p. 17). The form creates the content, just as a painter expresses their work on canvas, or an architect organizes matter in space. This indivisible unity of form and content is revealed in silence. And just as the concept of emptiness is fundamental to Zen Buddhism because it harbors the essence of things (Watts, 1976), silence works in a similar way in Hitchcock's films because it enables symbols to take on their full meaning, as we have seen.

Paradoxically, Hitchcock's cinematographic language swings between silence and eloquence. In each shot, the director expresses more than he silences. Following the principle of transparency, a prerequisite in narration, Hitchcock “suggests to the viewer all the information they need to orient themselves in the thread of the story” (Truffaut, 2001, pp. 86-87), although he later surprises them constantly, breaking with the principles of obviousness and predictability —“key concepts to understand what is tacit in saying” (Ramírez, 1992, pp. 15-45). He does so with powerful symbolic language where light and shadow (or, as the case may be, Technicolor), objects, and space and time recreate a disturbing reality that seems to overflow, drowning the viewer in a state of absolute discomfort when it does not end up in the abyss of terror.

Another of the British filmmaker's fundamental strategies to awaken emotions in the viewer's subconscious is to present the situation across numerous shots, accompanied by disturbing music. This is what happens in the shower scene in *Psycho*, a flagship horror movie, in which Herrmann's music is as relevant and meaningful as the image itself. We perceive the sound of violins as auditory stabs, functioning as hurtful synesthesia, while we see Marion's (Janet Leigh) murder in a series of extremely violent shots. As viewers, we hear and feel those stabs that end her life in seconds with the same character. With works such as *Rebecca*, *Vertigo* or *Psycho*, Hitchcock illustrates Nietzsche's concept of art, insofar as “it has the virtual capacity to create a reality superior to the truth” (Nietzsche and Vaihinger, 1980, pp. 3-7).

This complex semiotic universe, interwoven in silence and paradoxically eloquent, follows Hitchcock's notion of suspense and, beyond that, his vision of the world. In a world as volatile and changing as ours, there are no absolute truths. In modern society, reality is inconsistent and nothing is what it seems. Hitchcock seems to illustrate Jean Baudrillard's (1978) idea of “the culture of the simulacrum”: objects have lost their nature as symbols, becoming part of an illusory world of papier-mâché. In this sense, silence is the space of the simulacrum of language, at the same time paradoxically becoming the place of noise (Marco, 2001, p. 66). In this regard, it suffices to recall the first images that appear in *North by Northwest* (Coleman and Hitchcock, 1959). The camera focuses on the reflection of Manhattan's urban chaos in the windows of a skyscraper, accompanied by Herrmann's suggestive music. Furthermore, we would say that Hitchcock preempts that postmodernity that disintegrates into atoms, meaning the concept of “liquid reality” by

Zygmunt Bauman (2002). The director presents stories that involve a changing and kaleidoscopic reality, between the silence that surrounds a disguised reality and the perspectivism of the characters; the camera's point of view and that of the viewer. Thus, as if it were a game of mirrors—a very Cervantine idea—Hitchcock displays a disturbing reality—implausible or, as the case may be, dreamlike—showing us a multiform universe that goes beyond the limits of fiction again and again to invade the realms of the viewer's reality. It is worth mentioning Susan Sontag's corresponding words about modern art:

In light of the current myth, by virtue of which art aspires to become a “total expectation” that commands all the attention, the strategies of reduction reflect the most sublime ambition that art could adopt (Sontag, 1997, p.28).

The American thinker is referring to the ambition of achieving total consciousness of God. And this is exactly how the master is presented to us in his films: a wise demiurge like Prospero, the magician from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (2016).

### **The suspense story: a plot woven into the canvas of silence**

Silence is the canvas on which a suspense story is woven. An enigma is the common thread along which the plot unfolds. But for Hitchcock, what is relevant is not the mystery itself but rather weaving the spider's web and catching the viewer from the very beginning (Truffaut, 2001, p. 127), even from credits, as happens in *Vertigo*<sup>10</sup>. In this sense, Hitchcock shows his *horror vacui*, since there is no shot without content in the narrative fabric; every symbol is relevant and must enhance the suspense, as we have seen. In any case, the symbolism of his language and all the visual resources that come into play are subject to two fundamental elements in the plot that are inscribed in silence: first, the perspective from which the enigma is perceived—and from where things are not what they seem—and second, concealment of the characters' identity.

### **The perspective from which the enigma is perceived**

In Hitchcock's films, the story revolves around a hidden truth involving the protagonist which is the backbone of the intriguing situations in which the characters are immersed, and to which they react by giving free rein to their feelings and emotions (Truffaut, 2001, p. 128). This hidden or silenced truth that haunts the protagonist can be shown through two different gazes that determine the perspective from which the story is told. One is the gaze of a character that matches that of the viewer, knowing nothing about the reality that torments the protagonist (Truffaut, 2001, p. 144). In this case, the perspective is internal to

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<sup>10</sup> In *Vertigo*, the credit titles already arouse the mystery in the viewer. The eyes and the enigmatic gaze of the woman, together with the spiral design—a metaphor of the eye that perceives a deceptive reality—suggest the sinisterness of the plot that is going to unfold before the viewer's gaze.



the story, as occurs in *Suspicion* (Edington and Hitchcock, 1941) where we see in the end, with the same bewilderment as Lina McLaidlaw (Joan Fontaine), that her husband Johnnie Aysgarth (Cary Grant) is not a murderer. Everything has been the result of her neuroticism and strict Catholic upbringing.

The other gaze is that of the viewer who, unlike the protagonist, knows the truth (Truffaut, 2001, p. 105). In this external point of view, the camera presents the story laid bare like an omniscient demiurge. In *The Rope*, the camera lens shows us the horrors committed by the villains. The viewer knows the truth, witnessing the tortuous path that the protagonist has to travel to unravel the mystery. Rupert Cadell (James Stewart) discovers with horror at the end of the macabre party that not only have his former students<sup>11</sup> committed a murder but they have been capable of celebrating their crime with the corpse of their friend present at the party.

### **Reality is silenced: things are not what they seem**

In this visual game, in which situations and characters veil (silence) and “unveil” reality before the astonished gaze of the protagonist and us as spectators, in a reality in which nothing is what it seems, we are shown a set of mirrors or illusory truths that vanish when we approach. This is the case in *Saboteur* (Lloyd and Hitchcock, 1942), in which the protagonist is unjustly accused of an act that he has not committed, as in many other Hitchcock films<sup>12</sup>. Barry Kane (Robert Cummings) begins a journey in search of the truth that is riddled with surprises, twists and situations in which people are not what they appear to be. The list of silenced truths around the character is endless, forming a vast spider web in which he is trapped. The Kafkaesque reality that Kane experiences responds to the Chinese box structure: within each “supposed truth” there is another, and so on, until the plot ends.

### **Concealing identity**

At the same time as concealing the facts, the characters' identity is silenced, a narrative resource that plays a key role in the plot. In some cases, the protagonist themselves adopts a false identity to achieve their purpose, which usually involves fleeing from villains and, ironically, the police while simultaneously discovering the truth; that truth that is reluctant to emerge from its silence and be “unveiled”. In *The 39 Steps* (Balcon and Hitchcock, 1935), Richard Hannay (Robert Donat) adopts different identities to escape from his pursuers. In this case, the concealment becomes a source of comedy. However, in most films, the villain is the one silencing their true nature behind a mask of alluring amiability (Truffaut, 2001, p. 180), like the charismatic Robert Rusk (Barry Foster) in *Frenzy* (Hill and Hitch-

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11 Brandon (John Dall) and Phillip (Farley Granger) take Nietzsche's theory of the superman to its highest form. They believe that they are superior beings and that they can elevate murder to the category of art.

12 We see the most tragic case of an innocent protagonist accused of murder in *The Wrong Man* (Coleman and Hitchcock, 1956). While Manny (Henry Fonda) is in the dungeon, we see the superimposed image of the killer walking the city's streets. In an ellipsis, Hitchcock shows us that the innocent are victims of men's righteousness.

cock, 1972) and so many others. Or sometimes the other characters hide the identity of the villain, like in *Rebecca*, where not only has Mrs. Danvers (Judith Anderson) sublimated the image of the late Mrs. de Winter but all the characters, including Maxim himself (Laurence Olivier), contribute to creating the aura of a woman unattainable in the eyes of the viewer and the protagonist through their silence.

Intimately linked to the theme of concealing and silencing identity, we have the theme of the double<sup>13</sup>, which is highly symbolic. The double gives us all the dualities that make up reality: speech/silence, light/dark, and good/bad, among others. An insightful psychologist, Hitchcock<sup>14</sup> knew that shadows abound within human beings—as the Romantics recognized in their time—and that social actors only present the mask that social conventions permit. The theme of the double, which implies a show/silence ambivalence structured around the good/evil dichotomy, is a fundamental feature as he builds his characters (Spoto, 1993, p. 10). This splitting can occur in the psychology of the same individual or in the contrast between two characters. Thus, in *Rebecca*, the protagonist's identity is constructed in vivid contrast with the personality of the notable absentee: the late Mrs. de Winter. The capital R for Rebecca, a symbol of her omnipresence in the mansion, contrasts with the young woman's lack of a name throughout the film.

On other occasions, the theme of the double is present within the same character, as is the case of John Aysgarth in *Suspicion*. He is a charming man who, after a certain point, is seen through his wife's and our eyes, as viewers, as an alleged murderer. Consider the disturbing scene in which Aysgarth climbs the stairs in the dark with a glass of milk for his wife. Johnnie's silent shadow is projected on the wall, a metaphor for that other self that supposedly lives inside him, while the bright white glass seems to be a bearer of death (Truffaut, 2001, p. 133).

The theme of the double is a constant in the master's cinema, forming a gallery of disturbing characters, some dangerous and mentally disturbed, others victims of their own evil. Perhaps the most tragic and sinister example appears in *Vertigo*: the Madeleine-Judy pairing, both played by actress Kim Novak. In this case, it is not strictly good versus evil but truth versus lie (Spoto, 1993, p. 219). It is about the impersonation of an elegant and sophisticated woman by a girl from a modest background. In this game of mirrors and silences, the only truth is that Scottie (James Stewart) falls in love not with a woman of flesh and blood but with an idealistic image onto which he projects his desire.

### The ominousness of discovering the truth

Hitchcock knows that discovering the truth (*alétheia*) is traumatic, especially when things that should remain hidden—and silenced—are revealed before our eyes. Discovering

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<sup>13</sup> This theme is a constant throughout Western culture, illustrated in modern literature by novels such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (2006) or Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (2000).

<sup>14</sup> Donald Spoto defines the British director's personality as "a warehouse of all that is contradictory in human nature" (1993, p. 69).

something sinister is horrifying to us. “The sinister —understood as the limit of what we can bear— must remain veiled”, says Eugenio Trías (2001, p. 10). Crossing this limit comes with pain. However, pain and moral acceptance of limits are intrinsic to the path of initiation to life. Discovering the truth means waking up from the dream of innocence. We have this traumatic path of initiation in *Rebecca* and in *Shadow of a Doubt* (Skirball and Hitchcock, 1943), where Charlie (Teresa Wright) discovers to her horror that her uncle, whom she idolizes, is a murderer.

Sometimes the pain is more than we can bear, as Freud observed. The truth hides in the subconscious and trauma appears (Freud, 2014). Hitchcock is fascinated by the world of the subconscious, that silent universe that bubbles away within us and seems strange and alien. It is no surprise that some of his characters are marked by childhood traumas. In the film *Spellbound* (Selznick and Hitchcock, 1945), the disturbed mind of the protagonist, John Ballantyne (Gregory Peck), takes refuge in amnesia to overcome the guilt he feels for his brother's death as a child. Hitchcock draws on the enigmatic world of dreams to delve into the subconscious and reveal the root of the character's trauma. On the one hand, he uses the symbolic language of surrealism to release the protagonist's psychological repression; on the other, he uses Freudian psychoanalysis through Dr. Constance Petersen (Ingrid Bergman), who manages to reveal the meaning of Ballantyne's fixation with parallel lines, which induce him into a state of shock when he sees them.

Hitchcock is part of mythological tradition, in the deep sense that Hans-Georg Gadamer gives to the term: it “is the bearer of its own truth, in the voice of a wiser original time, for the explanation of the world” (Gadamer, 1977). Furthermore, the filmmaker reveals himself to be a visual rhapsodist of the problems of modern man, becoming a creator of post-modern myths. *North by Northwest* is a picture parable of the loneliness of modern man. And in *Rear Window* (Hitchcock, 1954), he recreates his *voyeurism* as he succumbs to the television screen, living a virtual reality instead of his own existence.

### **Hitchcock's symbolic universe**

The master's style lies in a very visually powerful, connotative language with multiple meanings. As Hitchcock himself said, his mind thought in images, so his films are essentially visual (Truffaut, 2001). Drawing a parallel with Nietzsche's view of language (Nietzsche and Vaihinger, 1980), the master's symbolic universe is autotelic and a metaphor for the phenomenological world.

Hitchcock's narrative transparency is supported by two resources that are added to synthesis and silence: symmetry and contrast, whether of images, characters or environments, among other aspects (Spoto, 1993, p. 73). The director presents one reality and then immediately contrasts it with its opposite so that the viewer gets the message straight away. More often than not, there is an ironic or humorous intention. In this way, when *Rebecca's* young protagonist makes her entrance into Manderley, as the new Mrs. de Winter, she does so in

a disheveled way. The girl's simplicity stands in contrast to the strict protocol Mrs. Danvers has arranged for her welcome. At other times, this contrast has a dramatic purpose to emphasize the danger that lies in wait for the protagonist. Consider the first shots of *Shadow of a Doubt*, which show us Uncle Charlie (Joseph Cotten) in a room of a boarding house in the suburbs of New Jersey. In a sequence shot, the camera recreates the sordid environment that surrounds the character—a metaphor for the darkness that dwells inside him. The next sequence shows us a panoramic view of a sunny city; the lens zooms in through a window with curtains and we see a cozy family home. The sequence ends with a close-up of Charlie, the niece, also stretched out pensively on the bed, just like her uncle. The two sequences contrast sharply to show us the uncle-niece dichotomy, an omen of the tension between good and evil which will unfold in the plot.

Hitchcock's metaphorical language extends to all areas: “from a careful staging, of interior or exterior spaces, to atmospheric phenomena (a sunny day or a stormy day), passing through objects—as we have seen. Any visual detail in the camera frame has something to say about the characters and their inner world” (Spoto, 1993, p. 70). The channel and the code used are always audiovisual, outside of verbal language. “It is easier for the receiver to retain a visual or acoustic image—music or noise—than words” (Truffaut, 2001, p. 134). We refer to the significant presence of music, in films such as *Rebecca* or *Vertigo*, which emphasizes the most climactic scenes in the plot. In *Rebecca*, Franz Waxman's violin melody accentuates the dreamlike atmosphere in which the protagonist immerses herself at Manderley—an atmosphere that simultaneously fascinates and torments her.

In Hitchcock's symbolic universe, spaces have as much prominence as the characters or objects. In many cases, they represent a psychological extension of the protagonist, when the latter does not empathize with them. More than a mansion, Manderley symbolizes the beauty and mystery that surrounds the memory of *Rebecca*. But just as with the identity of the characters, spaces are not always what they seem. In *Psycho*, we initially understand that the house on the hill is the sinister place where Norman Bates's (Anthony Perkins) mother lives; only at the end do we realize that it is a metaphor for the character's devious mind. Besides these examples, the spaces in which the characters interact can be interior or exterior and are generally urban. Interior spaces are the setting for intimacy, so it is common for protagonists to meet in a train car. Trains hold a special symbolism in Hitchcock's films as the space where two strangers meet at a specific moment in their lives, each with their past and their silence<sup>15</sup> and the psychological burden that this entails.

Another symbolic space is the inside of a car, which is key to developing intrigue. Scottie's uncertainty crescendos when following Madeleine through the streets of San Francisco in a stifling and dreamlike atmosphere until we witness one of the most fascinating scenes of

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15 With their fears and frustrations, with their desires and secrets. According to Michelle F. Sciacca: “Silence has a psychological weight that we cannot find in any word (...) (...) In an instant of silence all the weight of our life is collected: it is loaded with all memories, with all the presences and absences, with all the hopes and disappointments. In an instant of silence, a whole life is gathered” (1961, p. 103).

*Vertigo*. Scottie's long journey through the city ends in a dark alley, where he gets out of the car and enters a sinister place. In the darkness, he opens the door and we suddenly witness an explosion of beauty. The image of Madeleine in the flower shop, surrounded by flowers, is like a dream for both the protagonist and the viewer. At that moment, Scottie's fascination with the mysterious stranger takes shape.

The house is another important space, a metaphor for the character's inner self. Always ready to surprise the viewer and break with predictability, Hitchcock shows us the private life of the *Rear Window* protagonist who, instead of living his own life, spends his time spying on the neighbors. In any case, inside a house we find a silent universe with a great psychological burden. Symbols like doors connect two different psychological spaces (Spoto, 1993, p. 220). In the opening shots of *Rebecca*, the camera flashes back to immerse us in a dreamlike atmosphere, while we hear the protagonist explaining the dream of her trip to Manderley as a voiceover. She stops before the gate, which indicates the limit between the known world and the mysterious and Gothic otherness of the mansion. Other symbols would be the staircase and the corridor, places of passage that connect the threatening outer space with the safe interior. In *Notorious*, the ladder has dangerous connotations for Alicia Huberman (Ingrid Bergman). Once Alexander Sebastien (Claude Rains) discovers his wife's identity as an American spy, he dedicates himself to his idea of murdering her.

"The objects, whether or not they are everyday, have a marked symbolism, investing in recurrent psychological and metaphysical connotations in the plot" (Spoto, 1993, p. 55). For example, the mirror image is essential to understand the theme of the double in *Vertigo*, and the stuffed birds<sup>16</sup> in Norman Bates's gloomy living room in *Psycho* are a clue to the young man's troubled state of mind.

If the interior spaces are significant, the exteriors also play an indisputable role. They are generally dehumanized metropolises, like San Francisco or New York, or European cities, like London or Stockholm. However, Hitchcock also situates his characters in idyllic places, far from the noise of civilization, such as Bodega Bay in *The Birds* (Hitchcock, 1963) — although the peaceful routine of this heavenly place is soon disrupted with the arrival of the unusual and unexpected.

### The characters' silence

Hitchcock valued silence more than words (Truffaut, 2001, p.56), and that is how we get to know his characters: not through their words but through their silences, as well as through the non-verbal language they display in communicative interaction. They communicate even when they do not want to, as happens when Marnie, faced with the approach of her husband, Mark Rutland (Sean Connery), takes refuge in a cabin corner<sup>17</sup> and shuts herself

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<sup>16</sup> The stuffed birds are a symbol with which Hitchcock preempts his film of the that name and there is a symbolic reading: those tired of human arbitrariness decide to rebel against civilization.

<sup>17</sup> According to Hall, spaces say a lot about speakers in communicative interaction (1984, p. 198).

up in “postural silence” (Watzlawick, 1984) and quiet. “Like what happens to a musician in an orchestra, whether they want to or not, (Hitchcock’s characters) are immersed in a feedback process, where each gesture or silence is relevant in communication. The individual, even if he remains silent, does not stop communicating his feelings and emotions” (Bateson, 1984). “The social actor cannot not communicate even if he entrenches himself in a hermetic silence” (Watzlawick, 1984).

Besides silence being another communication channel (in the same way as verbal and non-verbal language), we contemplate this phenomenon in characters’ interactions from a linguistic perspective in integrated communication theory, as proposed by Muriel Saville-Troike, since these silences are translatable into words (1985, pp. 16-17). Furthermore, in the pragmatics of communication, these silences behave as a “form of behavior” (Fierro, 1992, pp. 47-78), since they cause the same effects as a “speech act” (Searle, 1990). In the first sequence of *Torn Curtain*, Sarah Sherman (Julie Andrews) learns at a press conference that her fiancé, Professor Michael Armstrong (Paul Newman), has crossed the “Iron Curtain” to render his services as a scientist. Her incredulous, reproachful look pierces her fiancé. In this “act of silence” supported by the gaze, the three functions of a speech act are fulfilled (Marco, 2001, pp. 224-31): the locutionary and illocutionary (conventional act), and the perlocutionary (unconventional). With the first two, silence manifests itself as “saying nothing”. Sarah does not speak—she cannot, as social protocol forbids it. Although the message is clear, it could be translated into the following statement: “Are you a traitor? I can’t believe it. No, you’re not. Or am I wrong?”. The message’s disapproving connotations are clear. The effects of the perlocutionary act are not far behind: Armstrong’s expression reflects his discomfort, seeing that Sarah has found out what he wanted to hide from her.

Characters say more with non-verbal communication and silence than with words. When they do speak, their words often mask the truth rather than reveal it. As Shakespeare says, “language is the domain of lies” (2016, p. 25), unlike body language which generally does not lie, as Birdwhistell points out (1984, pp. 165). With their facial expressions, looks, bright eyes or swaying, the characters do not lie, especially when they are in love. Recall the look exchanged by Roger Thornhill and Eve Kendall (Eva Marie Saint) in the game of seduction when they meet for the first time in the train dining car and she asks him to light her cigarette. However, characters can even lie with their body language. In such cases, the camera determinedly focuses on the character from a telling point of view, in either a high-angle or low-angle shot, to reveal and unmask them. In *Psycho*, the camera lens captures the face of Norman Bates in different shots from above as he talks with Detective Arbogast (Martin Balsam), who is investigating Marion’s disappearance. The young man lies to the detective with both his verbal and body language, but he cannot lie to the camera, which is positioned above the characters like a demiurge. The camera knows everything about the protagonist: his tormented soul and his crimes. Behind that innocent and timid face, and the fierce voice of a domineering mother, there is a sinister truth that must be revealed.

Likewise, when the character is alone, the camera's omniscient point of view captures his most intimate thoughts. As mentioned earlier, Hitchcock places great importance on the psychological dimension of silence, a matrix in which not only do feelings and emotions take shape but also the sinister and that which cannot be verbalized. Through the voiceover, we learn how Norman Bates's divided mind resolves the conflict. Sitting in the dungeon under a blanket, the young man shows a hint of an enigmatic smile while we listen to the voice of the old woman. At that moment, we infer who has won the psychological struggle between mother and son.

### **Noise versus silence: indicators of dramatic climax**

The noise/silence dichotomy is how Hitchcock expresses dramatic and psychological intensity with efficient use of resources, presenting us with climactic scenes in the plot. Consider the final scenes of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (Coleman and Hitchcock, 1955) when, after a few moments of long-drawn-out anguish at the end of the corridor in the Albert Hall Theater, Josephine McKenna (Doris Day) alternately observes the barrel of the assassin's gun, hidden behind some curtains, and the prime minister; meanwhile, a choir performs a cantata by Arthur Benjamin on stage. Seconds before the cymbals sound—the moment the shot should be fired—Josephine is unable to stifle a scream of terror in the middle of the room. The unexpected outburst distracts the murderer, who misses the shot, and the prime minister escapes the attack unscathed.

Another scene that illustrates this significant noise/silence contrast happens in *The Birds*, a film with no musical soundtrack. The squawking of the birds progressively takes over the scene after the first half-hour of the film. Hitchcock painstakingly prepares for the scene's climax, locating the camera at different angles to capture what happens inside and outside the bar, where the townspeople have taken refuge when fleeing from the massive bird attack. The bar is a few meters from a gas station, where we suddenly see that one of the gasoline tanks is losing fluid, forming a stream. A man lights a cigarette and tosses the match, causing a huge explosion. The camera shows us an overhead shot from the point of view of the birds, who watch the scene from the sky in terrifying silence, and we see the river of fire reach the bar, where the main couple is: Melanie (Tippi Hedren) and Mitch (Rod Taylor). This overwhelming silence is only comparable to that of certain theophanies in which the noise vs. silence contrast appears. The noise precedes a great silence, as in the *Apocalypse of Saint John* when the last trumpet sounds and the lamb opens the seventh seal: a long silence ensues, giving way to the greatness of God (New Jerusalem Bible, 8: 1, 1775). Silence is a sign that something spectacular must be coming (Eliade, 1981, p. 60).

A variant of this noise/silence contrast would be the opposites of a moving image vs. positional silence or stillness. Hitchcock introduces this contrast as a wink to the viewer, as he does with his cameos, for humorous effect; we can also interpret it as a tribute to silent cinema, the cinema that he admired, “the cinema par excellence” (Truffaut, 2001, p. 76). Non-

verbal language becomes a source of humor in some scenes in his films, such as in his last film, *Family Plot* (Hitchcock, 1976), in which Fran (Karen Black) and her friend George (Bruce Dern) are driving along the highway. The brakes fail and they go spinning, with Fran dizzily clinging to her friend, like Harpo Marx. In this same film, the director's cameo happens on the other side of a glass door. We see the silhouettes of two people talking and we recognize Hitchcock, who communicates with eloquent gestures like silent film actors did.

### **The persistence of Hitchcock's legacy**

Hitchcock's work illustrates the history of cinema, as well as the evolution of 20th-century culture. Apart from the homage that he paid to silent films, his creative process echoed the linguistic crisis that induces the contemporary artist to conclude their expressive search in an "aesthetics of silence". Likewise, the British filmmaker's visual rhetoric preempted fundamental 20th-century theories in the pragmatics of language and the human sciences, which emphasized the importance of silence in communication. Hitchcock also became a pioneer of new technologies, inasmuch as he pushed all the possibilities of cinematographic language to the limit, creating a symbolic universe of great virtual power. The master's creative genius, as with all great artists, transcends the coordinates of space and time and has a heuristic scope.



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