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A Comparative Analysis of the Film "The 405 Murder Case" and the Artistic Techniques of Alfred Hitchcock's Films

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Abstract:

The film "The 405 Murder Case" once achieved remarkable viewership in China during the 1980s, thanks to its multiple plot twists and tight pacing, intricately linked with its clever audiovisual language. Whether it's the creation of suspense, the use of cinematography and sound effects, or the montage narrative technique, the film shares many similarities with the techniques commonly used by the master Alfred Hitchcock, yet it also adds its own unique features. This paper will take a comparative perspective to explore the similarities and differences between the two, aiming to further uncover the secrets behind the commercial success of this classic film.

Keywords:

"The 405 Murder Case"; Alfred Hitchcock; film art; audiovisual language

Released in 1980, the suspense film "The 405 Murder Case" set records in both box office revenue and viewership. While the story revolves around police detectives unraveling a case to ultimately expose internal corruption and uphold political integrity, it avoids being didactic. Instead, the film meticulously crafts its audiovisual elements, creating a gripping pace, intricate suspense

1. Introduction of Suspense: Dual Gaze and Sensational Murders

In Alfred Hitchcock's films, commonly observed artistic techniques include suspense building, MacGuffin placement, voyeuristic perspectives, and editing skills. Dubbed the "Master of Suspense," Hitchcock's films are often likened to "bombs" by scholars, referring to his ability to plant perilous signals that continually agitate the audience's nerves, leaving them both eager for the truth to unfold and apprehensive about the impending conflicts.

The construction of suspense in films is intimately intertwined with the voyeuristic perspective. When viewers watch a film, they typically adopt two perspectives: one entails an omniscient view overseeing the story's development, while the other involves using a character's eyes as a window to peep into the case, personally immersing oneself in this viewpoint. However, characters have limited access to information, and their line of sight itself constitutes a gradual peek into the truth. In other words, the second perspective represents a "dual gaze" superimposed onto the character's gaze. Viewers not only embody the character's perspective to probe into the case but also peer into the characters from an external dimension. The dual gaze

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perspective is not a characteristic of all films; the objective presence of the camera often solidifies the first perspective, while the second perspective is frequently weakened or absent. Yet, this is precisely the rule that suspense films need to break—immersing the audience in the scene to experience the atmosphere of terror or tension firsthand and to grip their suspense. Therefore, suspense films often need to occasionally "move characters out of the frame," allowing the audience to enter the second perspective and become the subject of the dual gaze.

The credits sequence, usually not considered part of the film's main content, attempts to break this conventional pattern in both films, employing the second perspective mentioned above. In "Rear Window," as the credits roll, three vertically slatted blinds in the background gradually close from left to right, forming a suggestive "symbol" signaling the commencement of the story. This is followed by a long shot of a garden in a dreamy vision, indicating to the audience: from the outset, you have entered the second perspective, positioned alongside the protagonist, both peering through the same window.





In contrast, "The 405 Murder Case" incorporates the credits within the context of the crime scene itself. Displayed over photographs taken at the crime scene, the credits seamlessly integrate into the setting of the photo lab. As each photo is developed, the credits transition naturally under the supervision of the detectives organizing evidence. Notably, the cast list is presented uniquely; rather than employing the conventional method of appearing underwater, the photos are depicted falling from a printer, swiftly coming into focus. Once the development process is complete, the scene transitions to officers analyzing the photos pinned to a whiteboard, forming a cohesive loop. This approach similarly implies that the audience is engaged in the investigation alongside the detectives; as the officers peer into the crime scene through the photos, the audience shares this perspective.





In addition to engaging viewers in a dual gaze perspective, both films incorporate varying degrees of sensational murders. The portrayal of women as victims has a long-standing history in the development of detective fiction, with the allure of glamorous female victims seeming to naturally captivate audiences. While undoubtedly intertwined with the underlying logic of patriarchal discourse, its utilization in commercial cinema can be seen as a strategic device. Directors effectively leverage the audience's preconceived notions or "pre-understandings"—that the murder of a woman is both frightening and elicits sensations of excitement and arousal. Freud, in his psychoanalytic theory, noted the existence of destructive and aggressive instincts

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within the unconscious of every individual, restrained by social norms, yet stirring with anticipation when corresponding stimuli are received, thereby generating excitement and arousal.

Alfred Hitchcock's "Psycho," particularly the infamous shower scene where Marion is brutally murdered, serves as a response to these preconceptions and anticipations. This explicit and bloody sequence not only stirs the audience's fear but also resonates with the subconscious expectation of violence and aggression, leaving a lasting impression that stimulates both sensory experiences and a keen interest in uncovering the truth behind the act.

Similarly, "The 405 Murder Case" employs these preconceptions. At the film's outset, a young woman briskly walks through a dimly lit alley, the quiet surroundings echoing only with the sound of her footsteps. The ominous atmosphere subtly hints at danger, and at this point, the audience's subconscious has already made assumptions regarding the imminent demise of the woman. However, the specifics of how and why she meets her fate remain unknown, setting the stage for suspense. As the woman enters an apartment building and turns into Room 405, the camera focuses on the door number, followed by a piercing scream and the blare of sirens, announcing the occurrence of a homicide. This abrupt intrusion of suspense into the audience's consciousness captivates them.

The key difference lies in "The 405 Murder Case," where the woman actually doesn't meet her demise; she is merely startled and rendered unconscious at the crime scene, serving as a narrative twist.

2.Sensory Stimulation: Cinematic Space and Sound Rendering

Alfred Hitchcock's films often employ various visual spectacles, with one of the most representative images being staircases. In "Vertigo," Hitchcock utilizes dolly zoom shots to make the spiraling staircase visually resemble an abyss, creating a sense of infinite disorientation and vertigo within a confined space, making acrophobia tangible and palpable. In "Psycho," Hitchcock employs a high-angle aerial shot of the staircase in the mansion. As the private detective enters the mansion and approaches the second-floor room step by step, the fixed overhead perspective combined with the angular staircase creates an inescapable sense of claustrophobia. The door on the right side of the frame becomes an unexpected focal point, with the glint of a knife in the dimly lit scene serving as the most striking and bloody symbol, delivering intense visual impact to the audience.



In "The 405 Murder Case," there are also two instances where staircases are captured from special angles to create visual spectacles. Firstly, during Li Liang's interrogation of Fang Mingshan, demanding him to hand over materials, the camera descends straight down from the top, enveloping Fang Mingshan within the layered structure of the staircase. His defiance appears futile, with the shot implying that he is trapped and unable to escape. The vertical overhead perspective, combined with the winding staircase, creates a sense of confinement and surreal psychological suggestion. Secondly, during Fang Mingshan's attempted escape and

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the subsequent police pursuit, the film daringly employs a skewed angle to shoot a high-rise building. The camera rapidly descends from above the building, freezing on the stairwell where the characters are running. The extreme tilt angle conflicts strongly with the viewer's line of sight. The human brain has an unconscious mechanism to correct perspectives. Everyone has experienced discomfort when reading inverted text, and the film capitalizes on this principle to induce a sense of "maladaptation" visually, thereby reinforcing psychological tension.




Furthermore, sound rendering is also an integral part of sensory stimulation in films. Film sound effects typically encompass natural sounds, ambient noises, Foley effects, and musical scores, each contributing to different layers and intensities depending on the scene, thereby creating varying effects.

In "Psycho," the infamous shower scene utilizes sharp and rapid violin notes, coupled with Foley effects meticulously crafted through multiple experiments by the production team to simulate the piercing of human tissue with a knife into melons and steaks, achieving a chilling realism. As Marion begins to shower, the silhouette of a figure behind the shower curtain appears almost simultaneously with the sudden onset of the violin composition. The musical score, synchronized with the sound of the knife plunging, overshadows other natural and ambient sounds, effectively heightening the gruesome impact of the murder through sound effects.

Similarly, "The 405 Murder Case" employs distinctive sound effects. When typist Huang Lifang receives the notice to print "Execute Fang Mingshan" and rushes downstairs to seek help from Chen Minghui, the film creatively overlays the sound of a typewriter onto her footsteps. This not only intensifies the auditory impact but also implies the imminent approach of the enemy, underscoring the urgency of the situation. Additionally, the film progresses with variations in the theme music. When Chen Minghui is attacked by assailants, the melody is played with sharp instrumental tones, gripping the audience's emotions. As Chen Minghui recalls rescuing student leader Li Ming, the music transitions to a male vocal humming, conveying a blend of sorrow and steadfast determination. Finally, as the film concludes with Chen Minghui confronting the police chief, the musical score shifts from humming to a sung rendition of the lyrics "Everything will pass, only truth will endure," escalating the emotional intensity and bringing the film to its climax with a series of dynamic changes.

3. Montage Editing: Narrative Techniques and Expression

Montage, derived from the French term "montage," originally referred to the composition and assembly in architecture. In the context of film art, it denotes editing, juxtaposition, and collage methods, involving the recombination of shots, scenes, and segments to create contrasting, associative, and suspenseful effects. The types of cinematic montage can generally be categorized into three main types: narrative montage, expressive montage, and intellectual montage. Both Alfred Hitchcock's films and "The 405 Murder Case" utilize montage techniques to a certain extent.

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One of the most iconic examples of Hitchcockian montage is still the shower scene in "Psycho," which predominantly employs narrative montage. By stitching together numerous detail shots lasting less than a second, the scene depicting a murder lasts for about 30 seconds but comprises over 50 rapid cuts, involving more than sixty changes in camera position, to construct a complete sequence through cross-cutting montage. Notably, there is no direct depiction of the knife penetrating Marion's body in any of these detail shots. However, the scene remains profoundly horrifying because Hitchcock intercuts a shot of blood flowing down the bathtub, juxtaposing the dark blood against the pristine white surface, vividly illustrating the brutality of the crime and evoking visceral horror.

In contrast, "The 405 Murder Case" primarily employs expressive montage, aimed at conveying characters' emotions or expressing artistic intentions. There are three prominent instances of its use in the film.

Firstly, the film concretizes the imagined crime scenes in the characters' minds, projecting them onto reflective surfaces such as rearview mirrors and car windows. As Chen Minghui rides his bicycle home, suspecting the possibility of two perpetrators at the crime scene, the reflection in the bicycle's rearview mirror shows the scene of a double homicide. Simultaneously, the film accelerates the playback speed of these "picture-in-picture" scenes, suggesting that they are not actual footage but rather speculations by the police, reflected through mirrors. Film montage not only adds depth to the narrative structure and concretizes the characters' emotions but also serves as a means to "guide the audience to accept the producer's interpretation of real events." Particularly in suspense films, achieving aesthetic effects of multiple twists and turns requires leading the audience into wrong conjectures and cognitive pitfalls. Therefore, directors employ "psychological montage" to present the protagonist's ambiguous conjectures, aligning them with the audience's guesses. When the truth is revealed, the audience experiences both shock and enlightenment, sharing the joy of unraveling the mystery with the characters. This application further embodies the earlier concept of "the second gaze," or "dual scrutiny."





The second instance involves the film directly presenting characters' imaginations about the future, highlighting the tumultuous emotions within. Upon learning of the decision to execute Fang Mingshan, Chen Minghui is filled with sorrow and anger, envisioning the heroic sacrifice of Fang Mingshan for the revolutionary cause. The film maximizes the integration of sound and imagery, juxtaposing Chen Minghui's brisk pace with quick shots of the prison van heading to the wilderness. Viewers are immersed in the character's imagination until the sudden sound of a gunshot, which is revealed to be the noise of a roadside drilling machine. The fantasy is shattered, bringing the audience back to reality. With the interplay of reality and illusion, the film constructs a unique artistic time-space, dynamically expressing the characters' emotions.

Thirdly, at the film's conclusion, a flashback-style "temporal reenactment" of the chief's office is employed. In Chen Minghui's eyes, the chief's smiling yet insidious figure overlaps with his past collaboration with Liu Guoqiang and others to issue the cold-blooded order to frame Fang Mingshan. Now, however, he deals ambiguously with the righteous detective, using his power to assign Chen Minghui to a labor reform farm. The

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juxtaposition of past and present scenes at the same location, before heinous deeds and today's actions, creates a powerful visual impact. This technique was quite innovative in 1980s China, to the extent that during the editing process, some comrades couldn't grasp it, leading the director to attempt multiple edits. Ultimately, by rapidly flashing the negatives and positives of the photographs, the audience is reminded that this is a depiction of the past. This treatment not only vividly portrays the chief's cunning and villainy but also reaches the pinnacle of Chen Minghui's disdain and disgust towards him. These few shots themselves possess aesthetic appeal, adding depth to the film's narrative expression.




4. "Thrill" versus "Suspense" — Differences in Approach

The audiovisual language serves as the "poetics" of cinema, enabling films to present rich narrative structures and serving as a comprehensive expression of aesthetic artistry. However, beneath the sensory expression from a phenomenological perspective, the ultimate purpose of this technique points to different perspectives in various films. Any form of art is built upon the expression of its content, with the theme and author's intent guiding the construction of its form.

Although both employ montage editing techniques, the methods and purposes of expression in "Psycho" and "The Case of 405" are vastly different. "Psycho" seeks to create a terrifying and gruesome atmosphere. Besides the famous "shower scene," moments like the private detective's stabbing in the mansion, Laila's bone-chilling encounter in the cellar, Norman's eerie smile at the end, all envelop the entire film in an aura of imminent danger, leaving the audience with lingering unease. Especially, the death of the female protagonist, Marion, midway through the film breaks conventions, introducing a detective who inevitably carries the audience's expectation of leading them to the ultimate truth. Typically, detectives serve as instrumental figures in such narratives, and their safety isn't a concern. However, in a sudden twist, this detective is unexpectedly stabbed and falls down the stairs to his demise, shattering both the conventional narrative and the audience's sense of security, imprinting fear into their minds.

On the other hand, "The Case of 405" exhibits strong anti-corruption and anti-spectacularism sentiments. Despite multiple hindrances from the adversaries, led by Chen Minghui, the police officers never face actual harm. They persevere against all odds, escaping death repeatedly. While viewers may worry about the characters' safety, fundamentally, this concern doesn't extend to the audience themselves. Their "sense of security" remains intact. Director Shen Yaoting stated in his director's notes, "I mainly focused on three aspects: how to portray the true feelings of the characters, how to employ narrative methods more in line with the characteristics of film, and how to film action scenes well." All the suspense and tension in the film merely surface expressions of the plot. Whether it's character development or the distinctive Chinese kung fu action scenes, everything serves the thematic purpose of "everything will pass, only the truth remains." Therefore, Shen Yaoting defined this film as a "thriller," striving to achieve suspense without the intention of inducing fear.

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The fundamentally different intentions behind their expressions are the primary reasons for the contrasting atmospheres presented in "The Case of 405" and Hitchcock's films. The themes of artistic works are closely related to the demands of the market audience. Hitchcock's films brought vivid innovations to the relatively saturated European and American film markets, pioneering the genre of psychological thrillers. In contrast, "The Case of 405" responded to the demands of socialist cultural construction under the people's politics, criticizing the national scoundrels to establish the people's subject status, echoing the call for the eternal truth, striving to establish a film model more in line with the people's needs in the post-chaos era. Fundamentally, both films serve their respective times and societies.

Certainly, "The Case of 405" may not hold the same status in film history as Hitchcock's numerous films. Many of its techniques may have drawn inspiration from the latter, but it has also innovated and developed on this basis. "The Case of 405" is an undeniable achievement in the history of Chinese suspense films, with its creation of suspense, the utilization of camera and sound, and its structurally rich narrative still holding significance for learning and exploration.

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