



Let 'Em Play God

INFORMATIONAL TEXT

Alfred Hitchcock

1948

Introduction

With films that consistently put viewers on the edge of their seats, British film director Alfred Hitchcock earned the nickname “The Master of Suspense.” In the following excerpt from a 1948 essay, Hitchcock describes how he creates suspense by letting the audience “play God”—by providing them with certain information not known to characters in a movie—and illustrates how he used the technique to create dramatic tension in his 1948 thriller, *Rope*.

“As far as I’m concerned, you have suspense when you let the audience play God.”

NOTES



Skill: Author's Purpose and Point of View

Hitchcock is answering a question, but is he writing to inform or explain?

He starts to answer the question by describing how suspense is created, so he must be writing to explain. I'm just not sure what he means yet.

From “Let ‘Em Play God”

1. Every maker of mystery movies aims at getting the audience on the edge of their seats. The **ingredient** to keep them there is called “suspense.” Producers¹ cry for it, writers cry in agony to get it, and actors cry for joy when they do get it. I've often been asked what it is.
2. As far as I'm concerned, you have suspense when you let the audience play God.
3. Suppose, for instance, you have six characters involved in a mystery. A man has been murdered and all six are possible **suspects** but no one is sure including the audience.
4. One of the characters, a young man, is standing in a shadowy room with his back to the door when an unidentified character in a cloak and black hat sneaks in and slugs him into **insensibility**. It's a brutal act, but if the audience does not know whether the young man is a killer or a hero they will not know whether to cheer or weep.
5. If the audience does know, if they have been told all the secrets that the characters do not know, they'll work like the devil for you because they know what fate is facing the poor actors. That is what is known as “playing God.” That is suspense.
6. For 17 years I have been making pictures described alternately as thrillers, dark mysteries, and chillers, yet I have never actually directed a whodunit² or a puzzler. Offhand this may sound like **debunking**, but I do not believe that puzzling the audience is the essence of suspense.
7. Take, for instance, the drama I recently filmed at Warner Bros. called *Rope*. It stars James Stewart with Joan Chandler, our new discovery, in the feminine lead.

1. **Producers** the people who oversee the production of a film
2. **whodunit** a story about a murder in which the murderer's identity is concealed until the conclusion of the narrative

NOTES

8. John Dall and Farley Granger strangle a young man in the opening shot. They put his body in a chest, cover the chest with a damask cloth and silver service, then serve *hors d'oeuvres* and drinks from it at a party for the victim's father, mother, sweetheart, and assorted friends. Everyone is gay and charming. When Stewart begins to suspect foul play late in the film John Dall puts a gun in his pocket in case things get too hot.
9. The audience knows everything from the start, the players know nothing. There is not a single detail to puzzle the audience. It is certainly not a whodunit for the simple reason that everyone out front knows who did it. No one on the screen knows except the two murderers. The fact that the audience watches actors go blithely through an atmosphere that is loaded with evil makes for real suspense.
10. These are the questions, now, that constantly pop up. Will the murderers break and give themselves away? When the victim does not show up for the party will his father suspect? Will Jimmy get killed before he discovers the actual crime? How long will that body lie in its wooden grave at a champagne party without being discovered? If we are successful we'll have the audience at such a pitch that they want to shout every time one of the players goes near that chest.
11. In order to achieve this, one of the necessary ingredients of the formula is a series of **plausible** situations with people that are real. When characters are **unbelievable** you never get suspense, only surprise.
12. Just because there is a touch of murder and an air of mystery about a story it is not necessary to see transoms opening, clutching fingers, hooded creatures, and asps on the Chinese rug.
13. *Spellbound* was based on complete psychiatric truth. *Foreign Correspondent* was simply the story of a man hammering away at events with a woman who was not much help. *Notorious* concerned a woman caught in a web of world events from which she could not extricate herself and *The Paradine Case* was a love story embedded in the emotional quicksand of a murder trial.
14. In none of these was the house filled with shadows, the weather dull and stormy throughout, the moor windswept, and the doors creaky. In fact, it is important in a story with sinister implications to use counterpoint, great contrast between situation and background, as we did in *Rope*.
15. John Dall is guilty of a bestial crime which the audience sees him perform with young Granger. But throughout the film he is grace and charm itself and his apartment is gay and beautifully appointed. And when Granger plays the piano he picks a light and childish piece, a minuet. Suspense involves contrast.

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