

The Use of Editing in North by Northwest

Alfred Hitchcock spins a tale of suspense wherein a man becomes a secret agent because of a case of mistaken identity to save his life in this funny and suspenseful masterpiece of cinema. He uses thematic montage and associational editing to heighten suspense, Formalist theory editing to place the viewer into the scene, and provides continuity by cutting out frivolities that would otherwise make the film drag.

Sergei Eisenstein said that “Montage is conflict”, and one would be hard pressed to find a finer example of that than in the art auction scene in North by Northwest. Alfred Hitchcock incorporates both thematic montage and associational editing in this particular scene. He uses a form of montage known as “accelerated montage”. The scene begins with a slow dolly shot of Roger Thornhill walking into an art gallery to find Miss Kendall sitting with none other than the very man who has sent him on his illustrious journey, Mr. Vandamm. The camera follows Thornhill up to the seat where Miss Kendall and Mr. Vandamm are seated, and the shots grow shorter and shorter from person to person as the conversation builds. Hitchcock uses both this form of accelerated montage and associational editing, as when he does not even necessarily focus on the person who is speaking the actual dialogue, but on the person of whom the dialogue *affects* most, giving the viewer no choice but to focus on that

character rather than the person speaking. This particular combination of shots, even without the dialogue, gives us the idea that Miss Kendall is going to be met with some trouble once she and Mr. Vandamm leave the building. There is a look of panic and guilt on her face up until the very moment she is forced to leave the room, and the viewer feels that something bad is going to happen to her.

North by Northwest's editing style fits more into Soviet Montage (Formalist Theory) than Bazin's tradition of realism. Bazin preferred longer takes and believed that it was "better not to undermine the impression of reality with editing." Hitchcock, however, does his best and does not undermine reality, but rather allows the viewer to feel the realistic suspense of the scene with his fast takes and close-ups, and by, as Eisenstein believed to be superior, cutting shots at the height of their tension.

Continual and classical cuts in this film are widespread. For example, obviously it would take Grant and the police longer to get from the art gallery to the airport than a fraction of a second, which is how long it takes in the actual film. Since nothing of value happens on the way to the airport, the film's continuity depends on Hitchcock cutting this from the film. However, not only does the continuity depend on the quick cuts between scenes, but within the scene as well. Simply providing the viewer with a view of the action as if it were a stage play would compromise the integrity of the film. The rhythm of

the film is dependent on each character's action as well as dialogue. Fast-paced and chronological as this film is, the relationship between one scene and the next is as important, if not more important, than the relationship between the characters. When Vandamm takes Miss Kendall out of the room, Thornhill tries to figure out how he, too, can escape from the room without being caught. He then sits next to a lady and begins to disrupt the proceedings, causing a scene, initiating a bit of a ruckus and provides himself with a police escort to get out alive. It is suspense combined with classical humor and debauchery, and he gets exactly what he needs from it.

Overall, the editing in the scene is quick where it needs to be, slow enough to build the proper amount of suspense, and takes special care to keep the audience interested and on the edge of their seats, waiting for Thornhill to make his next move.