

**Topics in Film History: Hitchcock's Film
Assignment #1: Film Shot and Narrative Analysis**

Alfred Hitchcock's
Number 17 (1932)

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Sequence #1

Detailed overview

15 Seconds: 00:38:24 – 00:38:39

Having just tied Barton and Rose to the railing at the top of the stairs, Shelldrake, Brant, Henry and Nora are about to leave them behind to catch the train.

00:38:24

Long shot

POV: Barton & Rose

Shelldrake, Brant, Henry are Nora departing the hallway at the top of the stairs, exiting through a door on the right at the end of a corridor. Nora lags behind the men as she slowly and deliberately dropping her purse to the floor.

00:38:28

CU: Henry

Henry turns to face the camera and looks down.

00:38:29

POV: Henry

Nora's purse on the floor, her hand appears in the foreground as she walks out of the frame.

00:38:30

CU: Henry turns back around and continues to walk away.

00:38:30

Med Shot: Barton & Rose look up from the floor at each other.

00:38:31

POV: Barton & Rose

Med shot: Nora looks over her shoulder and says "I'm coming back" then continues walking away.

00:38:34

Med shot: Barton & Rose look at each other surprised. "She spoke" Rose remarks. They look back toward the doorway.

00:38:38

Long shot: Nora walks around the corner through a doorway at the end of the hall.

00:38:39

Med shot: Barton & Girl watching Nora's departure. Barton remarks "The deaf and dumb business was a fake. Trick of a crook."

Sequence #1

Comments

During this sequence, we have a case of appearance vs. reality. Thus far in the story – we have understood the character of Nora to be “deaf and dumb”, in this sequence – it is revealed that this is not true, as evidenced by her speaking to Barton & Rose. This revelation surprises both the characters in the film as well as the viewer as the assumptions we have constructed based upon the past thirty-eight minutes about the characters are now drawn into question.

This revelation unfolds through this series of shot-reverse-shots which alternate between the POV of Barton and Rose and the view from the hallway through which the rest are departing.

We see Nora from Barton and Rose’s POV as she lags behind the men as they begin to walk away and slowly and deliberately drops her purse to the floor, CU shot on Harry as he turns and looks down, CU of the purse on the floor (with Nora’s hand in the foreground as she walks OC), CU Harry again, as looks back up, turns back around and continues walking.

Henry’s reaction to the purse is somewhat strange, clearly he has seen it on the floor but he chose to say nothing. Why? That we never find out what motivated this decision is not important, what is important about Harry’s unusual behavior is that it plants a seed of doubt about Harry’s character – what are his motivations? There is ample room for doubt with Harry as thus far – as we haven’t been given a very strong sense of who he is. The sense of doubt created by his non-reaction to Nora’s purse creates suspicion, which will give a double meaning to everything he does from this point forward – which in turn, creates suspense.

After Harry continues to walk away we see Barton and Rose as they exchanging confused glances, and then from their POV we see Nora turn and tell them “I’m coming back”. We are then shown Barton and Rose’s reaction to this, as they watch Nora depart and look at one another surprised, to which Rose remarks “She spoke!”

The way in which this exchange is shot, more specifically the shot from Barton and Rose’s POV of Nora turning around and saying “I’m coming back” – allows the viewer to experience the surprise through the eyes of Barton and Rose. If this exchange had been presented in one long shot, Nora’s first words would be hardly as engaging.

Just as the viewer is likely wondering to themselves “*didn’t someone just finish saying that she was deaf and dumb? What’s going on?*”... Rose vocalizes this on screen with her line “She spoke!”, which confirms for the viewer that yes – it has been twice mentioned that Nora was deaf and dumb, and yes she did speak, so no – that wasn’t true.

This plot-twist puts the wind in the sails of the narrative, just when we thought that Barton and Rose were about to be left behind tied to the railing – suddenly they find they have an ally in Nora, who really isn’t deaf. This revelation shifts the tone of the narrative; hope is restored for Barton and Rose and from this point forward the pace of the narrative increases.

The final shot that I have included in this sequence is another medium shot of Barton and Rose as Barton remarks “The deaf and dumb business was a fake. The trick of a crook” and the two begin to squirm and struggle to break free of the ropes.

Sequence #2

Detailed Overview

46 Seconds: 00:53:09 – 00:53:55

Shelldrake and Brant in their pursuit of Henry were just spotted by one of the engineers – shot the fellow shoveling coal, and have entered the engine car only to have the engineer operating the train faint. Meanwhile, Barton has hijacked a bus and is in hot pursuit of the train.

00:53:09

Ext Railway

Direction: L-R

CU: Front of train whizzing along the tracks.

00:53:12

Ext. Road

Direction: L-R

Pan of bus passing the camera as it speeds down the road.

00:53:13

Int. Bus (rear)

Passengers are screaming in panic as they are tossed around by the motion of the bus. A woman is standing flailing her arms wailing as a seated male passenger tries to calm her down.

00:53:15

Int. Bus (front cab)

CU: Profile Barton in foreground looking somewhat calm and determined, the driver is leaned forward and looking tense as he drives the bus.

00:53:16

Ext. Road

Direction R-L

The bus coming toward the camera as it continues speeding along the road. There is a sign on the right side of the road.

00:53:18

Ext. Road

Insert Shot: CU: Sign swinging in the wake of the speeding bus. "Stop here for Dainty Teas"

00:53:20

Ext. Road

Direction: R-L

Long shot of bus speeding down the road.

00:53:23

Ext. Railway

Direction: L-R

PAN: Train speeds past

00:53:25

Ext. Road

Direction: R-L

Bus speeding along road

00:53:26

Ext. Railway
Direction: L-R
Train speeding along tracks

00:53:28

Int. Train
Shelldrake and Brant are trying to revive the engineer and realize he's hit his head on a bar. They look at one another for a moment, then move to the instrument panel and begin fumbling.

00:53:35

Ext. Railway
CU: Train wheels and machinery grinding away.

00:53:36

Int. Train
Brant and Shelldrake continue to fumble at the instrument panel.

00:53:39

Ext. Railway
Direction: L-R
Train speeds along the tracks.

00:53:41

Ext. Railway
POV: Train
The train speeds through an underpass and past a stop as the whistle blows

00:53:46

Ext. Railway
Direction L-R
Train speeding along the tracks.

00:53:47

Int. Train
CU: Brant fumbling with levers

00:53:48

Int. Train
Jump Cut: CU: Shelldrake looks out the window then moves back to the instrument panel (to the left).

00:53:50

Int. Train
Jump Cut: CU: Brant turns to the right, looking toward the window past Shelldrake who is still fumbling.

00:53:52

Int. Train
Jump Cut: CU: Shelldrake, pan left to Brant.

00:53:53

Ext. Railway
CU: Wheel and machinery grinding away furiously.

00:53:53

Int. Train

CU: Shelldrake looking out window. Brant joins him. They look at one another then back.

00:53:55

Ext. Countryside

Direction: R-L

Long shot of train and the bus traveling parallel to one another toward the camera.

Sequence #2

Comments

These 46 seconds contain approximately four sequences that play out back to back:

- 1) 00:53:12 – 00:53:20 – The chaos of the bus
- 2) 00:53:20 – 00:53:28 – The parallel chase between the train and the bus
- 3) 00:53:28 - 00:53:47 – The chaos of the train – as Brant and Shelldrake attempt to regain control.
- 4) 00:53:47 – 00:53:53 – The train out of control, as Brant and Shelldrake are helpless to stop it

I've considered these as a whole, and included the shots on either end that I felt in my judgment framed this period in the film as a sequence that brings the excitement of the chase to a fever pitch. The sense of suspense and chaos is heightened during this sequence as the shots alternate between the bus and the train, internal and external, and the direction in which the action (or the camera) moves.

Once Shelldrake and Brant realize that the engineer has passed out, we are shown a three second shot of the front of the train as it roars along the track. Knowing that the engineer has passed out and no one is driving the train changes the meaning of this image. We are left with a mini-cliffhanger at this point, as the next shot abandons the action on the train and takes us to an external shot of the bus speeding by on the road (moving in the same direction as the train; left to right) which we know Barton has hijacked to chase them.

Next we are shown two seconds inside the rear of the speeding bus as the passengers are screaming in panic as they are tossed about. In the center of the shot there is one woman standing waving her arms about frantically as a seated male passenger attempts to console her. The next shot lasts about one second and shows us the front of the bus (separated from the passenger area by glass), Barton seated next to the driver in silence. Barton's gaze is fixed on the road ahead, although the posture of the driver is somewhat tense – a contrast to the pandemonium happening on the other side of the glass.

Next we are taken outside the bus, a two second long shot of the bus roaring down the road toward the camera. Barely visible is a sign on the right hand side of the road, we are given a two second insert shot of the sign swinging in the wake of the speeding bus which reads: "Stop here for Dainty Teas".

These four shots encapsulate the overall chaos of the hijacked bus, the passengers are freaking out, Barton is fixated on catching this train, the driver is being forced to drive at gunpoint, and then we're shown this insert shot of a sign for (presumably) a tea room.

What follows between 00:53:20 – 00:53:26 are another four shots, which alternate between the bus and the train. In the two shots of the bus - it is moving from right to left. In the two shots of the train – it is moving left to right. This montage increases the suspense and tension for the viewer as it clearly illustrates that they are on a collision course. The timing of the shots becomes progressively shorter: the first long shot of the bus speeding down the road is about three seconds. The second shot of the train as it speeds past is two seconds, the third shot of the bus is only one second long, then the fourth shot of the train is two seconds – then the following shot is

of the internal of the engine car where Brant and Shelldrake are desperately trying to regain control of the train. This six second exchange further escalates the suspense and anticipation to a fever pitch.

We are then brought back inside the engine room of the train where Shelldrake and Brant are trying to revive the engineer and discover that he's hit his head on a bar. Realizing that they are up the creek for lack of a better term, their eyes meet for a moment before they rush over to the instrument panel and desperately begin fumbling about trying to regain control of the train.

This seven second shot is followed by a one second close-up shot of the train wheels and machinery grinding furiously, cut to Brant and Shelldrake inside the engine car fumbling with levers for three seconds, cut to an external shot of the front of the train as it continues to speed along for two seconds. Next we have a five second shot from the POV of the front of the train as it speeds through an underpass and passes a stop without losing momentum, then a one second long shot of the train as it continues down the track.

This montage between the action inside the train as Brant and Shelldrake's efforts to regain control, and the action happening on the outside of the train illustrate the futility of their efforts. Nothing they have done thus far has succeeded in slowing the speeding train down, the sense of anticipation during this cause and effect sequence is amplified by the difference in the volume of the sounds of the train. During the internal shots, we here the sounds the train is making at a moderate volume, during the external shots the sounds are much louder – and the pitch is slightly higher (*this pitch variance may very well be due to my very old and cantankerous VCR however*). The volume is especially loud during the close up of the wheels.

From 00:53:47 to 00:53:52 are four internal shots of Brant and Shelldrake as they continue their efforts at the instrument panel. These four shots employ the same directional contrast as the earlier shots between the train and the bus, except here – we have a series of four jump cuts between Brant and Shelldrake, during which the camera or the characters are moving left or right. These alternating shots are about 1-2 seconds in length; the use of jump cuts and the opposing direction of movement together create a sense of chaos as the two men scramble about at the instrument panel in their attempt to regain control of the speeding train. This is followed by another external quick CU shot of the machinery about the wheels of the train, the momentum seems to have increased and the sound is even louder.

Next a two second shot during which Shelldrake, looking out the window is joined by Brant. They exchange worried glances, and it is clear – they are powerless to stop the speeding train.

In the last shot in this sequence, the train and bus finally appear in the same frame. Throughout the past 46 seconds, we've seen the parallel action between the train and the bus – but have not been provided a sense of context for how close or far apart they are. The absence of this information increases our sense of suspense and anticipation; this shot reveals that Barton's bus has succeeded in catching up to the train at this point, the excitement has peaked and the chase moves forward into the home stretch.