Psycho (1960)

Alfred Hitchcock's powerful, complex psychological thriller, Psycho (1960) is the "mother" of all modern horror suspense films - it single-handedly ushered in an era of inferior screen 'slashers' with blood-letting and graphic, shocking killings (e.g., Homicidal (1961), The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974), Halloween (1978), Motel Hell (1980), and DePalma's Dressed to Kill (1980) - with another transvestite killer and shower scene). While this was Hitchcock's first real horror film, he was mistakenly labeled as a horror film director ever since.

The nightmarish, disturbing film's themes of corruptibility, confused identities, voyeurism, human vulnerabilities and victimization, the deadly effects of money, Oedipal murder, and dark past histories are realistically revealed. Its themes were revealed through repeated uses of motifs, such as birds, eyes, hands, and mirrors.

The low-budget ($800,000), brilliantly-edited, stark black and white film came after Hitchcock's earlier glossy Technicolor hits Vertigo (1958) and North by Northwest (1959), and would have been more suited for as an extended episode for his own b/w TV series Alfred Hitchcock Presents. In fact, the film crew was from the TV show, including cinematographer John L. Russell.

The master of suspense skillfully manipulates and guides the audience into identifying with the main character, luckless victim Marion (a Phoenix real-estate secretary), and then with that character's murderer - a crazy and timid taxidermist named Norman (a brilliant typecasting performance by Anthony Perkins). Hitchcock's techniques voyeuristically implicate the audience with the universal, dark evil forces and secrets present in the film.

Psycho also broke all film conventions by displaying its leading female protagonist having a lunchtime affair in her sexy white undergarments in the first scene; also by photographing a toilet bowl - and flush - in a bathroom (a first in an American film), and killing off its major 'star' Janet Leigh a third of the way into the film (in a shocking, brilliantly-edited shower murder scene accompanied by screeching violins). The 90-odd shot shower scene was meticulously storyboarded by Saul Bass, but directed by Hitchcock himself.

[A satirical parody of scenes from various Hitchcock films, including some from Psycho, were included in Mel Brooks' comedy High Anxiety (1978). The shower scene itself has been referenced, spoofed and parodied in numerous films, including Brian De Palma's The Phantom of the Paradise (1974) and Dressed to Kill (1980), Squirm (1976), Victor Zimmerman's low-budget Fade to Black (1980), Tobe Hooper's The Funhouse (1981), John De Bello's Killer Tomatoes Strike Back! (1990), Martin Walz' The Killer Condom (1997, Ger.), Wes Craven's Scream 2 (1997), Scott Spiegel's From Dusk Till Dawn 2: Texas Blood Money (1999), and the animated Looney Tunes: Back in Action (2003), in which Bugs acts out with the film's black-and-white footage and a can of Hershey's chocolate syrup poured down the drain.]

In this film, Hitchcock's gimmicky device, termed a MacGuffin (the thing or device that motivates the characters, or propels the plot and action), is the stolen $40,000 from the realtor's office. Marion Crane becomes a secondary MacGuffin after her murder.


Like many of Hitchcock's films, *Psycho* is so very layered and complex that multiple viewings are necessary to capture all of its subtlety. Symbolic imagery involving stuffed birds and reflecting mirrors are ever-present. Although it's one of the most frightening films ever made, it has all the elements of very dark, black comedy. This film wasn't clearly understood by its critics when released. Hitchcock admitted that Henri-Georges Clouzot's influential thriller *Les Diaboliques (1955, Fr.)* inspired his film.

The film's four Academy Award nominations failed to win Oscars: Best Supporting Actress (Janet Leigh with her sole career nomination), Best Director (Alfred Hitchcock with the last of his five losing nominations), Best B/W Cinematography, and Best B/W Art Direction/Set Decoration. Bernard Herrmann's famous and memorable score with shrieking, harpie-like piercing violins was un-nominated.

When the film was originally aired in theaters in mid-1960, Hitchcock insisted in a publicity gimmick (a la P.T. Barnum) that no one would be seated after the film had started - the decree was enforced by uniformed Pinkerton guards. Audiences assumed that something horrible would happen in the first few minutes. Violence is present for about two minutes total in only two shocking, grisly murder scenes, the first about a third of the way through, and the second when a Phoenix detective named Arbogast is stabbed at the top of a flight of stairs and topples backwards down the staircase. The remainder of the horror and suspense is created in the mind of the audience, although the tale does include such taboo topics as transvestism, implied incest, and hints of necrophilia.

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