

Psycho college essay



**ASSIGN
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“ Hitchcock stunned the world in 1960 with the horror film that pushed back the boundaries of acceptability. He wanted a reaction, and he got one. Audiences fainted, walked out and boycotted screenings but they wouldn't forget the horror that was Psycho.

” We have been studying the acclaimed thriller ‘ Psycho’ produced and directed by Alfred Hitchcock. In this essay I will be analysing the two murder scenes and how visual images, (images seen on screen that stick in the mind of the audience or have some greater significance), and careful presentational devices, (camera shots, sound, lighting etc) have created this filming masterpiece. The film was released on June 16th 1960 and premiered in New York. Audiences across the world were shocked and disturbed about the graphic content of the film. The film had a number of issues that would change censorship laws forever. For example, then the film was certified 18 but now it is 15, which proves there has been a huge change in the way films are perceived by the present generation of people.

In the film we see sex out of marriage, nudity, murder and hints of transvestism. The film proved to be a landmark in cinematography. And the mise en scene (put into the scene) is brilliantly produced to give the film several different levels of meaning. The traditional Hollywood film would have a beginning, middle and an end but in Psycho the audience can't follow the film because Hitchcock broke all the traditional film making rules. If you start with the leading lady you end with the leading lady but he doesn't.

Instead forty five minutes into the film she is killed and the audience is left feeling shocked and confused. The typical horror genre in a Hollywood film

nearly always involved vampires and ghost's but this film was based on a series of situations that could happen anywhere anytime in the real world. An example of this is where Marion and her boyfriend John Gavin is a couple in debt having sex out of marriage in dark sleazy hotels with ordinary jobs. Hitchcock, very unusually for the time, used 50mm camera lenses, a lense with the closest relation to the human eye to give it a sense of realism and so the audience would feel as if they are there while it's being shot on location.

Hitchcock based the film on the true life story of serial killer Ed Gern and bought all the rights to the film for \$9000 and bought as many books as he could to keep the film's story as secret as possible. He went to extraordinary lengths to keep the film secret, his film crew and cast had to swear to an oath of secrecy on the first day of shooting, and no unauthorised personnel were allowed on or of set. Hitchcock was a master of PR stunts and did many things to give his film as much free publicity as possible. After the entire budget for the film was \$800, 000 as paramount refused to fund this risque project? Because of the low budget, costs had to be kept to a minimum where ever possible.

Hitchcock used his film crew from his new T. V program and produced the film in black and white for three reasons one it was much cheaper to produce the film using mono-colour then coloured film, to cover up the gory scenes and to again make the film feel ordinary. Janet Leigh (Marion Crane) didn't wear glamorous costumes for the movie but instead bought normal clothes from normal shops so that the audience could identify her role as an estate agent receptionist nor did she wear too much make-up instead kept it to a

minimum and even done her own hair. Alfred's uncanny ways of boosting the hype surrounding Psycho were unlike anything ever heard of or seen before. In the sixties it was normal procedure for people to walk into a movie at anytime and leave when they want but it was strictly forbidden that anyone should enter the screening during it, instead it was the first case of fixed timings for films and the first use of ticket stubs.

Queues tailed back for blocks on end, in Chicago particularly, the cinemas were worried that the crowds would become unsettled and restless.

Hitchcock ordered staff to buy umbrellas and give them to cinemas to distribute appropriately. This proved that Alfred could turn a potentially disastrous situation into a publicity stunt that was guaranteed headline news the next day. After all any publicity is good publicity.

At the end of the film the shocked audience were left in darkness and Hitchcock asked the audience not to reveal the ending as they only had one. Critics were not allowed to see the film before hand and had to queue with the paying public, a British review in 1968 claimed that critic's egos were deeply bruised and that this was the reason for the initial bad reviews given about Psycho. A six minute trailer was provided with Alfred himself presenting it. At the beginning we see the house dominating the set and the steps leading up, the idea of two worlds, good and the bad is already being portrayed. In it he refers to the two murders and the mother.

But Hitchcock is vague and pretends he is too scared to go into grotesque details of the murders, this gives a significant effect on what you perceive about the movie even if you do not fall for his act. During Psycho's release

America was in a boom period. Living standards were improving, employment was high and technology was ever reaching new heights with the television firmly in place in the living room as if it had been here for decades beforehand. But it was also the time in which there was a strong division between blacks and whites, America's involvement in the Korean War, the cold war crisis was escalating and the Cuban missile crisis. Though it wasn't just politics of racial and communist problems that influenced in how the film was made but what was happening in the social groups, it was the rebellion of the teenager with rock gripping the music industry and the change of attitudes towards sex out of marriage and anything to do with sex in general.

This was seen as youthful threat but Hitchcock was well aware the younger generation were ever growing in populace support and more rebellious so he felt the sex scenes were essential to reach out to the youth and the way in which they behaved at that time. There was always going to be one big issue with the film and this was censorship. This film would push the boundaries of censorship laws back forever and change the way we perceive sex and murder as well. Any film in the US had to be checked by the MPPDA, (Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors of America). Alfred was warned that it was very unlikely that it'd be certified even an X and been allowed to be screened unless significant changes took place. Apart from the issues of blasphemy, by using words such as ' God' and ' hell', Alfred was asked to remove the point that Norman had an incestuous relationship with his mother and the discussion of transvestism.

But Janet Leigh (Marion Crane) recalled that Alfred had said “ he had planned to manipulate the censors by deliberately putting in things so bizarre that when they asked him to remove them, he would say ok but let me have this and that, so he was able to bargain with them. But nothing was more scrutinized then the nudity of the shower scene. Some censors adamantly believed there was a clear shot of a nipple but it was not so, instead it was suggested by the clever use of montage editing which Hitchcock had seen used from the work of the Soviet film makers of the 1920's. Hitchcock left this supposed ‘ nipple shot’ untouched and the censors did not say anything when it was sent back for reviewing. The actual shower murder would definitely not be allowed to be shown, so with the use of montage editing the audience thought they would see the knife slash her body but instead by cutting on every strike of the knife we didn't, though walked away thinking we had.

Hitchcock was very careful on who he cast for Norman Bates the impact of this character had to be stunning yet deceiving. Alfred wanted Bates to have a softness about him and a look of vulnerability which was impeccably portrayed when Norman was seen chewing his candy bars. The first time Norman appears in the film he looks a kind young man who always tries to do good. But when later on in the conversation about Bates' troubles with his mother an intensity comes into the performance and his whole character embroils in new expressions and tones and for the first time we see the dominating effect of Norman which makes the audience feel a little uneasy and nervous. The reoccurring themes in which entail the film throughout are

ones that make the film what it is and how it is considered ingenious work by perhaps the greatest film director ever.

The theme of the mother throughout is very unusual and doesn't seem to give a huge impact until the story is unravelled at the end. One theme that does have a strong influence on the film is voyeurism. But this kind of pleasurable viewing is very discreet in certain parts of the production. For example at the very beginning of the film the camera pans along the sky until a long shot of a city appears then it begins to focus on a building until we have a close up shot of one window.

As the camera focuses through the window it pans across the room towards a bed. On it Marion Crane and Sam Loomis are dressing, obviously just after they have had sex, for the first time in cinema history we see a woman, Marion semi naked adjusting her bra. This itself would shock and disturb the audience. Notice her underwear is black which symbolises her sin.

Birds are seen as watchers of the world, which can be related to voyeurism. The sub-theme birds watching runs throughout the film with subtle clues such as Marion's second name, 'Crane' the city she comes from, 'Phoenix' and Norman's unusual hobby of taxidermy where we can see stuffed birds in the house and motel. A more obvious example of voyeurism is when Bates watches Marion undress and go into the bathroom through a small hole behind a picture. An excellent clue of the film's unravelling plot is shown on this picture which depicts a scene of murder and rape. Marriage itself is an effective sub-theme as Sam is in debt and divorced which adds to the reason why they do not marry and Marion has to lie to her friends.

You can see the tension bubbling when after the very first scene when she is at work in the estate agents, Caroline her co-worker begins to talk about her marriage to her wonderful husband and how happy they are in love; Marion just has to smile and work on. To add to the suspense and tension of scenes Hitchcock uses dramatic irony on numerous occasions such as in the hotel room in the first scene Marion says to Sam, " checking out times in these kind of hotels is 3: 30 and when your time is up....

. " little does she know that she'd never check out of the motel, also when Sam is visited by Lila Crane, Marion's sister, a customer buying rat poison remarks, " death should always be painless. " Obviously for Marion and Arbogast it wasn't, the audience knows this but the characters on screen don't thus creating more tension. After Marion's steals the money from her boss she packs and sets off as quick as she can planning to tell Sam about it after she was far enough away.

On her way out of the city she sees her boss Mr Lowery, surprised she gives a suspicious smile and he returns a second quick glance. After a long time travelling Marion stops on the hard shoulder to rest for the night. The next morning Marion is woken by a policeman, automatically she thinks she's been caught and looks very nervous the audience don't know whether she has as they see the stolen money as they key factor in the film. He asks to see her licence papers then says " there are plenty of motels in this area ...

.. I mean just to be on the safe side," this is more dramatic irony as Marion takes his advice but with murderous consequences. In the town she drives

through she purchases a new car, paid by cash with the same policeman watching her.

The audience thinks something is going to happen here and that she's going to be caught. Little do they know? Marion carries on with her journey until a thunderstorm forces her to take refuge in a motel, Bates motel. The thunderstorm is an outstanding use of a visual metaphor, with it relating to the shower scene, not very obvious at first but something niggles you in the back of the mind with all these clues there must be an answer to the strange context of the film. When Marion is first greeted by Norman it all seems a normal introduction between two people.

She makes a remark that she is hungry and Norman offers her some dinner after some brief persuasion she agrees. We see Norman run up the steps ' into a different world' when he is in the house the audience believes he is arguing with his mother. His mother seems an extremely overprotective, prudent woman. On his return they discuss his mother, he seems to love her and changes his attitude and becomes more aggressive when Marion ask's why isn't she in an old peoples home. Hitchcock's effect of a patriarchal society is evident here with Bates a dominant male.

After it's calmed down with the suspense mounting, Marion's retires to her room to take a shower. The money is wrapped in a newspaper on the cabinet next to the bed; the audience still believe the film is orientated around the stealing situation. But Marion has decided to give herself up and face the consequences. The next scene is perhaps dubbed the greatest ever with its clever use of music, suggestion and editing. The shower room is a 12 x 12 ft

set in which every thing is brilliant white the shower, tiles, floor and toilet! The first toilet believed ever to be shown on film, this also would be very surprising. Her underwear has changed to white, the room is white, so this signifies her repent of her sins.

In the bath room naked she is totally vulnerable, the murderer had invaded her private space and we sympathise for her. This first murder scene took 7 days to shoot, with seventy camera set ups for only 45 seconds of footage. As Alfred was catholic the shower represents a baptism and her forgiveness. We have high angle shots of her taking a shower and for some footage she is actually filmed from the shower head as the centre holes were blocked off. Bits of the shower wall were also removable to get good views of Marion's murder. As Marion's murderer enters, the pace of the film increases, the extreme close up shots reveal her terror and the murderer begins to slash with the sound of casaba melons being cut as the noise.

Hitchcock was so meticulous in what he chose to be on set and how things were done that nothing was there by accident and that when he wanted to make a point he'd make sure he did by repeating it seven times. The music is key to the scene, composed by Bernard Herrmann; the music is made up entirely of strings as Herrmann thought it was only right to compliment the black and white film. As the murder occurs the music is at a piercing volume and pitch to provide the perfect aural counterpoint, melodies at the same time, for the glinting knife and the suggested stabbing which people believe does really occur, as Hitchcock had hoped, imagination was the best suggestive instrument of them all. As the murderer left, believed to be a woman even Bates' mother the music stops, the pace of the film

dramatically slows down, with just the sound of the shower and water running down the plug hole, Marion falls out of the shower and rips the shower curtain. The camera fades from an extreme close up shot of the plug hole to an extreme close up shot of Marion's eye which in actual fact is really a photograph as Janet (Marion) could not stop her eye from blinking or moving for that period of time. The camera then does a tracking shot from her eye, out of the bathroom, across to the money and over to the window where it focuses on the house.

Then we hear Norman shout, ' Blood, mother blood, God no," he rushes down to where Marion lies dead and covers his mouth before he vomits. This leads us further away from the truth, surely Norman wouldn't, couldn't do it, Marion is dead so what becomes of the money, would he find it and keep it? This entire question the audience are asking themselves becoming more nervous and disturbed. Like a devoted, loving son would, he dumped the body and everything of hers including the money, and cleaned the place up. Where was the film leading to know, the money was a red-herring, along with the policeman it was just put there to mount the suspense.

The second murder is of Milton Arbogast, a private detective hired by Marion's boss to recover the money. But we are less sympathetic to Arbogast as he has invaded the space of Bates and his mother. As Arbogast slowly walks up the stairs in Bates' house, again the theme of two different worlds, we have a quick close up shot of his face, here dramatic irony takes its effect, we see the door opening but Arbogast doesn't the music climaxes and the shot changes to a high angle and the ' mother' rushes out and stabs him. He stumbles backwards down the stairs, we have a mid shot of him and he

falls to the bottom where Bates' mother repeatedly stab him. The importance of these two murders relies on what we think and not what we see.

In the end the truth is revealed. Bates acts as his mother due to the fact that he killed her and her lover and committed both murders without any motives just his love of mother to blame. The loose ends are left loose, and the narrative can not be brought to a stop. Psycho's influence has shown a clear impact on how films are made and distributed. Without the innovations of Alfred Hitchcock, the sound, editing, mise en scene and cinematography, Psycho would not be, it's thanks to Alfred's deep roots into traditional film making that the audiences are shocked, disturbed, surprised and confounded by the sheer brilliance of one of the greatest films ever made.

There is no closure with Psycho this imaginative creation has yet to be matched.