

The techniques that
alfred hitchcock
employs to create
suspense and horror
in psy...



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Alfred Hitchcock uses many techniques to build horror and suspense in 'Psycho'. He does this with camera shots, lighting, plot twists, sound and many other devices to create a unique feeling of tension in this film. He plays on horror stereotypes like the big, dark, lonely house on a hill in the rain as Marion approaches, who happens to be an attractive young woman. He also plays with the aspect of black and white, which highlights shadow and light in each shot.

There is also the revolutionary idea Hitchcock used in which he used a lack of visual effects and more psychological imagery to create effective horror in his time. There are three key scenes in 'Psycho' in which Hitchcock manipulates feelings of anxiety in his audience. The first of these is the parlour scene. In this first scene we see two characters: Norman and Marion. The couple have an awkward conversation over supper, referring to traps, mother, and the ominous birds that populate the walls. The camera shots involved are almost exclusively shot reverse shot, which captures the changing conversation between Norman and Marion.

The camera also builds discomfort, as the simple eye-level shots turn into low-angle, unnatural shots of Norman, as he progressively looms over Marion throughout the dialogue. Lighting is used cleverly in this scene to contrast the 'good and evil' between the two characters. Whilst Marion is shown in an angelic full light, lit from all directions, Norman is shown in an eerie under-glow, casting half his face into shadow. This is a symbolic representation of his split personality: the light and innocent side of Norman, with the dark and evil side of mother, shown on one face.

The birds have a significant role in this scene. This use of proxemics shows them looming over him, like his mother looms over his life, watching the conversation take place. They are also representative in that all of these birds are birds of prey. Maybe it is to suggest that Norman is one of these predatorial birds, and Marion is soon to be his prey. The key bird featured is an owl over Norman, which is a nocturnal hunter.

Norman, or mother, killed Marion at night whilst she was most vulnerable. Their talk turns to mother surprisingly often, as we begin to see Norman's affection for her. " A boy's best friend is his mother. " This shows us his curiously devoted relationship, in which he seems to only ever talk to his mother, denying himself of any friends.

When Marion suggests that he put his mother away ' some place' (referring to a mental institution), he reacts very seriously to this. He is very against this because he knows that in reality he cannot do this, and if he could, he wouldn't be able to live without her. They also have an interesting conversation about traps. " We're all in our own private traps. " This is a curious statement because before this Norman seems to be happy living with his mother in this strange and remote place.

He also manages to let slip some insight into his poor mental health. We all go a little mad sometimes. " This ominous remark puts Marion on edge, because it reflects her random and unplanned stealing of the \$40, 000. Their body language also shows their differences in attitude to each other. While Marion sits down on the sofa and delicately eats her supper, Norman is constantly shuffling forwards and backwards in his seat.

This shows he is very nervous and on edge with this strange visitor. The next crucial scene of 'Psycho' is the infamous shower scene. This scene is a famous directorial masterpiece in film history. It is most well known for its crucially playing sounds, both digetic and non-digetic. Hitchcock cunningly uses the rhythmic drone of the shower's running water to lull us into a false sense of security, before launching into Bernard Herrman's stabbing violins which have given 'Psycho' its name. The shower begins right at the start of this scene, and continuously plays throughout, adding fluidity to it, through digetic sound.

Once the murder of Marion begins (a well-planned red herring), the high pitched violins begin. They seem to stab every time the knife plunges into her, almost drowning out her screams. However, as mother leaves the room abruptly, the strings backing the scene change to a deep and low tune, slowly fading until her death. It helps to symbolise the life draining from her.

The camera angles used in this scene are also a key technique used. It initially consists of close-ups of Marion in the shower, and then a shot of the showerhead. The camera then switches to a medium shot including Marion in the corner, before an ominous-looking shadow appears in the doorway, approaching. Of course, the attacker's face is obscured by the translucent material of the shower curtain, before the camera zooms in on the face of the mysterious character, although it is hidden in shadow. This obscuring of the assailant helps mask their identity, as well as adding to the uncertainty of the scene.

What follows is a montage of close-up shots and shot reverse shots of both mother and Marion from varying angles. This is basically where the director edits together several different shots in quick succession, to give a sense of confusion. It also helped to get around censors when it was first released, because even though you do not see any nudity or violence at all, the fast shots leave you in the belief that you saw things you actually didn't. After several fast swaps and changes in the focus of the camera, we are shown mother suddenly leaving in a rush, allowing Marion to die dramatically by herself.

There is an extreme close-up of Marion's hand gripping at the shower curtain with her last ounce of strength. But, as we watch, the curtain fails to hold her and is pulled from its pole, Marion falls solemnly to the floor. The camera then zooms to the plug hole, and closes in on the water rolling down into its dark depths. This picks on a crucial recurring idea of bottomless holes and the horror that goes with the uncertainty of what they contain, which is also reflected in the swamp, the basement, and of course eyes.

The shot of the plug hole then cross-fades into Marion's out of focus eye, before slowly zooming back out, to show her dead and naked body lying on the floor. A third important factor of this scene is the lighting. The dubious shadow which is nearing our main character is given added tension by the simple fact that Marion cannot see it coming. If she could, she wouldn't have any more ideas as to who it is than us. Once the curtain is drawn, we are left in further dismay, as we realise we still can't see her face.

There is just a silhouette around her figure, highlighting her hair and clothes only, misleading us to think that it is actually mother. This was one of the reasons why 'Psycho' was so revolutionary. It's not what his audience sees which is scary, but what they think they see. This gives birth to ideas and feelings of suspense. These shadows work well especially because they contrast with the illumination of Marion as she showers in apparent innocence with high-key lighting. Once again these pick upon classical 'good and evil'.

The third important scene in highlighting the many horror and suspense techniques used in the film is the scene in which Lila, Marion's sister, is looking around the Bates' house. In this scene the key device is the proxemics - items specifically placed in the shot - but lighting, sounds and camera angles also play a significant role in the tension build-up. The whole scene is dominated by very slow and deep string instruments. This helps build up an eerie and uncomfortable atmosphere, which puts us on the edge of our seat. It progresses from a slow rhythmic drone, to a frantic disorganised flurry as Norman searches for his intruder, ending with the familiar stabbing violins as Norman brandishes his knife for the final time in the basement.

When Lila first enters the house, she takes a look out of the window; the fact that it is obscured by the lace curtains plays on our fear of not seeing quite everything that could be there. In mother's room, we are shown an array of different objects. A basin by the wall, a fireplace, a large wardrobe all show signs of recent use, although contradictorily it seems to be empty and dead.

A sculpture of two clasped hands is symbolic of a death-cast in appearance, <https://assignbuster.com/the-techniques-that-alfred-hitchcock-employs-to-create-suspense-and-horror-in-psycho/>

which is significant in the fact that in truth the room's owner is dead. There is also the opened wardrobe, which is filled with perfect and untouched clothes.

The impression in the bed, picked out clearly by shadows, helps coax us on with the lie of mother's living presence inhabiting the house still, although it does seem a little fake. As Lila moves on to Norman's room, we begin to see a little into his curious mind for the first time. A mutilated toy on his shelf and a small toy rabbit on his bed reflect on the childhood which Norman still tries to live in, or they are simply a reminder to himself of his earlier life. There is also an LP player with a record of "Eroica" by Beethoven.

Inscribed on the front of it was "Composed to celebrate the memory of a great man." This may be intended to reminisce back to Norman before he killed his mother. When we flick back to Norman as he knocks out Sam, we are instantly put on edge. He sprints towards the house where we know Lila is unaware of the danger she is in. We are even more scared for her because we have just seen Norman harm Sam, which we did not expect him to do. Fortunately, Lila sees him coming and runs to hide on the stairs to the fruit cellar.

This is a hugely tense shot, where we see the terrified Lila hidden from a furious Norman as he enters, separated by a flimsy wooden stair guard. Luckily for everyone, he runs straight past her and up to mother's room, leaving a clear path for Lila to escape. However, just as she is about to leave, she spots the fruit cellar door. At this point the audience freezes - we know that mother has been hidden down there, and we know what 'she' might do

to her. Down in the cellar it is dark and filled with disused object; a cliché of all horror - basements. In the final room, this cliché is terminated when Lila turns on a light (a bare light bulb) to reveal who we assume is Mrs Bates.

Calling her name without effect, Lila approaches and then pulls her shoulder to turn her. At this point in the film the audience are shocked to see not an old woman, but a dressed corpse transfixed with a malicious grin. Here is when the lighting takes a large part in this scene. Screaming, Lila throws up her arm, batting the light bulb and sending it swinging. This kicks off the familiar violins of Bernard Herrman, and we see Norman dressed in his mother's clothes come crashing in with a knife, followed by Sam who leaps on the attacker and forces him to the ground. As the wig falls off, revealing Norman's squealing face, we know that the real mother has been defeated at last.

The scene finishes with a close-up shot of mother's skull, as the swinging light bulb causes shadows to play across its grinning face, in the eye sockets mainly, symbolising the recurring motif of eyes and holes in the film. These dancing shadows make the eyes seem to move as if she is still there watching, as the moving light gives the skull life as we leave the house.

There are many other things which are used by Hitchcock to heighten the suspense and tension in this film. The first point at which we are put on edge is the traffic cop scene.

A policeman pulls over and goes to talk to the sleeping Marion in her car.

This is a total red herring, as we see later on that he plays no part in the rest of the film. However, the cop's reflective sunglasses make us feel very

suspicious of him; maybe he is the killer we know will eventually appear. This again plays on the motif of eyes in the film. We cannot see his, so we feel more powerless against him. Next is the scene where Marion decides to buy a new car.

Here we become more and more anxious as she does, and we begin to worry for her. Will she be caught out by her dubious behaviour, or will the traffic cop across the street come over to get her? These thoughts run through our minds throughout this scene, although in the end she manages to escape quickly and without too much delay. Third is the scene in which Arbogast, the detective hired to find Marion, is killed in the house by Norman/Mrs Bates. The clever use of the crane shot helps to conceal the killer's true identity longer, even though we all think it is obviously mother. It is similar to the silhouette we see of Norman in the shower scene.

To conclude, Alfred Hitchcock uses many techniques to heighten the suspense created in 'Psycho'. He builds on the classical elements of horror in his own unique way to bring horror films to a new level. He has mastered the art of creating believable red herrings, as in the case of Marion's death. Janet Leigh was the name linked to the title 'Psycho', and yet she died only a third of the way through the film.

Her death immediately troubles us because we now do not know what could happen next. In fact, late comers to cinemas were forbidden to enter once the film had begun, because people entering after her death would see her already out of the plot and thus it would completely spoil the film for them.

There is also his technique to do with visual horror. Only once in the film, the

shower scene, is the violence graphically shown, although we are not really shown any graphic violence; much of it is simply what we imagine. So by doing this early on he created tension for the rest of the film, as we sat scared and waiting for a repeat of this initial horrific murder.

So we can see that Alfred Hitchcock is a true master craftsman of film.

Through use of devices such as camera angles, lighting, mise en scene and red herrings, he has created a unique film of psychological horror which was revolutionary and a tense sight to watch.