

# Essay on psycho and the silence of the lambs

[Sociology](#), [Violence](#)



The art of subtlety is one that has faded over the past 50 years, in many elements of our culture. The era of the restrained news anchor, sitting behind a desk and calmly reading the day's headlines, has been replaced by the animated entertainer, aided by blinking graphics in presenting events that are much the same; however, to gain the audience's attention, news program producers have to add many more stimuli than they once did. The same is true in the genre of the horror movie. In earlier years, when there was not as much technology in place to create special effects, directors had to rely on dialogue, gesture and elements of light and shadow to express their points, and restrictions on content meant that the monstrous had to be represented in ways that the audience could understand, without the use of gore and grotesque violence for shock value. The differences between *Psycho*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock and released in 1960, and *The Silence of the Lambs*, directed by Jonathan Demme and released in 1991, show the ways in which writers have replaced the power of suggestion with the power of shock.

Both *Psycho* and *The Silence of the Lambs* feature murder scenes, but they use different artistic techniques to express the horror of the events portrayed. In *Psycho*, the villain murders a beautiful woman while she is in the shower, in one of the most famous scenes in the history of cinema. The audience sees a knife and hears the woman scream, and the sound of violins played in discordant tones, at the highest point of their register, communicates her fear more viscerally than continued screaming would have. There also shots of the shower head (with the central jets disabled), pouring water onto the body, and then of the drain, with blood (actually

chocolate syrup, but it's a black and white movie) swirling down it. While there is a knife, we do not see the stabbing – we don't hear skin being torn. Instead, the audience receives musical and visual images that suggest the death, and its horror, without the use of gore.

In *The Silence of the Lambs*, Hannibal Lecter is imprisoned in a makeshift cell in the middle of a hotel ballroom, as part of a ruse he has contacted to escape from his maximum-security prison in Maryland. He tricks the guards into coming into his cell without paying close attention to him; his civility to that point has dulled their sense of caution. With this opportunity, though (and the helpful clip from a ballpoint pen that his former warden happened to leave behind in a careless moment), he acts quickly and ruthlessly, beating one of the guards with his nightstick. While we do not actually see the contacts between the nightstick and the guard, we do see Lecter's face, enjoying his work, and the blood spattering on Lecter's white shirt and the curtain. In the background, the classical music to which Lecter had been listening was playing. Here, many of the elements (the music, the beautiful ballroom, Lecter dressed in an innocent white) work against the horror, leaving the violence itself to express the moment. The spattering blood, rather than an afterthought, combines with the sounds of nightstick on bone and skin to etch the horror into the audience's mind. There is nothing subtle here.

In both movies, villains who have gone insane carry out a series of murders; however, the enduring power of *Psycho* comes from its artistic ways of expressing the horrible without making the audience cringe with actual gore

and violence. The enduring power of *The Silence of the Lambs*, in contrast, comes from the gruesome depths to which Hannibal Lecter and his ilk will sink. Both movies horrify the audience; *Psycho* does so in a way that is less desensitizing to the viewing public.