

# Psycho, the greatest film of all time?

[Entertainment](#), [Movie](#)



This essay will attempt to show you the brilliance that is Psycho and how Alfred Hitchcock managed to create a film which even today grabs and retains the interest of any audience. The music in the film Psycho was a brand new idea at its time in the 1960s and acted like magic on audiences, making them sit in horror at the edge of their seats. The music in Psycho is 'non-diegetic' and is performed by an all-strings orchestra. At the time when Psycho was released, using music that was played by an all-strings orchestra in horror movies was a brand new idea and startled film critics and the audience alike.

This method of using high-pitched, sharp music was such an effective idea that many other horror films and television series adopted the thought and this style of music is still used to this day (for example, in Nightmare on Elm Street). Using an all-strings orchestra in Psycho was a fantastic way of building tension and it worked very effectively. The reason it worked so well was because the sound was so recognisable. This is because, as the music was played on and on-and-off basis, the audience gradually noticed that when the music played, something bad was probably about to happen.

No other music could have been used in Psycho which would have created the same amount of tension in the movie and sounded so shrill and discordant. To a pre-1970s audience, the all-strings music was remarkably effective and the music by itself built tension. Nowadays, when a modern audience watches Psycho, they react in the same way as audiences over thirty years ago, even though they are used to music like this. The eerie sound of string instruments playing sharp scratchy notes, e. g. in the shower

scene, still makes modern audiences sit on the edge of their seats and watch in suspense as the plot unfolds.

The music in Alfred Hitchcock's horror films was so important and effective that without it the films would not have succeeded. It is possible to see that when his films are watched on mute, the suspense disappears and the film becomes boring and not at all exciting. Even the brilliant use of lighting and shadows is not enough to keep the interest of any audience watching Psycho without the music. The plot of Psycho is ingenious and has to be one of the greatest stories of all time. Alfred Hitchcock used a brilliant technique in all his films for retaining the audience's interest which he called "the McGuffin" i??.

Alfred Hitchcock used this technique in all his films to catch the viewer's attention and drive the plot. In Psycho, the McGuffin was the \$40,000 in cash stolen by Marion. In the first half of the film, the audience is led to believe that the movie is essentially about the stolen money, and this alone envelops the viewer's attention because the plot is so tightly and perfectly constructed. By the end of the film though, few people remember that the money even existed, as the McGuffin is only really needed to move the audience into the Bates Hotel. The plot was designed very cleverly by Alfred Hitchcock.

To grab his audience's attention, he made the audience ask questions. He does this right from the very beginning of Psycho until the end of it. For example, in the first scene alone, when Sam and Marion are meeting secretly during their lunch break, the audience is made to think: can Sam pay off his

father's debts and his wife's alimony? Will they get married? Will they get caught together? etc. , etc. Forcing the audience to ask questions mentally, traps their attention, as they want to know the answers. Another way that the plot does well to catch and retain an audience's focus is the suspense which is built up so frequently.

When suspense is built up, the audience always wants to know what will happen next. As the storyline twists and turns and the viewers get surprises, the audience becomes drawn into the film and becomes more involved. For instance, when the main character is suddenly killed halfway through the film in an unforgettable scene, the audience is left wondering: what will happen next? Who will be the new main character? All of these sudden changes in plot shock the viewer more and more and make the film more exciting and interesting. Another change in plot is when Sam, Lila, the sheriff and his wife meet after church in broad daylight.

This break in the tension allows the viewer to relax and watch a different scene; one in daylight, which is not eerie and in shadow. This may appear to be an odd change in plot, but it helps keep all audiences focused. A very clever ingredient in Psycho, was Alfred Hitchcock's excellent positioning of objects on the film set. Using his complicated knowledge of filming and positioning, he created scenes which convinced the eye of an alteration to the truth. He set objects up, for instance, in the eerie house, which looked so normal and blended in with the film perfectly.

He placed typical old-woman-objects in Norman's mother's bedroom to make the audience convinced that there really was an old woman living in the

house and that she was still there. He also placed objects such as a toy fire engine and a male doll in Norman Bates's old room to make it suit its part. These little things are actually precisely positioned so that they suit the atmosphere and the audience sub-consciously notices them. All audiences, modern and old alike, notice these little differences and it is things like this which manage to retain the interest of an audience watching Psycho.

Set pieces were not all small though. The large old Victorian style house atop a hill was specifically chosen for its image and its evil and dark appearance. The camera, throughout the whole film, always filmed this house from below, making it appear to tower over all else and cast a dark shadow over everything. The actors chosen for Psycho, despite in the case of most, being famous before its creation, were all picked after long deliberation by Alfred Hitchcock for their particular skills??.

Janet Leigh, for example, who played the part of Marion in Psycho, was chosen out of a list of seven possibilities. Most of the actors in Psycho were all very professional, popular and they all fitted perfectly; without them and their talent, the film could have easily turned out to be a failure (as Psycho's remake was). As all of the actors were so capable and Alfred Hitchcock directed them all so well, their talents shone through in this movie and they all appeared so realistic and their body language in Psycho was flawless. This goes for their dialogue too.

They may have all been able to say their scripts, but the timing and their expressions and tones were all planned out by Hitchcock perfectly. The camera angles and lighting in Psycho are arguably the cleverest and most

effective ever used in a film. Alfred Hitchcock personally worked out every camera angle and every scene in Psycho. He used the camera to guide the story, build the tension and throw twists into the ending. The camera angles used are legendary. Using Alfred Hitchcock's directing genius, one of the most famous scenes in cinematic history was created.

In this one scene (the 'Shower Scene' as it is now commonly known), seventy camera angles were used, intermixed with quick cuts to emphasise the brutality of the act; yet the knife is never actually seen penetrating Marion's body. Marion is filmed in the shower from so many different angles so that suspense is built up as the audience knows something bad must be about to happen. She looks vulnerable in the shower without any clothes and she is unsuspecting - her expression is one of concentration, on showering.

All this put together, combined with Alfred Hitchcock's directing, creates an extremely scary, exciting and memorable scene. Alfred Hitchcock was obviously very talented, and when it came to the camera's positioning and lighting, he always managed to create brilliant pictures. Without using sound, Hitchcock could make people look nervous, vulnerable, strange, powerful, dangerous etc. by just using camera angles. For instance, to make the private investigator look vulnerable as he walked upstairs and reached the landing, the camera filmed him from above, looking down on him so that he looked alone and vulnerable.

There was only one poorly created scene in the whole film. This was the stair scene, when Arbogast, the private investigator, falls down the stairs with a knife wound. To a 1960s audience, this scene seemed to be extremely

realistic and well filmed. Unfortunately it is spoilt on a modern audience as nowadays everyone is so used to graphics and special effects that the stair scene appeared comical to us, as it wasn't realistic. It was quite obvious that there was a film of stairs coming towards the audience being played behind the falling private investigator.

The lighting in Psycho was used to great effect and was directed fantastically. Alfred Hitchcock managed to create different atmospheres in different scenes by his use of lighting and shadows. For instance, in the climax scene, when Norman Bates runs into the fruit cellar with a knife, the lighting is fantastic. When the camera turns to look at Norman's mother's wrinkled, mummified face, as the bulb swings creating strobe flashing, in the hollows of her eyes, shadows dance against the inside of her skull which creates an illusion of a mad, mirthful response to the scene before her.

Today, Psycho is still looked upon as a brilliant and unique film, which even now manages to grab and retain the interest of any audience. No other film has ever managed to outclass Alfred Hitchcock's masterpiece in complexity or in cleverness. The black and white photography used is perfect for the film's tone and mood - colour would merely have blurred the nightmarish quality. Psycho is an exceptional film, which altered the course of cinematic history, and its brilliance will always be recognised.