

How does hitchcock's  
psycho retain and  
sustain a modern  
audience



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Hitchcock's talent had been known through many films and Psycho (1960) is one of his most famous. Psycho is a film in black and white, a film of shadow and light, a film about the dark and bright sides of life. In Psycho Hitchcock takes an intense look at the hidden sides of the human mind, with its human longings and fears. Hitchcock focuses on the topic of a split personality.

However, he does more than just tell the story of a schizophrenic person. He creates a whole world of contrasts, a world of light and shadow, of image and reflection. But this is no ordinary world, this is a world in which the walls have holes and the shower curtains are pulled aside. Psycho has been adapted into many TV shows even the family comedy 'The Simpson's'.

Hitchcock intended Psycho to scare and enthrall ordinary cinemagoers on a Saturday night. Not only was Hitchcock's Psycho a great success in the 60's, it can still intrigue and entertain an audience today. Perhaps one of the most important ingredients of Psycho's success is the haunting, dramatic and memorable music. Music is a fundamental and important part of this film. It catches the viewers' ear and keeps them interested throughout the film.

Music can tell what is going to happen next and can turn a pleasant scene into a horrifying scene. The staccato music played in Psycho by a string orchestra still lingers in your mind long after the film has been seen.

Hitchcock always manages to get music that fits the scene or adds a new dimension to it. An example of this is whilst Norman Bates is efficiently cleaning up after Marion's murder: the wild dissonant music tells the audience of his insane mind, helping to sustain the suspense.

From the theme tune to the murder scenes, the sharp, shrieking and symbolic sound really leaves a lasting impression of horror and insanity on the viewers' mind. The most shocking scene in the film is the shower scene. As the murderer whips aside the shower curtain and raises a menacing butcher knife, the piercing, stabbing and screaming of the violin creates sheer terror for the audience. The strings shriek before Marion's own screams, making her screams sound like wild birds. Just as horrific is the scene in which Arbogast is murdered. Unexpectedly, an old woman emerges from the bedroom on to the landing with the same long butcher knife.

The screeching music commences as Arbogast is stabbed to death in the same brutal way as Marion. Equally as important is the opening theme tune of the film, which occurs again while Marion is driving out to the hotel in the dark and the rain. The long repetitive theme helps to grasp the audience in suspense as a background to the confused voices she is hearing in her head. Lighting is used to show the good and evil sides of the movie. This is achieved by the skilful use of light and shadow.

They create another world of eeriness keeping the viewer tense. Light and shadow in the movie makes a strong impact through contrast. The most notable use of light and shadow was near the end when Lila, choosing the wrong option in going down to the cellar, screams and hits the light bulb. As the light bulb swings back and forth the stuffed mother's eyes seemingly come back to life and the moving shadows across the screen seem to have a fit of laughter. This clever use of light and shadow makes the audience think the dead mother is alive, adding to the nervousness and anxiety.

Another brilliant use of light and shadow is present when Arbogast leaves and Norman Bates is in half light, half shadow. This could represent the ambiguity of a traitor, but in this case the half-lit face is appropriate, as he is half mother and half Norman Bates. Hitchcock's ability to use dramatic irony is also a powerful tool in sustaining tension and suspense for a modern audience. This is most obvious when Arbogast is killed. The camera follows from behind, exposing his vulnerability, and then we see Bates coming around the corner to attack him.

Also, in the shower scene, the viewer can see Marion's eyes and see the attacking figure behind her. This makes the nerves tingle even for a modern audience. Hidden meanings and irony are very common in the film. The scene with Norman Bates' face half lit, half dark had a secret meaning (mentioned above) that the viewer did not know about after watching the film for the first time.

Another scene with hidden meanings is when Marion is seen in her underwear. At the beginning, the viewer Marion wearing a white bra, but after stealing the money she wears a black bra signifying her theft and her darkness. An example of irony used in the film is when Norman Bates is talking about madness to Marion as if he is an expert on the subject. Also near the end Sam suggests to Norman Bates that being alone would drive him crazy.

Bates responds ' I think that is an extreme reaction. ' All these hidden meanings and ironic comments help retain the interest of a modern audience even if it is their fifth or sixth time watching. Another small way Hitchcock

helps keep an audience interested is that he himself appears briefly in the film. If the viewer wants to see him, they need to be wide awake.

In Psycho, Alfred Hitchcock makes his cameo appearance outside the office where Marion works. Camera angles are very important in a film like Psycho. Hitchcock manipulates the camera angles so that the viewer can see what the actors can not see. This creates an atmosphere of fretfulness and worry for the viewer. A variation of high angles, close ups and long shots make the actors look vulnerable. An example of this vulnerability is when Arbogast is walking up the stairs to Bates' house.

The camera switches to a long shot and you see a small figure walking towards an enormous house that is towering over him, showing that something is going to happen to him inside the house. Furthermore, the way Hitchcock uses the camera to zoom in and out is important. The part where he uses this to great effect is when Norman Bates voyeuristically watches Marion undress. The camera zooms in and out on his unblinking eye and much later it does the same on Marion's dead eye which also fills the screen and thus marks the end of the scene. Although there are not many characters in Psycho they are all very different, with different thoughts and personalities. At many times during Psycho the audience feels sorry for the characters or wants to help them or warn them of danger.

This is due to fact that the viewers know more than the characters and feel as if they should warn them, which makes them very anxious and on edge. Yet another way Alfred Hitchcock retains and sustains the audience is by deliberately not answering mysterious questions. The unanswered questions

(e. g. when is Marion going to marry Sam? What will she do with the \$ 40, 000? ) puzzle the viewer and keeps alive the tension and suspense created. The plot does not open up until Marion was killed; the plot was centred around Sam and Marion.

At this point in the film it needed something to move the story on. Hitchcock uses the stolen money as the turning point and that helps keep the suspense. The mistakes and the terrible decision making of the characters also help keep the tension. For example, Marion stealing the 40, 000 dollars, or Norman Bates lying to Arbogast keeps the audience, even a modern one, interested. A modern audience would respond to the title as a great classic of 20th Century cinema. Not all films are amazingly good in the 21st Century but films about psychotic characters are usually the ones that receive a good response from the audience.

Audiences will take an interest in Psycho immediately from reading the title. It is uncommon to make a film in black and white in the modern era. Usually modern audiences don't watch black and white films as they associate them with past ages. The first thing that any audience will notice about Psycho is that it is in black and white. This automatically loses the viewers' interest to start with.

But once the film gets going and they notice the advantages of using black and white, it captures their attention and keeps them gripped on the film. Using black and white makes shadows look sinister and the ' after dark' effects are enhanced. Hitchcock used a lot of voyeurism, allowing the audience to feel they shouldn't be looking at what is happening. It is

extremely ordinary to see sexual content or partial nudity in TV shows and movies today. In the 60's Hitchcock was taking a big risk putting it into his film.

Some members of a modern audience enjoy this and it keeps them engrossed. An example of partial nudity is when Marion is undressing before taking a shower. You see her in her bra and knickers. This maintains the audience's attention as they know something will happen to her. In conclusion one could say that Hitchcock's Psycho can retain and sustain a modern audience.

He can engross the viewers and keep them tense and in suspense with his technical and narrative skills, some of which are discussed above.