

The birds and psycho

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Alfred Hitchcock's productions of 'Psycho' in 1960, and three years later his classic of 'The Birds', are regarded by many as the greatest films of all time. This is largely due to the enormous amount of tension created within specific scenes, and his ability to create contrasts and parallels to emphasise issues of importance. The main contributors to the build up of tension are lighting, music, camera angles and sound effects. These are all present in Psycho, where Marion arrives and is killed in the Bates Motel, and in The Birds, where the crows attack the school.

The use of lighting can evoke great feeling to an audience if it is used effectively. Its use is very much apparent in Psycho and is successful in creating tension, but this is reversed in The Birds, where there is an absence of lighting, which is also very successful. In Psycho the scene starts with Marion, in her car driving down a long straight road. It is nighttime so everything is dark. The headlights from cars travelling the opposite way are constantly flashing on to her face. Suddenly it starts to rain very heavily. The lights are blurred as they come through the wet windscreen.

This is to signify the change from normality to distortion that is later very much apparent within the lives of the characters. This also resembles the blurry view through the shower curtain when Marion is in the shower. Through the rain she spots the neon sign for the Bates Motel and she pulls in. Norman comes out and they go into his office. Side on lighting casts half of their faces into shadow, another piece of Hitchcock's imagery, signifying the way the two characters have things to hide; Marion, that she has stolen the money, and Norman that he is psychopathic.

The use of darkness to represent evil is continued throughout the scene. When Norman goes to get the sandwiches, his 'mother side' takes over and he starts to argue with himself. When he brings the food back from the darkness around the corner into the light he is transformed back to normal. The lack of light represents a barrier between the Norman part of him and his mother part of him, (although this is not apparent to the audience until the film concludes). Norman and Marion go into the parlour to eat.

There are many stuffed birds casting big shadows all over the walls. The shadows create a 'net' of evil around the two characters, which will eventually close in on them. It also symbolises the fact that things are not always as they seem. The shadows look menacing and monster like, but they are cast from harmless stuffed birds. At this point the audience will start to see the sinister side of Norman Bates being in constant contact with dead things and know that something sinister is about to happen.

The next main part in this scene is when Marion is in the shower. The shower curtain is shut with a blinding light behind it. The silhouette of a woman emerges from the background. For the audience the tension is extremely high, partly because they do not know what is about to happen and partly because the figure is unidentifiable. The lighting in The Birds is a complete contrast to Psycho. This is because The Birds is set outside and there are no lighting effects. This makes the scene feel more open, as if there is nowhere to hide.

There are also no dark corners for anything to hide in, yet in some way this makes the film just as sinister. In Psycho there is a strict boundary between

the uncertainty of the bright, harsh lighting outside the shower and the security of the soft lighting within, which the murderer so horrifically crosses. Due to the absence of lighting in *The Birds* there is no such divide making us feel even more vulnerable from the birds' attack. The camera angles used in *Psycho* contribute greatly to the tension being created.

They are used very cleverly giving the audience clues as to the personalities of the characters, for example: we see the reflection of Marion in two mirrors in this scene. One when she signs-in to the motel, and once when she first goes into her room. The only time we see Norman's reflection is in the cabin window when he brings the sandwiches, and because it is in glass, it is ghostly and transparent. Their reflections tell us that although both characters have two sides to them, Norman's is much more sinister. The most commonly used camera angle is a low angle shot.

This is used every time we see the Bates' house. This type of shot makes whatever it is focusing on seem powerful and makes the audience feel vulnerable as they are lower down. This is also apparent when Marion and Norman are sitting in the parlour; Norman always appears higher up. At one point when Marion mentions 'some place' Norman leans right into the camera as if to close up on the audience. This makes them realise that mental institutions are very significant to Norman's life, Perhaps he has even been in one. In the shower scene there are 48 camera shots.

It starts off with Marion in the shower washing herself. The camera is at her eye level giving a relaxed feeling and relief from the anxiety of the previous conversation in the parlour. Next there is a point of view shot looking up at

the water coming out of the shower. She is enjoying the shower and is calm and happy. She turns around so that she has her back to the shower curtain and we see a figure approach slowly from behind. This is a big leap for the audience from being relaxed, to the highest point of tension in the whole film.

The shower curtain is ripped back to reveal the silhouette of a figure grasping an enormous bread knife. Marion turns around and we get close up terror erupting on her face, and then a big close up of her screaming mouth. A series of fast camera shots follow, made up of close ups, point of view, low angle and high angle shots. These camera shots make the audience feel as if they are in the shower and that they are part of the action. After being stabbed she falls out of the bath and we get a shot of the blood running down the plughole.

It zooms in on to the drain, which then fades onto a big close up of her eye. This signifies that all the evidence has been washed away and that the only person that saw the murderer - Marion is now dead. The water also creates a parallel with the rain that made her stop at the Bates' Motel and now it is rain (from a shower) that is washing the evidence of her murder away. The remarkable thing about this scene is that we never actually see her getting stabbed, due to very clever editing we only think we do.

For every change in the camera angle there is the sound of the knife penetrating her skin. The audience then quickly begin to associate a cut in the film to a cut into her body. They start to think they know what they see. This is a common theme throughout the film. On the other hand, the camera

angles in *The Birds* purely create tension. Melanie Daniels sits down on a bench outside the school and lights a cigarette. The main focus of the shot is a metal climbing frame behind her. When she sits down a bird lands upon it and the shot cuts back to her smoking.

When we see the climbing frame again a few moments later there are four birds on it. This keeps repeating itself until the whole frame is covered in birds. This creates tension because we can see that Marion is in danger but she is oblivious to this. All the audience want to see is what is happening on the climbing frame but the cuts to her face go on for far too long, as a result, creating suspense. This scene resembles the shower scene where we can see the killer coming into the bathroom but Marion cannot. Next Melanie goes into the school and everyone leaves.

The birds fly off when they hear the children running. Next there is a series of rolling camera shots and points of view shots of the children being attacked by the birds. This makes the audience feel vulnerable, as if they are themselves being attacked. The camera is also down very low which gives the audience a feeling of vulnerability. Bernard Herrmann composed the music for *Psycho* with only the string section of the orchestra. He managed to capture the tension, excitement and horror of the audience with a soundtrack that is perfectly aligned and involved with the film.

Two types of music are used; one where the tempo is reasonably fast, as used in the title sequence and when Marion is in her car, and the other where the tempo is slower and the pitch is lower. The first is used to go along with the pace of the film and the other used to create tension. During

the Motel scene it is the lower, tension-creating piece that is played, starting at a place of significance or tension within the film, like when Norman starts to talk about taxidermy and when Marion is looking for a place to hide the money.

During the shower sequence there is no music to start off with. All we can hear is the sound of the shower. This is done to mask the sounds that the killer would make coming into the room. When she rips back the she shower curtain we get shrill, high pitch notes and the sound of her scream. This, combined with the sound of the knife penetrating her body, gives us the image in our minds that we see her getting slashed with a knife. In The Birds this is a very different story. The children start to sing at the very beginning and do not finish until the children leave the school.

They chant an extremely repetitive tune but at the same time it does give a sense of ease within the school. Because the song is so repetitive it will stick in the audiences mind after the film has ended. This makes the scene more memorable. Even though the two films are very different, both make exiting viewing and to some extent fulfil their roles as horror films. They have lost some of their emotion evoking properties in this day and age as explicit subjects have become more accepted by today's society. Even though they both make exciting viewing.