

# PSYCHO

Directed by Alfred Hitchcock  
Distributed by Paramount Pictures  
Released in 1960

Censorship is always difficult. Though it has numerous forms, censorship on moral grounds is the most contentious. To some it means protecting the community, fostering individual decisions beneficial to all. But to others, particularly the artists who create the films, censorship is to be fought to the bitter end: it prevents others from sharing in an honest, challenging commentary on life.

Extreme sex or violence is not evidence of directorial brilliance. Similarly, the quality of a film has nothing to do with the conviction that went into it. Some films clearly demonstrate contextually that the actions of the characters are destructive or, within the constructs of the film's internal logic and reality, wrong.

But giving the creative team the benefit of the doubt when the film plays to empty seats and critical paeans is a lot easier than in the case of a multi-million-dollar blockbuster.

What the filmmakers intend to do ultimately does not matter if one is talking about objective morality, and not the morality of a film (which is a world unto itself). A director can concoct a film with sex in every other scene—graphic sex with jaw-dropping nudity—and be quoted as saying that his intent was to create a film lamenting the lack of substantive communication and sacrifice in modern love. Twenty people could watch the film and all of them find it blatantly pornographic. But the director has explicitly dismissed this label.

Part of the controversy of pornography over the years has been how it would be defined, particularly in the arena of film. Years ago a consensus arose that material designed to arouse is pornographic. So the producer of such material, which is designed to arouse, already despicable enough to demean women for the obsessing masculine millions, can lie. He can say he was merely making an artistic statement, and leave it at that. The burden of proof rests in the hands of the public, who can say very little about said producer's intent. But they're not idiots.

So artistic intent is irrelevant. It's always irrelevant. If somebody wants to make a statement it needs to be unambiguous. Sometimes communicating so that everyone can understand what is meant to be said is difficult. However, film, with its multitude of stimuli, is hardly the ideal medium for clear communication. It is a most powerful means of communication, but messages, however clearly intended, are often rendered opaque. Art must be left to the audience, no matter what the medium. If the speaker is impassioned, let his passion be expressed clearly. He can make a speech, tell what he thinks is wrong about the world, and everybody can go home and argue whether he is right. With art, meaning is subjective. This is its great asset, the mystery that forever fuels our fascination.

Censorship is pretty rare nowadays. In-depth warnings from the Motion Picture Association of America screen moviegoers from potentially objectionable material. Prior to the institution of the ratings system in 1968, the studios, not outside boards of review, handled the bulk of censorship. Now studios pressure filmmakers to cut certain material in order to garner

PG-13 status, saving it from the risky 'R' designation. But the real kiss of death is NC-17. Many films flee the stigma and universally-depressed box office concomitant with that classification. Similarly, back in the late 1950s, studios reviewed the scripts before production began on the latest films. They decided what was objectionable and excised the offensive material.

Alfred Hitchcock had met these challenges for many a year, and had learned the game well. When he submitted his script for *Psycho*, he included horrid and patently scandalous scenes that he had no intention of including in the finished product. Shocked, the Production Code office demanded changes. Hitchcock, because of his awesome track record, was able to bargain with the powers-that-be to keep what he really wanted in the film, despite their qualms. Upon its release it proved to be the biggest hit of the director's career. Many still found it vulgar and ugly, reprehensible even. Perhaps these critics, including Walt Disney, believed that movies were always intended as an escape into a happy and exciting world dissimilar to the ugly one displayed in the harsh light outside. Working from this premise, they logically concluded that Hitchcock found the subject matter of *Psycho* to be amusing. Indeed, Hitchcock did have fun with the film, but because he felt he was really playing with the audience, not with the subject matter. Hitchcock strove to capture the human condition, and if that meant somebody didn't sleep easy, he had done his job.

But this passing discussion of directorial intent is relevant only in exposing its centrality to film criticism as a misguided fallacy. We can judge how well a director accomplished his stated goals—this is a critique of the director. Taking the measure of a movie, however, we have nothing to rely on but the film, itself. What is *Psycho*?

At the conclusion of a frenetic title sequence that already has the audience on edge, a sudden calm in the music is matched by the opening shot, mundane and despairing, a desert city on the edge of nowhere. But within seconds, titles announcing location, date, and time glide into the frame, echoing the visual schizophrenia of minutes prior. Abetted by dissolves we arrive at a window and enter into the world of two ill-fated characters. Documentary in feel, it is an audacious initiation, a departure laced with dread, the auspicious beginning of an unforgettable film.

Marion Crane sets out for Sacramento, eager to deliver the \$40,000 she has pilfered from her boss and a boorish client. The money is necessary to pay off her lover's debts so he can marry her in good conscience (after bedding her in secret). Sex carried no guilt, but the debt did, and Marion resolves to free her indecisive merchant paramour with a wad of absconded cash. Through imagined dialogue and the unwanted attention of a suspicious state trooper and car salesman, her sense of guilt is awakened. But not until she drives off the map, arriving at the Bates Motel, does she realize the consequences of her ill-conceived crime. Norman Bates, in the best scene of the film, awakens her to the fear in hiding all her life, keeping the truth of her sudden marriage secret, forever furtive. Norman Bates speaks of the traps we never escape. In the fear and pity she feels, the only reasonable decision is to return the money, less she degenerate into somebody like him. Anything else would be insane. And that is what everyone wants to conclude of Norman Bates once the story has closed. That would be scary enough.

More frightening is the realization that he may not be mad, just waywardly evil, lost on a path that he, with full understanding, set upon many years ago. His lack of foresight was his undoing and how far are any of us from that?

Every day we trust each other. Just to get out of bed, get dressed and go driving to work, we are trusting that people are not going to try to run us off the road and shoot us in the head. We trust that when we go to a restaurant the waiter will not poison our soda and kill us. We trust that when we go to the dentist he will use Novocain properly and will refrain from drilling the wrong teeth out of spite or malice. A functioning society is reliant on trust between its citizens. That is why crime is such a travesty. It is a breach of trust between people who may not have met, but share in an unwritten covenant to honor the rights and privileges of others for the betterment of the individual who shows restraint each day, refraining from dark impulses shallow buried. Marion Crane trusted that when she went to shower, as the only guest at an isolated inn, that she could simply enjoy the water, free her mind of trouble, and prepare for bed. Instead, she was struck down in the most vulnerable location in the most horrifying manner.

The shower scene gets a lot of attention, and rightfully so. In *Psycho* it marks the shift from Marion Crane to Norman Bates as a new protagonist takes over. It is also the most tightly edited, visually spectacular section of the film, a film which on the whole is inconspicuously shot, with few of the camera-batics for which Hitchcock was legendary. After taking in the whole film, the shower murder is very sad, a senseless slaughter that, even with the killer captured, reduces justice to a token idealism having no part in a hateful world such as this.

As Sam and Lila, the lover and sister, respectively, of Marion, go questing for her, Norman Bates takes his place as the lead character, a sort of anti-hero doing wrong but only trying to protect his ill mother. Sam and Lila are so dull that dismissing Norman as an appropriate focal point renders the film directionless. Indeed, it is quite slack for the half-hour in which wily detective Arbogast pries his way into a life carefully hidden. Once Sam and Lila take on Norman, the man distracting Norman in aggressive conversation while Lila searches the Bates mansion, the film takes off again. The tension is palpable, the audience left in the throes of cross-cutting. And still we can sympathize with Norman; Sam badgers him about \$40,000 he has never seen.

We have already witnessed two brutal murders, Marion and Arbogast, and the possibility of Lila becoming the next victim seems hopelessly certain, particularly as she snoops in the bedroom, opening the wardrobe. Coupled with the great tension in wanting Sam to break Norman while concurrently harboring sympathy for Norman, hoping he can extricate himself from Sam's belligerent interrogation, these last moments before The Great Reveal define suspense. And it all unravels in broad daylight, turning an enduring convention on its head.

Mother is the defining mystery of *Psycho*. We get the background on what transpired from the sheriff, and the psychiatrist helps us understand her twisted legacy. But there are no easy answers. The truth is elusive; this living tragedy cannot be explained away. It is not Mother who is dead, but Norman. At the film's end she instructs Norman on how to behave so to cultivate doubt in the policemen watching him. Norman says nothing, looking pretty grim, but soon he summons a hellish smile and, looking straight into the camera, the skull of his mother is momentarily superimposed over his living corpse. She carries on, like never before.

Until Lila disturbs the solitary cellar chair, Mother and Norman are two distinct characters, his only crime protecting her guilt. Then we see the rotten flesh of Mrs. Bates and know the rotten soul of her son. He has carried on a charade for ten years.

Soon after Marion arrives at the motel, she looks up to the mansion and sees a shadow move across an upper window—gliding, ghost-like. Very soon after, Norman emerges from the front door.

After he exits the mansion a second time, Marion, who has overheard a heated discussion, observes that she has caused him trouble. His mother has excoriated Norman, first accusing him of treating this stranger with kindness because of her attractiveness, then, ignoring his explanations, labeling him a coward unable to dismiss this dinner guest. He refuses to listen.

On the occasion of a premiere viewing, a likely reaction to this scene is that Mother just wants to antagonize Norman to compensate for her diminishing physical power. Upon further reflection, we can see that Norman is wrestling with his own conscience. He wonders if he so equitably engages with all his guests, and then is angered by his lack of assertive masculinity. These are patterns of thinking, not speech. (He does lie to Marion, saying first that he was going to eat supper, and upon serving it, declaring it all for her, as he is not hungry!)

At first timid, stuttering, nervous, aware of Marion's beauty, Norman's embarrassment is most telling when he finds himself unable to utter the word "bathroom." (And his hesitation is darkly ironic considering this is where she would soon die.) But soon he is tough, denouncing his lodger for her ignorance, insulted by her suggestion about putting away his mother and freeing his life of the troubles of caring for her and maintaining a dying enterprise in the Bates Motel.

Quietly fighting the desire to do so, Norman looks through the peephole to observe Marion undressing. His bearing calm, he simply takes her forbidden loveliness in. Returning the painting over the peephole, he ponders, his face thoughtful, devoid of lust. He retreats to the mansion.

The murder is symbolic; wrong in her larceny, Marion is punished, despite a change of heart. It may also represent Norman's buried sexual impulses, the knife that most devastating of phallic symbols. But it is Mother who commits the crime. Her motivation could be jealousy, seeing Marion as a threat to remove the old lady and live with Norman in the house, since it was Marion who suggested unloading Mrs. Bates into an asylum.

We must also remember that she had threatened to dismiss Marion from supper if Norman didn't have the guts to do it himself. He told her to "shut up," but she does take action when he won't listen. Possibly she knew the temptation Marion would be for Norman, sexually. So to help, and not out of jealousy, she orders him to call off his dinner plans with her. The dinner does deepen his attraction to her. But Mother kills her, heading off Norman's contemplations of rape, represented by the painting covering the peep hole. As Norman relates to Arbogast in one of his few truthful admissions, "She mighta fooled me, but she didn't fool my mother."

Killing Arbogast, disgusting as the crime may be, makes sense—he would soon stumble upon their twisted secrets, disturbing a carefully ordered world and removing Mother for a

crime she felt justified in committing. The first crime is totally senseless, but that is what Norman/Mother has become. Norman was said, by the windy psychiatrist, to have voluntarily assumed the character of his mother to compensate for his guilt in the wake of her absence. He had poisoned his mother and her lover ten years before, and the police deduced suicide. But at the film's end, wearing none of her clothing, deprived of the wig, we only hear the thoughts of Mother. She told the psychiatrist the whole story because she couldn't have them thinking that she had been responsible. No, her dutiful boy would take the blame, continuing to protect her. Norman looks miserable. Upon accepting a blanket, it is her voice, not his, that expresses thanks. Her possession of him has become so overwhelming that in addition to speaking (Norman imitating her voice), her words are already lodged in his brain. Without her clothes and the granny wig, Norman should be his own self. But he is doubly incarcerated. The masquerade is over and the awful dream world that was life at the Bates compound is done for good. Mother is imposing her guilt on him—making him believe that he (the Norman half) committed the murders. She steps in with advice, and he, having failed to secure her trust, shifts more of his consciousness her way. It's revenge—the mother is taking over Norman. She will live on and he will finally die in that room of nothingness. Remember, the last line is "*She* wouldn't even harm a fly." The significance of this line is that Mother had been giving advice, as far as we can gather, to Norman. But now, referring to her son, Voice-of-Mother uses the feminine pronoun, not the masculine. The game's up—not wonton killing, but Norman's foolish notion that he could defeat his mother in death like he beat her in life. We still don't know why all this happened; the mystery remains, and Evil walks.

Norman's father had died when he was young. It was just he and his mother, surviving on the money her husband had provided for them. Norman claimed he had a very happy childhood. Either that is a lie or everything was good until the new guy came around. He convinced her to build the motel. And he pulled her away from her son. Killing the lover and the mother with poison presages Mother killing the three girls (two missing persons before Marion) and devouring the person of Norman. In both cases, one party wants to maintain the status quo, acting so vigilantly that even the possibility of betrayal is forever quashed by doing away with the person who could stray from the isolation of two, mother and son. But in the process, both mother and son are destroyed.

The problem with the attacks on *Psycho* contemporary with its release was the inability of the critics to specify their concerns. The film is not violent, but slow, pensive, and bursting with an artistic flourish far exceeding its limited budget. The problem some people have had with the film is what it says about us. On the surface a fledgling slasher-whodunnit, *Psycho* is a rich and disturbing commentary on the horrible capacity for sin and malfeasance buried within, expressed here through a story of Oedipal possessiveness. Censoring an idea subtly impressed on an attentive audience is very difficult. Excising a scene or altering a line of dialogue is ineffective. The whole thing has to go, and that wasn't going to happen. The ugly truths in this film were going to be heard, even if they were slow to register in the titillation of a thrice-disrobed Janet Leigh or the frightening blur of impressionistic kills unlike anything seen before in a theater.

AN ILLUMINED ILLUSIONS ESSAY BY IAN C. BLOOM

We really don't know what Hitchcock intended to say with this film. The message seems clear, but only because it is true. Interpretations will invariably differ, but this remains:

Many critics took years to recognize the importance of *Psycho*. Let us not forget, and may we be willing to see that the incredible is often all too real.