



**BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

# Psycho

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away the film's ending.

## A contemporary review

What keeps the public happy is undoubtedly their obsession with narrative craftsmanship. Your average critic, on the other hand, tends to be more concerned with the story itself than with its telling and when, as in Hitchcock's *Psycho*, he finds an outrageous story allied with a portentously irregular press-show and publicity, his conditioned reflexes automatically cause him to hiss and jeer.

Admittedly, there is some justification for the view that a thriller which, by its very nature, stands or falls by its action is merely exposing its debility when it comes to depend on a complex, last minute explication: a movie psychiatrist's explication at that. Hastily, therefore, one must affirm that *Psycho* bears about as much relation to Freud as Eva Marie Saint's high-heeled scramble down Thomas Jefferson's face does to American Central Intelligence routine; and once the tics of its amateur taxidermist have made the fact abundantly clear, then no experienced Hitchcock student has the slightest reason to expect anything other than the unreasonable. Nor, once the heroine has braved the fruit cellar, to feel exactly stunted, either. A shy young matricide who lugs his dear departed out of her grave, preserves her for ten years alongside the rest of his stuffed specimens in a swamp-bordering motel, speaking to and for her, dressing in her clothes, murdering any girl whose attraction for him might make the possessive old thing jealous, until the only way he can survive a rapidly growing burden of understandable embarrassment is by seeking total refuge in his mother's identity... Set down in cold print, the only mystery Hitchcock's solution seems unable to explain is why the critics should have even tried to believe such arrant nonsense, and what happened to their sense of humour in the first place.

There is surely plenty to laugh at. The whole second movement preceding this coda is an expert blend of Gothic wit and horror showing a proper respect for the traditions of its *Old Dark House* and *Cat and the Canary* genre. A fair example is the tart rejoinder of the pretty victim (Janet Leigh), told by her sinister admirer (Anthony Perkins) that she eats like a bird and glancing up at a roomful of stuffed comparisons before conceding that he, after all, ought to know. A few moments later, the boy is agitatedly insisting that his mother, though hateful and probably mad, is really as harmless as his stuffed birds, and one gives Hitchcock the first of several credits for playing fair and literal with his audience. No one, for instance, could presumably be fooled by that tall, uncomfortable female figure fitting briefly across the width of a lighted upper window; nor by that Old Mother Riley voice with dialogue to match. ('So you want to shut me up in the fruit cellar eh boy eh? You think I'm fruity, I suppose!')

Yet the audience is fooled, for the simple reason that there is something horribly and persistently compulsive on the other side of the coin. And it is here that Hitchcock's showmanship comes in. Having given Janet Leigh the kind of postscript star billing conventionally reserved for drunk scene 'guest' appearances and murder victims, and relying on word of mouth reports that *Psycho* contains one of the bloodiest murders ever filmed, he then asks this spirited actress to sustain the daylight panic of a secretary in love who has robbed her firm of \$40,000. This she does, for a full 30 minutes, through a series of false trails and encounters with a lantern-jawed cop in dark glasses so increasingly unnerving that one feels her guilt pouring down one's own brow. But it is not until the switch from first to second gear that one becomes fully aware of Hitchcock's diabolical ingenuity. There is the car ride itself, reminiscent of *Orphée* in its imperceptible shift from the everyday exhaustion of pursuit and blinding headlights to the cold, latent horror of the missed turning, dusk, rain on the windscreen and death in the vulnerable, hygienic setting of a motel shower. Inevitably, the beastliness of the murder itself comes almost as a relief, especially when followed by the symbolic, guilt-assuaging detail of mopping-up operations and the washing of blood-stained hands. But the respite is brief. With the swamp's disinclination to swallow the car and its corpse at one gurgle, the burden of panic and guilt is transferred to the candy-chewing killer, Norman Bates, watching under the branch of a withered tree. An aura of nightmare embraces the whole cast. An innocent-seeming old lady in a hardware store is heard asking for painless insecticide; hayforks form a menacing, serpentine crown round the head of the dead girl's sister.

For all the fake intimacy of the opening love scene and the manifest absurdity of the denouement, *Psycho* comes nearer to attaining an exhilarating balance between content and style than anything Hitchcock has done in years. Of course, it is a very minor work. But its virtues of tension, surprise, virtuosity and control are all major ones. The unacademic chop and change of George Tomasini's editing and John L. Russell's camerawork is effectively unsettling, notably in the second murder sequence; the strange bond that seems to unite Bates with the birds which obsess him is conveyed by feral, blood-curdling shrieks on the sound-track each time he strikes (not to mention that low-angle, beak-like close-up of his under-jaw at one point); one notes the subliminal, momentary dissolve from our last sight of Bates into his mother's grinning skull, and the minatory quality of Bernard Herrmann's score. Finally, there is some excellent acting: from Martin Balsam as the tenacious private detective, John McIntyre as the sceptical local sheriff, above all from Anthony Perkins as Bates, all stammers and spasmodic charm concealing a festering and malignantly disordered mind.

**Peter John Dyer, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1960**

PSYCHO

Directed by: Alfred Hitchcock  
©/Production Company: Shamley Productions  
A Paramount release  
Unit Manager: Lew Leary  
Assistant Director: Hilton A. Green  
Screenplay by: Joseph Stefano  
Based on the novel by: Robert Bloch  
Director of Photography: John L. Russell  
Special Effects: Clarence Champagne  
Edited by: George Tomasini  
Pictorial Consultant: Saul Bass  
Art Direction: Joseph Hurley, Robert Clatworthy  
Set Decorator: George Milo  
Costume Supervisor: Helen Colvig  
Make-up Supervision: Jack Barron, Robert Dawn  
Hairstylist: Florence Bush  
Titles Designed by: Saul Bass  
Music by: Bernard Herrmann  
Sound Recording by: Waldon O. Watson, William Russell  
Sound System: Westrex Recording System

uncredited  
Producer: Alfred Hitchcock  
2nd Assistant Director: Les Berke  
Script Supervisor: Marshall Schlom  
Camera Assistant: Jim Sloan  
Key Grip: Frank Harper  
Gaffer: George Meerhoff  
Best Boy: Norman Cassidy

Cast

Anthony Perkins (Norman Bates)  
Vera Miles (Lila Crane)  
John Gavin (Sam Loomis)  
Martin Balsam (Milton Arbogast)  
John McIntire (Sheriff Al Chambers)  
Simon Oakland (Dr Richmond)  
Vaughn Taylor (George Lowery)  
Frank Albertson (Tom Cassidy)  
Lurene Tuttle (Mrs Chambers)  
Pat Hitchcock (Caroline)  
John Anderson (car salesman)  
Mort Mills (policeman)  
Janet Leigh (Marion Crane)

uncredited  
Sam Flint, Francis De Sales, George Eldredge (officials)  
Alfred Hitchcock (man outside realty office)

USA 1960©  
108 mins

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

**Lift to the Scaffold (Ascenseur pour l'échafaud)**  
Thu 1 Sep 18:30; Thu 15 Sep 20:55; Sun 18 Sep 15:50; Wed 21 Sep 21:00; Tue 27 Sep 21:00  
**Do the Right Thing**  
Fri 2 Sep 20:40; Sat 24 Sep 20:40; Wed 28 Sep 18:00 + intro by freelance writer and producer Kaleem Aftab  
**Wild Strawberries (Smultronstället)**  
Sat 3 Sep 16:00; Fri 9 Sep 14:30; Tue 13 Sep 18:10; Sat 17 Sep 12:30  
**Psycho**  
Sat 3 Sep 20:45; Sun 11 Sep 15:40; Thu 15 Sep 14:30; Tue 4 Oct 18:30  
**The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser (Jeder für sich und Gott gegen alle)**  
Sun 4 Sep13:20; Fri 9 Sep 20:45; Tue 13 Sep 20:30  
**In a Lonely Place**  
Sun 4 Sep 16:00; Wed 14 Sep 18:15 + intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer at Large; Fri 23 Sep 18:00; Wed 28 Sep 20:50  
**The Bride Wore Black (La Mariée était en noir)**  
Mon 5 Sep 20:50; Fri 30 Sep 18:10; Mon 3 Oct 17:50  
**Accident**  
Tue 6 Sep 20:40; Sun 11 Sep 13:10; Tue 20 Sep 17:50

**Ratcatcher**  
Wed 7 Sep 18:15 + intro by Catharine Des Forges, Director of the Independent Cinema Office; Sat 17 Sep 18:00; Thu 29 Sep 21:00  
**The Umbrellas of Cherbourg (Les Parapluies de Cherbourg)**  
Thu 8 Sep 20:45; Mon 12 Sep 14:30; Mon 19 Sep 20:45; Sun 25 Sep 15:30  
**Letter from an Unknown Woman**  
Sat 10 Sep 12:30; Wed 14 Sep 14:30; Wed 21 Sep 18:00 + intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer at Large  
**The Motorcycle Diaries (Diarios de motocicleta)**  
Sat 10 Sep 18:00; Sat 17 Sep 14:45  
**Cleo from 5 to 7 (Cléo de 5 à 7)**  
Tue 13 Sep 14:30; Fri 16 Sep 18:00; Tue 20 Sep 20:50; Sat 1 Oct 12:30  
**Fargo**  
Thu 22 Sep 20:55; Sat 1 Oct 18:00  
**Last Year in Marienbad (L'Année dernière à Marienbad)**  
Mon 26 Sep 20:50; Sun 2 Oct 12:45; Tue 4 Oct 20:40

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