

Psycho and the Brilliance of Alfred Hitchcock

By Jamie Trapp

Alfred Hitchcock's reputation as "The Master of Suspense" was well earned



Alfred Hitchcock aka The Master of Suspense

Alfred Hitchcock made 53 feature films in his incredibly prolific career that spanned 54 years. He was in many ways a movie making machine, churning out incredible levels of production while also maintaining impeccable quality. The British born director started out making silent films in England in the 1920s before transitioning to sound films. In 1940 Hitchcock bolted for the United States in order to work in Hollywood. And with all due respect to his very worthy British films, it was in Hollywood that he would start making some of the greatest movies of all time.

Similar to many of the other auteur filmmakers Hitchcock would revisit many of the same themes throughout his career; the innocent man on the run, spy films involving mistaken identity, an ordinary person caught up in a dangerous situation merely by chance. He explored many of the same themes over and over including voyeurism, duality of humans, sexuality, obsession, and crime. The majority of his films could be placed in the mystery/thriller/horror genre with a few exceptions. Hitchcock certainly did not invent any of these genres, but he undoubtedly took these types of films to unprecedented levels. He was a true visionary and his reputation as the "Master of Suspense" was well earned.

Surprise vs Suspense

Hitchcock understood the power of the imagination.



Hitchcock famously explained the difference between **surprise** and **suspense** using the example of a bomb going off in a movie.

Surprise is as simple as a bomb goes off and the audience is startled by something they did not see coming. Thus, the audience was not aware of the presence of the bomb so when it goes off, they are taken aback.

Suspense on the other hand is created when the audience is made aware of the presence of a bomb that the characters in the movie are not aware of. This knowledge makes the audience uneasy. Think of watching a slasher movie in a theatre where the deranged killer (a metaphorical bomb) is hiding behind the bedroom door and everyone in the audience is screaming for the protagonist to run toward the back door. The longer that the killer remains hidden the more the suspense is ramped up.

The main difference between the two from the audiences perspective is that the payoff from a surprise only lasts briefly. Sure the audience will be startled and perhaps exhilarated by a bomb going off, but the shock value is fleeting. Suspense creates tension amongst the audience that can last throughout the movie. It is no surprise that Hitchcock strongly favored suspense over surprise.

Psycho (1960) Scaled back production

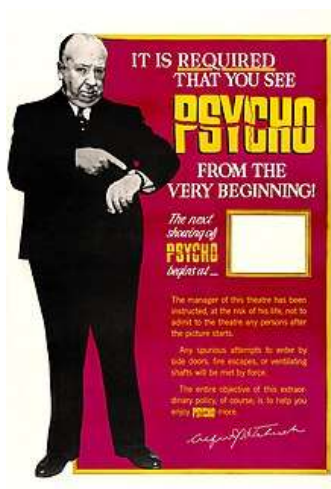
Hitchcock made Psycho on a significantly reduced budget.



In a 3-year span Hitchcock made *Vertigo* (1958), *North by Northwest* (1959), and then *Psycho* (1960). It is undoubtedly the greatest 3 year stretch in Cinema history as he made 3 consecutive Masterpieces. What is interesting is that after making *Vertigo* and *North by Northwest* the 2 prior years Hitchcock deliberately made *Psycho* on a significantly lower budget. In fact the budget for *Psycho* was made of a budget of just \$800K which was approximately a 1/5 of the budget of his prior movie *North by Northwest* which had a budget of approximately \$4.3 million. *Vertigo* had a budget of \$2.5 million. It is also interesting that after making 7 of his previous 8 films in color, Hitchcock returned to black and white cinematography for *Psycho*.

Revolutionary Aspects of the Film (Spoilers...)

Alfred Hitchcock requested that movie theatres not admit anyone late.



Hitchcock subverts audience expectations throughout *Psycho*. The decision to kill Marion Crane not even halfway through the movie was something that had simply not been done before. Especially in the way that she seems set up to be the movie's protagonist. That Hitchcock killed her off and then shifts the focus to Marion Crane's sister was absolutely revolutionary.

One of the most genius aspects of *Psycho* is that Norman Bates's mother is not revealed to be dead until the very end. We hear "her" voice and the characters in the movie are impacted by "her" presence throughout the movie.

Like most great movies, particularly horror/thrillers, the mood and atmosphere are just as important if not more important than the plot. What Hitchcock understood better than just about any other director who has ever lived is what audiences wanted in a film. Hitchcock was a master of manipulating human emotions. In *Psycho* Hitchcock effectively uses music to connect to the audience. The score from the masterful composer Bernard Herrmann cannot be overlooked. Herrmann's score was unsettling, the sound of danger. When it starts up immediately after Marion sees her boss crossing the street the emotion that the audience instantly recognizes is guilt. Remember this occurs right after Marion has decided to steal the \$40K and make a run for it.

The split personality twist has been beaten to death in modern thriller and horror movies. There are literally dozens and dozens of these lame and frankly lazy plot maneuverings to the point of self-parody. The peak of this nonsense came when *Secret Window* (2004) and *Hide and Seek* (2005) were released not even a full year apart. Because of this it can be easy to overlook just how inventive *Psycho*'s use of this was at the time. In fact, Norman Bates subverts many of the expectations that audiences had of villains. Norman was an amiable character, you pitied him and his situation living with an overbearing and psychologically abusive mother.

The violence in *Psycho*, particularly the shower scene was groundbreaking even though the audience does not actually see the knife penetrating the skin; instead it is left up to the imagination. This is one of the most famous scenes of all time and revolutionary in terms of film editing. Hitchcock was not sure the audience could handle real blood which was one of the reasons why he chose to make the film in black and white.

The Mythology

Psycho's shower scene is one of the most famous in movie history.



One of the reasons Psycho fascinates me is the way it has maintained its cultural relevancy. Norman Bates is undoubtedly one of the greatest movie villains of all time. The American Film Institute or AFI listed Norman Bates as the 2nd greatest movie villain of all time behind only Hannibal Lecter.

After Alfred Hitchcock's death in 1980 there were 3 sequels to Psycho with Norman Bates leaving a mental facility. And 53 years after the release of the original movie, a TV series, Bates Motel premiered. Bates Motel told the story of Norman Bates and his mother Norma Bates in a contemporary setting. The story is told over 5 seasons from 2013 to 2018 and focuses on the complex psychology in the relationship between the mother and son with strong Oedipal undertones. I remember first seeing the preview for the show and instantly deciding that I was going to not only check the show out but probably watch the entire 1st Season. A show revolving around Psycho, I was so excited. I ended up watching the entire series which got better by the season.

When the discussion of Hitchcock's best film comes up usually Psycho, Vertigo, Rear Window, Notorious, and North by Northwest are all brought up. However, Psycho is the one that remains Hitchcock's most well known and most culturally relevant film.

The shower scene is perhaps the most famous scene in all of Hitchcock's filmography as well as one of the most famous in all of Cinema's history. There have been entire essays and documentaries on just this scene alone. It is considered one of the best edited scenes in movie history.

You could make a perfectly legitimate argument that no single person has had a greater impact on Cinema than Alfred Hitchcock. He forever impacted what was possible for a movie not only thematically but visually and stylistically as well. Psycho is in my humble opinion his best and more important film.