

# Psycho

By Charles Taylor

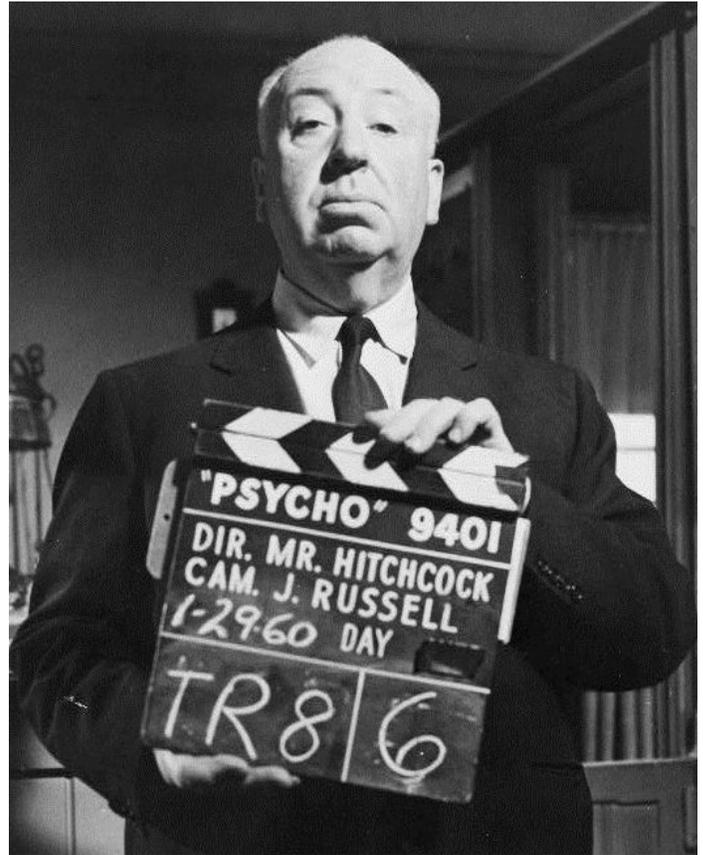
"The A List: The National Society of Film Critics' 100 Essential Films," 2002

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The impact of Alfred Hitchcock's "Psycho" owes so much to its two big surprises that when the film opened in 1960 Hitchcock not only refused to allow press screenings but had theaters hire Pinkerton security guards to prevent latecomers from entering the theater once the picture had started. He wanted to keep the people who hadn't bought tickets from finding out that Janet Leigh's Marion Crane is stabbed to death in the shower only forty-five minutes into the movie, and that the murderer is Anthony Perkins's Norma Bates, who has succumbed to the personality of the mother he murdered years before.

In many ways, "Psycho" seems like a death knell for the studio system that would lumber on for a few more years before collapsing later in the decade under the weight of filmmakers and audiences sick of the old stultified formulas. It isn't just that Hitchcock made the film fast and on the cheap (it cost only \$800,000), using the crew from his television anthology series "Alfred Hitchcock Presents." And it's not just the shock of the shower murder, its brilliant and savage elisions heralding and in many cases surpassing the screen violence to come. The entire movie is predicated on the conscious violation of the reassuring Hollywood conventions that were so common audiences took them for granted. In the manner of a star taking on a small character part, Janet Leigh is billed last in the credits. But to audiences trained in reading Hollywood convention, Leigh, who's in every scene until her death, who is the only character we are encouraged to identify with in the first half of the movie, is the star. It was Anthony Perkins who received top billing, and when he enters the movie he is so sympathetic, so obviously a nice person in a horrible position — a good son who has sacrificed himself to the care of his mad, domineering mother — that he is the natural character to switch our allegiance to after Marion's abrupt death.

Hitchcock establishes our complicity brilliantly. After putting Marion's body and belongings into the trunk of her car, he pushes the vehicle to a swamp and waits for it to sink. When it stops just shy of disappearing beneath the surface, Norman holds his breath and so do we. From identifying with Marion and being shocked by her murder we have already, in the space of a few minutes, become an accessory to erasing the final traces of her existence.



*Alfred Hitchcock holding a clapper on the set of "Psycho."  
Courtesy Library of Congress*

We are as anxious for Norman not to be found out covering up "mother's" crime as we were for Marion not to get caught stealing the \$40,000 that started her on the journey that ends at the Bates Motel. That's why the final revelation that Norman isn't hiding his mother's guilt but his own made some moviegoers feel as if they were the victims of a cruel prank. A friend of mine was nine years old when the film was released and saw it at the drive-in with his mother. She was shocked by the overall candor, particularly the sight of Janet Leigh in a bra (this was an era when Hollywood stars were typically seen in nothing more revealing than a slip). He was shocked by the revelation of Norman's madness. How, he wondered, could he be tricked into feeling such sympathy for this madman? How could a madman seem so like us?

But secrets only keep so long. Now, more than forty years after its release, "Psycho" is so famous that even people who've never seen it know that Marion is murdered and Norman is the killer. And as with all things that upset or shock or frighten us, "Psycho" has become something of a joke, an excuse for quips about showers or mothers. For Perkins, who had been a sensitive, affecting juvenile lead in pictures like "Friendly Persuasion," it was a joke that never wore off. He became Norman Bates to the public (even when playing a very different disturbed young man in 1968's "Pretty Poison," one of his very best perfor-

mances), and his increasingly mannered and eccentric acting played into the perception. His participation in several sequels seemed to be the final surrender.

So how is it possible to still watch “Psycho” long after its secrets have been spilled? The answer is that beneath the shocker is a profoundly despairing film, a work as redolent of contemporary desolation and isolation as Eliot’s “Preludes.” (It can’t be chance that the movie takes place in the weeks leading up to Christmas and no one alludes to or even seems aware of the coming holiday.) Beginning in a desert and ending in a swamp, “Psycho” is a film in which the aridity of sex, work, family and routine strands its two main characters in the quagmire of their private traps.

That’s the phrase Norman uses to Marion during the scene that precedes her murder, a long sequence in his private parlor, a sort of spiritual interrogation that establishes both what links them (their surrender to their own brands of madness — “I think we all go a little mad sometimes, haven’t you?” Norman asks Marion) and what separates them (Marion’s ability to recognize a way back to sanity — she answer his question, “Sometimes just once is enough”). In the movie’s central piece of dialogue, Norman says, “I think we’re all in our private traps, clamped in them, and none of us can ever get out. We scratch and claw, but only at the air, only at each other. And for all of it, we never budge an inch.”

Watch “Psycho” with those lines in mind and what you’ll see is Marion and Norman in a succession of their own traps. For Marion it begins with the cheap Phoenix hotel room where she meets her lover Sam (John Gavin) for a midday tryst, the shabbiness of the place defining the money problems that keep them apart. Then we see the office where she works, and the money that offers the seeming solution to her problem dangled temptingly in front of her. Then the bedroom of the home she shares with her sister, its clean, modest conventionality, the family pictures watching her from the wall (the movie’s first example of what Norman will call “the cruel eyes studying you”) feeling like a respectable death-in-life. Then the car in which she’ll make her futile getaway, all the while unable to stop imagining the worries of the people she left behind. Then the shower of her cabin at the Bates Motel, where she will be senselessly murdered after deciding to go back to Phoenix and make amends. And finally, the trunk of the car that holds her body and the swamp that swallows it up.

For Norman, the traps are fewer but profound. “I was born in mine,” he says. Meaning not just the Bates home with its morbid, nearly gothic Victoriana (furnishings from which the stale, dead air of the movie seems to emanate), but his very being, his body in which he will be subsumed by “mother.” In our final glimpse of him, a subliminal cut superimposes the face of his mother’s grinning ten-years-dead corpse on his own. Earlier, when Norman is apprehended by Sam as he attempts to kill Marion’s sister Lila (Vera Miles), Perkins’s face twitches in the manner of a man whose personality is coming apart at the seams (just as the titles in Saul Bass’s credit sequence pull apart, degenerating from words into meaningless visual patterns). That struggle has ended when we last see Norman. The distance between him and “mother” has collapsed just as the distance between Norman and ourselves has suddenly become too wide to traverse. “Psycho” is his tragedy no less than Marion’s. Marion (whose last name is Crane) winds up like the stuffed birds in Norman’s parlor, staring accusingly from dead eyes. It’s a measure of the bleak empathy of “Psycho” that, caught in their private traps, both hunter and prey can be described by Eliot’s line as “some infinitely gentle/Infinitely suffering thing.”

*The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

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