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### **Rebellious and Revolutionary *Psycho***

Before *Psycho* was released, Alfred Hitchcock had made his name as the “master of suspense”<sup>1</sup>. He had produced excellent, polished thrillers such as *Rear Window* and *North by Northwest*, but *Psycho* was completely different. The censorship of particularly violence and racy content in films, known as Hay’s code, meant that directors were restricted to glossy, stylish, film-noir stories with no signs of brutality<sup>2</sup>. Though traces of the slasher genre were seen in films such as *The Scarlett Claw* (1944) and *Jack the Ripper* (1959), *Psycho* was the first to boldly depict murder in a truly nightmarish fashion as well as create suspense and surprise that had viewers on the edge of their seats. Film critic Stephen Robb in his article “How Psycho Changed Cinema” on BBC News, described it as “the like of which most cinema-goers had never seen”<sup>3</sup>. *Psycho* was released in 1960 and continues to have an everlasting impact on films. This film is tremendously iconic and immense cultural significance due to its extensive impact on the horror genre, its enduring presence in popular media and it’s dynamic political display of the time period in which it was constructed.

*Psycho* has made countless notable contributions to the horror genre as well as film history. Though the entire scene is less than a minute long, the shower murder in *Psycho* is one of the most prominent scenes in cinema history. Within the shower scene we see the brutal killing of the protagonist of the film, Marion. One of the reasons why this scene is

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<sup>1</sup> Robb, Stephen. "How Psycho Changed Cinema." BBC News. BBC, 04 Jan. 2010. Web. 23 Oct. 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Hudson, John. “How Hitchcock’s ‘Psycho’ Changed Cinema and Society”. The Wire. 16 June 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Robb, Stephen. "How Psycho Changed Cinema." BBC News. BBC, 04 Jan. 2010. Web. 23 Oct. 2014.

so horrifying is due to the use of graphic violence which was revolutionary for its time. The use of blood was considered so gory that Hitchcock deemed the entire film too scandalous to be shown in color<sup>4</sup>. In the movie, Hitchcock used a shifting point of view, which became a prominent method in many future slasher films<sup>5</sup>. It opened up many different pathways for screenwriters and directors looking to create a horror film. *Psycho* specifically has influenced scenes of graphic violence in *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Jaws*, *Halloween*, *Fatal Attraction*, and *Scream*. It created a new standard for horror films and marked a shift in the way horror films were made and rated. In this sense, *Psycho* pushed the boundaries of horror and started a revolution of violence in films<sup>6</sup>. *Psycho* has continued to influence the horror genre, even fifty years after its initial release.

Hitchcock's use of music in *Psycho*, and specifically the shower scene, dramatically enhanced the fright in this film as well as in future horrors. Mr. Brook, one of the many critics of the films, says "It was only with the second version, with the music added, that people just leapt of their seats- especially when the shrieking violence started". This violence was heavily enhanced with Bernard Herrmann's famous "screaming violins" score<sup>7</sup>. Hitchcock's strategic and masterful use of music not only intensified the horror of *Psycho*, but also influenced the likes of later horrors such as *Jaws* and *Halloween*. The terrifyingly minimalistic composition of all three scores turns a sinister horror film into something more nightmare inducing. All three use few notes but these simplistic scores seem to make the scenes even more suspenseful and scary. Music has the ability to

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<sup>4</sup> Gleiberman, Owen. "'Psycho': The horror movie that changed the genre". Entertainment Weekly. 4 August 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Callenbach, Ernest. "Psycho by Alfred Hitchcock." JSTOR. University of California Press, n.d. Web. 23 Oct. 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Ebert, Roger. "Hitchcock Showered 'Psycho' with Surprises, Plot Twists." San Antonio Express-News: 0. Dec 06 1998. ProQuest. Web. 4 Nov. 2014 .

<sup>7</sup> Sullivan, Jack. "Psycho: The Music of Terror." JSTOR. Cineaste Publishers, 2006. Web. 3 Nov. 2014.

greatly affect the way in which a scene is interpreted and viewed, and *Psycho* proves this through its use of music in the shower scene<sup>8</sup>.

Though *Psycho*'s budget was only \$800,000, it continues to have a powerful presence in numerous forms of media<sup>9</sup>. It opened up the doorway for a new and more visual aspect of film and television. As well as opening up a complete floodgate of other movies including *Friday the 13th*, *The Night of the Living Dead* and *Scream* with the violence presented in the famous shower scene, it also has made appearances in television. The popular television show *The Simpsons* parodied the film. Using the *Psycho* soundtrack, Maggie appears with a mallet and Homer screams, just as Marion did in the film. A bucket of red paint, representing blood, then falls after Homer grabs onto the shower curtain and collapses. The paint, or 'blood', then runs down the drain. These events and camera shots are an almost exact depiction of what happens in the film. Popular late night talk-show *Saturday Night Live* also parodied *Psycho*, with a "Norman Bates School of Motel Management" skit. A commercial for Ruud water heaters parodied the shower scene, with a woman stepping into a cold shower and imitating Marion's scream<sup>10</sup>. An entire episode of *That 70s Show* pays homage to Hitchcock; Ashton Kutcher's character is taking a shower. Mimicking Marion, he screams because of scalding hot water and is hit numerous times by another character with a long-handled back scrubber brush in a fashion similar to that of Norman stabbing Marion. A campaign raising awareness for dirty water killing children in third-world countries by the organisation Good made a short film of a woman being showered by filthy water and echoing Marion's

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<sup>8</sup> Sullivan, Jack. "Psycho: The Music of Terror." JSTOR. Cineaste Publishers, 2006. Web. 3 Nov. 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Nixon, Rob. "Pop Culture 101: Psycho." Turner Classic Movies. Turner Entertainment Networks, n.d. Web. 04 Nov. 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Johnson, Brian D. "The Psycho Effect." Maclean's. Roger's Media, 10 Feb. 2010. Web. 20 Oct. 2014.

scream. Every one of these examples uses almost the exact same camera angles and techniques as the film in order to accurately mimic the scene. Through these examples of parody we can see *Psycho*'s strong influence in popular media even today.

One of the unique and innovative qualities Hitchcock employs in *Psycho* is the notion of class struggle. *Psycho* is not just a horror film but a commentary on capitalism and the American Dream<sup>11</sup>. The plot makes this clear; Marion Crane has worked for years as a secretary in a real estate agency. She is in a relationship and wants to marry but her boyfriend, Sam, lives in another town and does not make enough money to support them both. Their relationship consists of hasty sexual visits. In one scene, they have rushed sex in a shabby hotel during Marion's lunch break. The movie almost revolves around money more than it does mental illness or murder; Marion barely earns enough money to live on and her boyfriend's career is not moving forward either; he is a clerk in a hardware store. Marion cannot achieve the American Dream that was so glorified and worshipped by people of 50s; she can't start a family or do the proper things she longs to do<sup>12</sup>. Finally, she gives her boyfriend a final demand; either they get married, or their relationship is over. Her frustrated discontent already marks her as a class outcast. She is not attaining her designated role of a compliant wife realising the American Dream<sup>13</sup>. By depicting Marion in this situation, Hitchcock is commenting on the notion of the American Dream as a myth. Many women of the time were in similar situations to Marion; they were struggling to earn enough money to live and had yet to start a family. When speaking to the wealthy oilman who enters the office with the \$40,000 home payment that she later steals and begins the series of events that lead to her death, it is clear that she is frustrated. He then

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<sup>11</sup> Nicholson, Mervyn. "Alfred Hitchcock Presents Class Struggle." Monthly Review. N.p., Dec. 2011. Web. 04 Nov. 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Nicholson, Mervyn. "Alfred Hitchcock Presents Class Struggle." Monthly Review. N.p., Dec. 2011. Web. 04 Nov. 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Nicholson, Mervyn. "Alfred Hitchcock Presents Class Struggle." Monthly Review. N.p., Dec. 2011. Web. 04 Nov. 2014.

proceeds to boast about how he “buys happiness”. It is obvious Marion experiences a ripple of exasperation in this scene; she is not getting any younger and she is unmarried but doesn’t have the funds to start a family. Although she has been working for years, she is still worth nothing. The same goes for her boyfriend who is steeped in debt. It contrasts those who work for a living and have nothing, such as Marion with people who don’t work and have everything. Marion represents the threat of the “undeserving”, lower-class people taking property away from the “deserving” rich or the owners of the capital. She performs the most serious crime - taking the possessions of the rich, which is the most dreadful worry that endures in the rule of the capital<sup>14</sup>. In this sense, class struggle is shown as it is waged between the owners of capital against those in the working class. While *Psycho* is a thriller and horror film, filled with suspense and peculiar twists, it also portrays real problems of ordinary people the 50s and 60s. It characterises the power of the capital and the helplessness of the labourer. The realities of Marion’s situation - oppression, isolation and rebellion - are what make the story possible<sup>15</sup>.

Without *Psycho*, we wouldn’t have the same revolutionary depictions of violence or high standard of suspense and surprise in horror and thriller films in contemporary cinema. Hitchcock’s rebellious and imaginative techniques continue to transform film as well as media today. This film’s substantial influence on the thriller and horror genres, its forceful, long-lasting presence in popular media and its dynamic political display of the time period in which it was constructed all equate to its renowned and immense cultural importance.

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<sup>14</sup> Nicholson, Mervyn. "Alfred Hitchcock Presents Class Struggle." *Monthly Review*. N.p., Dec. 2011. Web. 04 Nov. 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Nicholson, Mervyn. "Alfred Hitchcock Presents Class Struggle." *Monthly Review*. N.p., Dec. 2011. Web. 04 Nov. 2014.