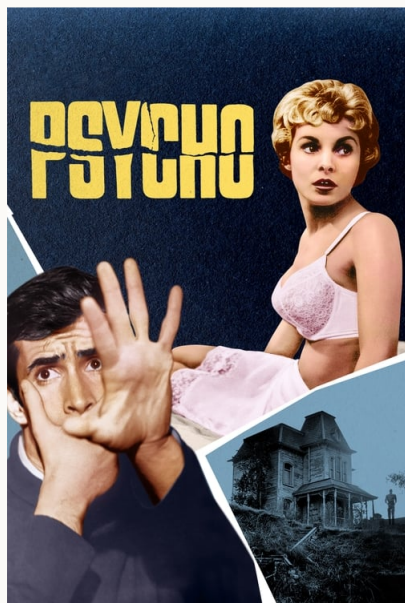




HORROR · THRILLER · MYSTERY

Psycho

1960 · Directed by Alfred Hitchcock

Horror

Suspense

Auteur Cinema

A woman on the run with a stolen envelope of cash leaves the highway for a quiet motel off the main road. Its shy young manager seems harmless, but Hitchcock builds unease out of small details, a house on a hill and a score of nothing but strings.

DIRECTOR Alfred Hitchcock

YEAR 1960

RUNTIME 1h 49m (109 min)

COUNTRY USA

GENRES Horror, Thriller, Mystery

CAST Anthony Perkins, Janet Leigh, Vera Miles, John Gavin, Martin Balsam

MUSIC Bernard Herrmann

IMDB 8.5 / 10 (783,952 votes)

ROTTEN
TOMATOES 97% (critics)

METACRITIC 97 / 100

TMDB SCORE 8.4 / 10 (11,297 votes)

WHERE TO
WATCH Stream (US): Netflix, Peacock Premium, AMC Plus Apple TV channel, AMC+, Netflix Standard with Ads, Peacock Premium Plus
Rent: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, YouTube, Fandango At Home
Buy: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, YouTube, Fandango At Home

Part one is spoiler-free. Part two, "After watching", reveals the story, scenes and ending.

Before watching

Spoiler-free

WHY WATCH THIS?

1 A founding film of the modern horror thriller

Psycho moved screen horror from castles and monsters into ordinary American roads, motels and minds. It is Hitchcock's most famous film and the template for much of the suspense and horror cinema that followed.

2 A masterclass in controlling an audience

Hitchcock steers what viewers know, fear and hope for, shot by shot. Even on a first viewing, it is a lesson in how editing, framing and music create dread without announcing it.

3 Craft at full strength on a small budget

Shot in black and white with a modest crew, it pairs Bernard Herrmann's strings-only score with Saul Bass's graphic design and John L. Russell's stark cinematography. It is a lean, unusually precise piece of studio filmmaking.

WHY IT MATTERS IN CINEMA HISTORY

A defining film of postwar American suspense and a turning point for horror, it showed a mainstream studio director taking genre material into frank, psychologically unsettling territory just as the old production restrictions were loosening.

WATCH WITH INTENTION

YOUR LENS

Watch how Hitchcock controls what you look at and what you feel about it, long before the film explains anything.

THREE THINGS TO NOTICE

- Mirrors, windows and glass surfaces: how often characters are reflected or looked at through them, and what the camera lets you observe.
- Bernard Herrmann's strings-only score: how it changes the tension of ordinary moments, such as a long drive, before anything alarming happens.
- The rooms and objects in the motel office, parlour and the house on the hill, and what they suggest about the people who keep them.

ONE QUESTION TO CARRY WITH YOU

What does the film make you most anxious about in its opening stretch, and how does it manage your attention?

CINEMA AT THE TIME

- **Director's moment:** Hitchcock arrived at Psycho after Rear Window, Vertigo and the glossy colour hit North by Northwest. He deliberately chose a cheaper, harsher project to test himself.
- **Industry:** Studios were struggling against television and the old Production Code was loosening. Hitchcock financed the film through his own company and used a television crew to keep costs low.
- **Dominant styles:** Screen horror in the 1950s meant creature features and colourful British gothic. Mainstream suspense usually meant glamorous stars in exotic settings and reassuring resolutions.
- **Audience:** Audiences expected a major star in a Hitchcock picture to anchor the story. Marketing urged people to see the film from the beginning, treating the viewing itself as an event.

WHERE IT CAME FROM

FILM

Les Diaboliques (1955)

Henri-Georges Clouzot's shocking French thriller was a major hit and showed that audiences would pay for dark, tightly plotted suspense.



FILM

Vertigo (1958)

Hitchcock's previous film, an intense study in obsession and subjective viewpoint, shows the psychological territory he was moving into.



TRADITION

Robert Bloch's novel *Psycho*

The pulp novel supplied the premise, which Joseph Stefano's screenplay reshaped and Hitchcock sharpened into a visual exercise in suspense.



THIS FILM

Psycho (1960)

NEW AT THE TIME *A major-studio, star-led thriller that set its fear in plain, contemporary American settings and handled violence and disturbed psychology with a frankness unusual for 1960.*

SOCIAL CONTEXT

Made in 1959–60, as Eisenhower-era American conformity began to loosen and the Production Code was weakening, by a famous director taking a financial gamble.

- **Country and moment:** The film came out at the end of the 1950s, a time of postwar prosperity, suburban family ideals and Cold War anxiety. Many Americans held up respectability and conformity as norms, and the film looks at what might lie beneath them.
- **Politics and censorship:** The Production Code still governed Hollywood, but it was losing authority. Hitchcock negotiated with the Code office over sexuality and violence, and he pushed the limits of what mainstream audiences were allowed to see.
- **The filmmaker's situation:** Hitchcock was at the height of his fame, with a television series and a string of hits. He was dissatisfied with studio routine, and Paramount was reluctant to back the project. He financed it largely himself and used his television crew to keep costs low.
- **Society and audience:** Postwar American culture was growing more interested in popular psychology and psychoanalysis. The film drew on this fascination, and it was inspired by a novel loosely based on a real Wisconsin criminal case.

WHAT TO EXPECT

- **Pace:** Unhurried and deliberate at first, then tightening into sharp, economical suspense. Dialogue scenes carry as much tension as the set pieces.
- **Style:** Precise, controlled studio filmmaking: stark lighting, carefully composed close-ups, and editing that guides the eye.
- **Performance:** Restrained, naturalistic acting. Anthony Perkins's nervous, boyish manner and Janet Leigh's guarded warmth carry much of the tension.
- **Format:** Black and white, standard widescreen 1.85:1, with a score for strings only.
- **Violence:** Suggested through cutting and sound rather than shown graphically. It is mild by modern standards but still intense.

WATCH WITH KIDS?

14+

 SUGGESTED AGE

Ratings range from 12 (Germany, France) to 15 (BBFC) and R (US); 14 suits teens who can handle sudden, intense scenes and a slow-building classic.

Official ratings: US R · UK 15 · Germany 12/18 · France 12/18

- **Good for:** Teens curious about classic cinema will find a masterclass in suspense, music and editing, with a short running time and plenty to discuss and rewatch.
- **May unsettle, violence:** Sudden, very intense attacks. Quickly edited so little is shown explicitly, but they are shocking and frightening.
- **May unsettle, intensity:** Sustained suspense and a creepy, tense atmosphere, helped by a shrill, jarring musical score.
- **May unsettle, scary imagery:** Shadowy figures, gloomy interiors and unsettling details may stay with sensitive viewers after the film ends.
- **May unsettle, mature themes:** Adult subjects including theft, secret relationships and brief suggestive scenes with characters in underwear.
- **Explain first:** It is a black-and-white film from 1960, so the pace and acting style feel slower and more formal than modern thrillers.
- **Explain first:** Hitchcock builds suspense deliberately; the screeching music and tense camera angles are intended to unsettle you.
- **Explain first:** Try to avoid spoilers beforehand: the film works best if you go in knowing as little as possible.

Talk about it after: *How did the music, camera angles and editing make you feel tense, even in moments when very little was actually shown on screen?*

Cinespective's own guidance, a draft. Check it against the official ratings and your own judgement.

After watching

CONTAINS SPOILERS

THE FILM, UNPACKED

CENTRAL IDEA

The film can be read as an exploration of how thin the line is between the respectable and the monstrous. Ordinary people are trapped by private pressures, and the film implicates the viewer's own watching.

THEMES

- **Divided and doubled selves:** Almost every major character presents one face and hides another, and the film builds toward a literal splitting of identity.
- **Traps and private compulsions:** Marion's money, Norman's mother and the characters' work and duty all hold people in place. Characters repeatedly say they feel trapped.
- **Voyeurism and complicity:** The camera peers through gaps, windows and peepholes, making the audience a watcher who shares in the looking.
- **The past and the maternal:** The dead and the domineering weigh on the living. The film treats family, especially mother and child, as a source of horror rather than comfort.
- **Guilt and moral ambiguity:** Marion's theft and Norman's isolation make it hard to sort victims from villains, and the film asks for sympathy where the audience expects judgment.

Key scenes

The shower

Hitchcock kills his apparent lead a third of the way in, breaking the Hollywood rule that stars survive. The montage suggests violence without showing the knife entering a body, and Herrmann's shrieking strings turn editing into pure sensation.

The parlour conversation

Marion and Norman talk over sandwiches among stuffed birds. Framing, shadows and Perkins's halting delivery make a polite chat reveal both characters' traps, and it shifts audience sympathy toward Norman.

Arbogast on the staircase

A shot looking down from above, then a cut, pulls the viewer's sense of space out of balance. It shows Hitchcock using camera position as a device for shock and for withholding information.

The fruit cellar and the psychiatrist's explanation

The discovery in the cellar delivers the film's central reveal, and the psychiatrist's wrap-up is deliberately flat and clinical. Its tidy explanation contrasts with the lingering dread of the final images.

Filmmaking

- **Structure:** The film removes its apparent protagonist and hands its sympathy to someone else, which was shocking and unmatched at the time. It plays with the habit of tying empathy to the star.
- **Editing:** Cutting is used for rhythm and implication, from quick montage in the attack to long unbroken takes that stretch anticipation. What the viewer imagines is as powerful as what is shown.
- **Music:** Bernard Herrmann's score uses only string instruments, giving the film a harsh, unified sound. Its screeching and pulsing lines became a shorthand for suspense.
- **Cinematography and design:** Black-and-white photography gives the film a plain, documentary-like look, while the Gothic house above the modern motel splits the setting between the everyday and the uncanny.
- **Point of view:** The camera moves between objective distance and subjective glimpses, often tying the viewer's gaze to a character's. Hitchcock repeatedly makes watchers feel they should not be looking.

THE FULL STORY

The full plot, including the ending.

Marion Crane, a Phoenix real estate secretary, is tired of meeting her lover Sam Loomis in hotel rooms because he cannot afford to marry. When her boss entrusts her with \$40,000 in cash, she takes it and drives out of town. Exhausted and rattled by a suspicious highway patrolman, she turns off at the Bates Motel during a rainstorm.

The manager, Norman Bates, is shy and polite, and he shares a meal with her while mentioning his domineering mother in the house above. Marion decides to go back and return the money. While she showers, a figure bursts in and stabs her to death. Norman finds the body, blames his mother and cleans up, sinking Marion's car and her belongings in a swamp.

Marion's sister Lila, Sam and a private detective, Arbogast, search for her. Arbogast traces her to the motel and goes up to the house, where he is murdered on the stairs. Lila and Sam learn from a local sheriff that Norman's mother has been dead for years.

Lila explores the house and finds Mrs. Bates's mummified corpse in the cellar. Norman, dressed as his mother, attacks her with a knife but is stopped by Sam. A psychiatrist explains that Norman killed his mother and took on her personality to keep her alive, and that this "mother" killed out of jealousy. In a cell, Norman sits motionless as the mother's voice takes over, and Marion's car is pulled from the swamp.

BEHIND THE FILM

- **Hitchcock buys the novel:** Hitchcock bought the rights to Robert Bloch's 1959 novel quietly and cheaply. It was loosely inspired by the real case of Ed Gein, and Hitchcock wanted the plot kept secret.
- **Self-financed shoot:** Paramount disliked the project, so Hitchcock paid for it through his own company and used the crew from his television series. He took a deferred salary in exchange for a large share of the film.

- **The theatre policy:** Hitchcock insisted that nobody be admitted once the film began, which was unusual then. Publicity stressed the rule and helped make viewing it an event.
- **Strings only:** Bernard Herrmann scored the film for strings alone, an economical choice that matched the black-and-white look. Hitchcock was reportedly doubtful about music for the shower scene, then accepted Herrmann's version.
- **Saul Bass:** Designer Saul Bass created the film's title sequence, with its slicing bars of type, and storyboarded the shower sequence. The title design set a tone of fracture before the story begins.
- **Myth:** The shower scene shows the knife stabbing Marion's body. **Reality:** No shot shows the blade piercing flesh. The effect comes from fast cutting, sound and implication, and the scene's reputation rests on what the audience imagines.
- **Myth:** Saul Bass directed the shower scene. **Reality:** Bass claimed that he did, but Hitchcock and Janet Leigh both said Hitchcock directed it. Bass is best credited for the title design and storyboards.

LEGACY AND CONNECTIONS

Its place in the lineage before → after

FILM

Les Diaboliques (1955)

Henri-Georges Clouzot's shocking French thriller was a major hit and showed that audiences would pay for dark, tightly plotted suspense.



FILM

Vertigo (1958)

Hitchcock's previous film, an intense study in obsession and subjective viewpoint, shows the psychological territory he was moving into.



TRADITION

Robert Bloch's novel Psycho

The pulp novel supplied the premise, which Joseph Stefano's screenplay reshaped and Hitchcock sharpened into a visual exercise in suspense.



THIS FILM

Psycho (1960)



FILM

Halloween (1978)

John Carpenter's film borrowed Psycho's stalking viewpoint, strident string-like music and shock timing, and helped define the slasher cycle.



MOVEMENT

The slasher film

Psycho's killer, isolated victims and shock set pieces became a formula that later horror filmmakers repeated and varied.



FILMMAKER

Brian De Palma

De Palma openly adapted Hitchcock's techniques, including Psycho's, in thrillers such as Sisters and Dressed to Kill.



FILM

Psycho (Gus Van Sant remake) (1998)

Van Sant's shot-for-shot colour remake became an experiment in how far the film's design depends on its original setting and cast.

Reception and reputation

Some critics were unimpressed by what they saw as a tasteless shocker, and a few reviews were hostile. Audiences nonetheless queued around cinemas, and the film became one of the biggest box-office successes of Hitchcock's career, far above its modest cost.

Critics reassessed it in the following years, and it now stands as one of Hitchcock's central achievements and a basic text in film study. Its tricks are so familiar that new viewers can underestimate how radical they were in 1960.

Awards Oscars and Cannes

Academy Awards: 4 nominations (Best Supporting Actress for Janet Leigh, Best Director, Best Cinematography Black-and-White, Best Art Direction Black-and-White).

Cultural impact beyond cinema

- **Shower scene shorthand:** The shower murder, with its shrieking violin stabs by Bernard Herrmann, became cultural shorthand for sudden menace. It is parodied in comedies and cartoons, including Mel Brooks's *High Anxiety*, and in *The Simpsons*, and is evoked whenever a shower turns sinister.
- **Norman Bates's legacy:** Norman Bates and his mother-fixated persona shaped the popular image of the disturbed, seemingly polite killer. The Bates Motel and the house on the hill became lasting emblems of horror. Their story spawned sequels, a 1998 remake, and the TV series *Bates Motel* (2013–2017).
- **Marketing and viewing habits:** Hitchcock's strict no-late-admission policy and his teaser trailer, in which he tours the Bates house, changed how audiences were sold a film. The policy encouraged viewers to arrive at the start of a screening, rather than drift in mid-film. It remains a famous example of showmanship.
- **Pop and fine art:** The film keeps resurfacing outside cinema. Douglas Gordon's video installation *24 Hour Psycho* (1993) slowed it to a full day. The film is also a staple of film-studies teaching, and it features in discussions of cinematic shock and the treatment of mental illness.

Its lasting influence

It helped create the template for the slasher film and the psychological horror thriller, from Italian giallo to John Carpenter's *Halloween* and Brian De Palma's thrillers. Its musical and editing language has been copied and parodied for decades.

WHAT NEXT?

CONTINUE THE DIRECTOR

Vertigo (1958)

Hitchcock's richer, more dreamlike study of obsession and false identity, and a natural companion to Psycho's colder precision.

FOLLOW THE IDEA

M (1931)

Fritz Lang's thriller also asks the audience to look closely at a disturbed killer and complicates easy judgment.

COMPARE ANOTHER APPROACH

Peeping Tom (1960) **COMING SOON**

Michael Powell's film appeared the same year and also turns the audience's looking into a source of horror, but drew a harsher response at the time.

SEE ITS INFLUENCE

Halloween (1978) **COMING SOON**

Carpenter's low-budget thriller shows how Psycho's methods became the base of the slasher genre.

JUMP FORWARD

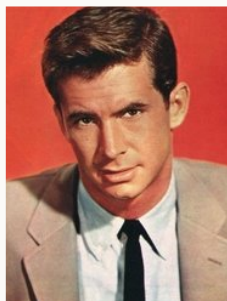
Bonnie and Clyde (1967)

Another film that shocked audiences by killing characters they cared about, marking a new frankness about screen violence.

FULL CAST AND CREW



Alfred Hitchcock
DIRECTOR



Anthony Perkins
ACTOR
as Norman Bates



Janet Leigh
ACTOR
as Marion Crane



Vera Miles
ACTOR
as Lila Crane



John Gavin
ACTOR
as Sam Loomis



Martin Balsam
ACTOR
as Milton Arbogast



Bernard Herrmann
COMPOSER

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