

Alfred Hitchcock's *PSYCHO* (1960)

### The Psyche of a Psycho

Ancient Greek philosophy defined "*psyche*" as an entity made up of two elements: soul and mind. Implicitly, like any other binomial unit, the whole aggregate malfunctions if one of its two elements breaks. Ancient Greek mythology presented *Psyche* as the personification of a woman who is loved by Eros, the God of Love. In modern psychology and psychoanalysis, *the psyche* defines the mental structure of a person regarded as its moving, motivating force.

Hitchcock's blockbuster *Psycho* touches all these definitions with a masterful cinematic brush. Norman Bates – the main character played by the amazing and very young Anthony Perkins – loses his mind and, consequently, his soul. He distortedly identifies his lost spirit with Marion Crane (Academy Award winner Janet Leigh), the sole visitor of the Bates Motel. This newly found *Psyche*/Marion motivates all of Norman's future actions: while in search for his *Psyche*, Norman becomes a *psycho*.

Although already in use since 1942, this term became wildly popular overnight due to Hitchcock's most influential film of the same name.

Do not look for hidden meanings or deep philosophical ideas in this movie. *Psycho* is a thriller bordering on the edge of horror, and nothing more. That being said, it is a very smart thriller, cleverly executed and splendidly constructed. Its impact was so significant due to its uniqueness that, at the time, it changed the genre forever. All thrillers "*post-Psycho*" have at least a speck of the Hitchcock-ean in them. Even today films cannot seem to be able to get away from it.

Before starting to write this review I swore to myself that I was not going to talk about the *shower scene* - one of the most analysed and popular scenes in the history of film. If you want to find out more about it, please Google it or simply ... watch the movie. Yet, there is one thing I felt was worth mentioning. If *Psycho*, as a whole, greatly inspired almost every thriller produced after it, the *shower scene* was the engine of this inspiration. That's all I'm going to say about the *shower scene*. Anyway, *shower*, or no *shower*, *Psycho* is one of these movies worth watching and revisiting. This film's tension grows like a storm, like a post-romantic symphony. The camera moves in unexpected ways at unexpected times in such a refreshingly original manner. Herrmann's music - unique and innovative – is unforgettable. Its cinematography is the catalyst of a mesmerizing and sophisticated décor of shadows. Although in black and white – and deliberately so - the movie almost squeezes colours out of its infinite scales of gray. Omnipresent shadows whisper ominously from the walls, hanging dissolutely off the ceilings, slithering on the floors, disassembling and reassembling faces.

Hitchcock's legendary creativity bursts early on, from the very title of the movie. Presented in animation, the title is displayed in a fractured way. The word "*Psycho*" breaks down into two horizontal halves which move mechanically and rhythmically in contrary motion, in a visually poignant suggestion of a cracked human mind. This opening title is a hint of what is to come - the film's abundance of intelligent and astonishing camera moves. I will offer a mere two examples.

Detective Milton Arbogast (Martin Blasam) has a discussion with Norman Bates over the motel's guest book. The camera moves down to the pages displayed on the counter, and then, from this position, suddenly turns up. The rest of the dialogue is filmed from the counter level - right between and

under the two actors' faces. When Anthony Perkins (Norman Bates) leans over to point out a detail in the guest book, his face is distorted in a most grotesque way. It is an unbelievable metamorphosis of the human face, astutely achieved through a minimalist method: camera positioning, Perkins' moves and the light and shadow - incredible effect without any CGI assistance.

Let's move now to my second example. When Norman Bates enters his crippled mother's room and then carries her in his arms down to their house's basement, the camera first follows Norman up the stairs. It then stops at the door - leaving Norman entering the room- and crawls on the wall, reaches the ceiling (it is a very tall house) and freezes there. It is from this very elevated vantage point that, seconds later, we observe Norman getting out of the room with his mother in his arms, descending the stairs to the main lobby, and then disappearing on the lower staircase towards the basement.

*Psycho* is not your all-Academy-Award-winner; it is not what is commonly regarded as a masterpiece; it doesn't ask fundamental questions about the Universe or human existence. Nevertheless, it *is* one of the most influential films in the history of cinema, the 'father' of all thrillers, and an astounding blockbuster – an \$ 800,000 budget and \$50 million success at the box-office. I won't give away the twisted and very clever ending.

Folks, it really doesn't matter if you like thrillers or not, this is one you've gotta see!

**Dr. Phil M. Ovie**