



# Psycho

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away the film's ending.

## A contemporary review

What keeps the public happy is undoubtedly their obsession with narrative craftsmanship. Your average critic, on the other hand, tends to be more concerned with the story itself than with its telling and when, as in Hitchcock's *Psycho*, he finds an outrageous story allied with a portentously irregular press-show and publicity, his conditioned reflexes automatically cause him to hiss and jeer.

Admittedly, there is some justification for the view that a thriller which, by its very nature, stands or falls by its action is merely exposing its debility when it comes to depend on a complex, last minute explication: a movie psychiatrist's explication at that. Hastily, therefore, one must affirm that *Psycho* bears about as much relation to Freud as Eva Marie Saint's high-heeled scramble down Thomas Jefferson's face does to American Central Intelligence routine; and once the tics of its amateur taxidermist have made the fact abundantly clear, then no experienced Hitchcock student has the slightest reason to expect anything other than the unreasonable. Nor, once the heroine has braved the fruit cellar, to feel exactly stunted, either. A shy young matricide who lugs his dear departed out of her grave, preserves her for ten years alongside the rest of his stuffed specimens in a swamp-bordering motel, speaking to and for her, dressing in her clothes, murdering any girl whose attraction for him might make the possessive old thing jealous, until the only way he can survive a rapidly growing burden of understandable embarrassment is by seeking total refuge in his mother's identity... Set down in cold print, the only mystery Hitchcock's solution seems unable to explain is why the critics should have even tried to believe such arrant nonsense, and what happened to their sense of humour in the first place.

There is surely plenty to laugh at. The whole second movement preceding this coda is an expert blend of Gothic wit and horror showing a proper respect for the traditions of its *Old Dark House* and *Cat and the Canary* genre. A fair example is the tart rejoinder of the pretty victim (Janet Leigh), told by her sinister admirer (Anthony Perkins) that she eats like a bird and glancing up at a roomful of stuffed comparisons before conceding that he, after all, ought to know. A few moments later, the boy is agitatedly insisting that his mother, though hateful and probably mad, is really as harmless as his stuffed birds, and one gives Hitchcock the first of several credits for playing fair and literal with his audience. No one, for instance, could presumably be fooled by that tall, uncomfortable female figure fitting briefly across the width of a lighted upper window; nor by that Old Mother Riley voice with dialogue to match. ('So you want to shut me up in the fruit cellar eh boy eh? You think I'm fruity, I suppose!')

Yet the audience is fooled, for the simple reason that there is something horribly and persistently compulsive on the other side of the coin. And it is here that Hitchcock's showmanship comes in. Having given Janet Leigh the kind of postscript star billing conventionally reserved for drunk scene 'guest' appearances and murder victims, and relying on word of mouth reports that *Psycho* contains one of the bloodiest murders ever filmed, he then asks this spirited actress to sustain the daylight panic of a secretary in love who has robbed her firm of \$40,000. This she does, for a full 30 minutes, through a series of false trails and encounters with a lantern-jawed cop in dark glasses so increasingly unnerving that one feels her guilt pouring down one's own brow. But it is not until the switch from first to second gear that one becomes fully aware of Hitchcock's diabolical ingenuity. There is the car ride itself, reminiscent of *Orphée* in its imperceptible shift from the everyday exhaustion of pursuit and blinding headlights to the cold, latent horror of the missed turning, dusk, rain on the windscreen and death in the vulnerable, hygienic setting of a motel shower. Inevitably, the beastliness of the murder itself comes almost as a relief, especially when followed by the symbolic, guilt-assuaging detail of mopping-up operations and the washing of blood-stained hands. But the respite is brief. With the swamp's disinclination to swallow the car and its corpse at one gurgle, the burden of panic and guilt is transferred to the candy-chewing killer, Norman Bates, watching under the branch of a withered tree. An aura of nightmare embraces the whole cast. An innocent-seeming old lady in a hardware store is heard asking for painless insecticide; hayforks form a menacing, serpentine crown round the head of the dead girl's sister.

For all the fake intimacy of the opening love scene and the manifest absurdity of the denouement, *Psycho* comes nearer to attaining an exhilarating balance between content and style than anything Hitchcock has done in years. Of course, it is a very minor work. But its virtues of tension, surprise, virtuosity and control are all major ones. The unacademic chop and change of George Tomasini's editing and John L. Russell's camerawork is effectively unsettling, notably in the second murder sequence; the strange bond that seems to unite Bates with the birds which obsess him is conveyed by feral, blood-curdling shrieks on the sound-track each time he strikes (not to mention that low-angle, beak-like close-up of his under-jaw at one point); one notes the subliminal, momentary dissolve from our last sight of Bates into his mother's grinning skull, and the minatory quality of Bernard Herrmann's score. Finally, there is some excellent acting: from Martin Balsam as the tenacious private detective, John McIntyre as the sceptical local sheriff, above all from Anthony Perkins as Bates, all stammers and spasmodic charm concealing a festering and malignantly disordered mind.

**Peter John Dyer, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1960**

---

## PSYCHO

*Directed by:* Alfred Hitchcock  
*©/Production Company:* Shamley Productions  
*A Paramount release*  
*Unit Manager:* Lew Leary  
*Assistant Director:* Hilton A. Green  
*Screenplay by:* Joseph Stefano  
*Based on the novel by:* Robert Bloch  
*Director of Photography:* John L. Russell  
*Special Effects:* Clarence Champagne  
*Edited by:* George Tomasini  
*Pictorial Consultant:* Saul Bass  
*Art Direction:* Joseph Hurley, Robert Clatworthy  
*Set Decorator:* George Milo  
*Costume Supervisor:* Helen Colvig  
*Make-up Supervision:* Jack Barron, Robert Dawn  
*Hairstylist:* Florence Bush  
*Titles Designed by:* Saul Bass  
*Music by:* Bernard Herrmann  
*Sound Recording by:* Waldon O. Watson, William Russell  
*Sound System:* Westrex Recording System

*uncredited*

*Producer:* Alfred Hitchcock  
*2nd Assistant Director:* Les Berke  
*Script Supervisor:* Marshall Schlom  
*Camera Assistant:* Jim Sloan  
*Key Grip:* Frank Harper  
*Gaffer:* George Meerhoff  
*Best Boy:* Norman Cassidy

## Cast

Anthony Perkins (*Norman Bates*)  
Vera Miles (*Lila Crane*)  
John Gavin (*Sam Loomis*)  
Martin Balsam (*Milton Arbogast*)  
John McIntire (*Sheriff Al Chambers*)  
Simon Oakland (*Dr Richmond*)  
Vaughn Taylor (*George Lowery*)  
Frank Albertson (*Tom Cassidy*)  
Lurene Tuttle (*Mrs Chambers*)  
Pat Hitchcock (*Caroline*)  
John Anderson (*car salesman*)  
Mort Mills (*policeman*)  
Janet Leigh (*Marion Crane*)

*uncredited*  
Sam Flint, Francis De Sales, George Eldredge (*officials*)  
Alfred Hitchcock (*man outside realty office*)

USA 1960©  
108 mins

---

## SIGHT AND SOUND GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME 2022

### Breathless (À bout de souffle)

Wed 1 Feb 14:30; Tue 14 Feb 20:50; Fri 24 Feb 18:20

**Le Mépris (Contempt)** Wed 1 Feb 18:10; Fri 17 Feb 20:50

**Daughters of the Dust** Wed 1 Feb 18:15; Thu 16 Feb 20:30

**Sans Soleil** Wed 1 Feb 20:40; Fri 17 Feb 18:00

### M (Mörder unter uns)

Thu 2 Feb 14:30; Thu 16 Feb 20:40; Wed 22 Feb 18:00

**Moonlight** Thu 2 Feb 20:45; Tue 14 Feb 20:30

### Blade Runner: The Final Cut

Fri 3 Feb 20:40; Sun 5 Feb 20:40; Sat 18 Feb 18:10

### Battleship Potemkin (Bronenosets Potemkin)

Sat 4 Feb 12:40; Sat 18 Feb 18:30

**La dolce vita** Sat 4 Feb 14:15; Sat 25 Feb 19:30

**Sherlock Jr.** Sat 4 Feb 17:20; Sat 11 Feb 11:45

**City Lights** Sat 4 Feb 17:20; Sat 11 Feb 11:45

**Goodfellas** Sat 4 Feb 20:10; Wed 15 Feb 20:10

**North by Northwest** Sat 4 Feb 20:20; Thu 9 Feb 18:00

**L'Atalante** Sun 5 Feb 12:15; Tue 14 Feb 18:30; Wed 22 Feb 14:30

**Rear Window** Sun 5 Feb 12:20; Fri 24 Feb 20:45

**Stalker** Sun 5 Feb 17:40; Tue 7 Feb 20:10; Sun 26 Feb 14:00

**Casablanca** Mon 6 Feb 20:30; Sun 12 Feb 13:20

**Psycho** Mon 6 Feb 20:45; Mon 20 Feb 14:30; Thu 23 Feb 20:40

### 8 1/2 (Otto e mezzo)

Tue 7 Feb 18:00; Tue 21 Feb 14:30; Sun 26 Feb 12:50

### The Battle of Algiers (La battaglia di Algeri)

Tue 7 Feb 18:10; Sat 25 Feb 11:50

**News from Home** Tue 7 Feb 20:45; Fri 17 Feb 18:20 (+ intro)

**Rashomon (Rashômon)** Tue 7 Feb 21:00; Thu 23 Feb 18:20

**The Piano** Wed 8 Feb 20:35; Tue 21 Feb 17:50

**Wanda** Thu 9 Feb 20:30 (+ intro by Jason Wood, BFI Executive Director of Public Programmes & Audiences); Sat 18 Feb 18:20

### Fear Eats the Soul (Angst essen Seele auf)

Thu 9 Feb 20:55; Mon 27 Feb 18:00

**Ordet (The Word)** Fri 10 Feb 18:15; Sat 25 Feb 14:30

### The 400 Blows (Les Quatre cents coups)

Fri 10 Feb 20:50; Sun 19 Feb 18:40

### Bicycle Thieves (Ladri di biciclette)

Sat 11 Feb 11:50; Mon 20 Feb 20:55; Thu 23 Feb 14:30

**Barry Lyndon** Sat 11 Feb 19:20; Sat 25 Feb 15:30

**Some Like It Hot** Sun 12 Feb 13:30; Tue 14 Feb 18:10

**The Third Man** Sun 12 Feb 18:30; Tue 21 Feb 20:40

**Killer of Sheep** Sun 12 Feb 18:40 (+intro); Sat 18 Feb 20:40

**Mirror (Zerkalo)** Mon 13 Feb 20:50; Tue 28 Feb 20:50

**Pather Panchali** Sat 18 Feb 20:30; Tue 21 Feb 20:35; Sun 26 Feb 15:45

**The Apartment** Wed 22 Feb 20:35; Sun 26 Feb 12:40

---

## BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at [bfi.org.uk/join](https://www.bfi.org.uk/join)

## BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on [player.bfi.org.uk](https://player.bfi.org.uk)

## SIGHT AND SOUND

Never miss an issue with **Sight and Sound**, the BFI's internationally renowned film magazine. Subscribe from just £25\*

\* Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK only).

More info: [sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk](https://sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk)

**SIGHT AND SOUND**

**Join the BFI mailing list** for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at [www.bfi.org.uk/signup](https://www.bfi.org.uk/signup)

---

Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email [prognotes@bfi.org.uk](mailto:prognotes@bfi.org.uk)

The British Film Institute is a charity registered in England and Wales No. 287780