

Parlor Scene Analysis: Hitchcock's *Psycho*

Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* is considered one of the landmarks of cinematography due to giving a start to the slasher genre as one of the earliest examples of depicting graphic violence on screen. When the movie first came out, it ripped the cinema of the twentieth century in half. Before it, there was a movie culture in which viewers huddled together in the darkness of the cinema to be thrilled, moved, or frightened, with the promise that they were all in it together and that a happy ending awaited them on the other side. The reassurance that a horror movie would end well was a given as facilitated by the Hollywood approach to movie making. Even such movies as *Frankenstein* and *The War of the Worlds* reinforced the feelings that the nature of the universe was for any horror to end and for good to prevail over evil, but *Psycho* went against that principle from the very beginning.

Its infamous end scene causes extreme shock among viewers, with the heroine being slaughtered just in front of their eyes. Thus, the movie transformed the entire philosophy of the horror film genre (Gleiberman, 2020). While the ending "Shower Scene" is the most popular and revealing of Hitchcock's approaches to the horror film genre, the "Parlor Scene" will be explored further. This part is also illustrative of the director's intentions of going against the established traditions of the horror genre. However, the artistry in lighting, the angles of the camera, and the mise-en-scene make it easier to hide in plain sight and create a world that is abundant in its duality.

The "Parlor Scene" starts with the seemingly innocent invitation from Norman to Marion Crane, the naïve Bates Motel guest, to come into the parlor. This invitation is a veiled reference to Howitt's fable "The Spider and the Fly":

"Will you walk into my parlor?" said the Spider to the Fly,
"Tis the prettiest little parlor that ever you did spy;

The way into my parlor is up a winding stair, [...]

For who goes up your winding stair can never come down again (para. 1).

This reference establishes the tone of the scene, creating a juxtaposition between the hunter and the prey. The lines' significance becomes even more apparent toward the end of the film when Norman's "mother," who has by then consumed Norman's mind and soul, gives a direct look into the camera and says that she would not "even hurt a fly" (Hitchcock, 1960). As the scene progresses, Hitchcock creates a further narrative of the movie. The parlor room appears small, with barely enough room for two chairs, a coffee table, a lamp, and a chest. The lamp, which seems to be by Tiffany, is the only source of light in the room and thus the main light within the scene.

The choice of lighting is especially important because the only source of light in the room gives hints for the characterization of its participants. For example, Marion sits close to and a little behind the lamp, which allows for the good lighting of her face, helping the viewers to generate the radiation of glowing warmth of her expression. Even though she has embezzled money from her boss, the director intentionally does not hide her in the shadows to show the darkness of her character (Hitchcock, 1960). Choosing to leave Marion in light shows that her atonement and redemption are possible. Even though Norman is oblivious to the details of Marion's intentions, the audience knows that she plans to return what she has stolen. The overall pool of soft lighting that encapsulates the young woman in the scene creates an atmosphere of calmness, suggesting that her actions are redeemable.

In contrast, Norman is positioned far from the light source, compared to Marion, slightly bending to one side. The effect is that of a harsh line, with an almost imperceptible contrast between light and shadow across his face. The increased duality of light emphasizes the clash of his personality and character, validating the juxtaposition between a host and a murderer, a man and a

child, as well as mother and son. Shot in low-key lighting, the scene is set so that Norman is depicted in an unnatural status, indicating that he has some secrets to hide. Both fill and backlighting are minimized, resulting in a sharp and angular shadow that is being cast ominously on the ceiling and the wall above Norman.

The scene is notable for Hitchcock's use of camera angles to reveal everything that the audience needs to know about the issues that trouble the character's mind. Similar to what he did with the lighting, the director shapes the scene in terms of contrasts. On the one hand, Marion sits in her designated chair with comfort, with her posture leaning slightly forward, eating a sandwich that Norman made. The camera is placed at the eye level, making the viewers feel as if they were also sitting in front of the characters in the scene, sitting and talking to them. This positioning of Marion feels natural, and the audience has a sense of normalcy when interacting with the scene. On the other hand, the movement is out of the viewers' comfort zone, with Norman being shot from an unnaturally low perspective. While the camera angles themselves do not have any significant value, it is their juxtaposition and contrast that allows for creating some meaning. The change in the way in which Norman is being shot is a suggestion that his world is skewed and off-balance. The audience is expected to feel uncomfortable when seeing the character from this position because the view is unnatural, making it more difficult to extract meaning.

The mise-en-scene is also instrumental in capturing the intentions of the characters. The duality created in the "Parlor Scene" exists not only in the character of Norman Bates but also inside every person. For example, the scenic details are such that Marion can be perceived by viewers with sympathy despite her flaws. After all, she did steal some money, but no one could judge her too harshly. Behind and above Marion, there are curved lines that are seen in the picture frame, such as the Tiffany lamp, with the rounded shade glowing. Similar to this, the walls behind her are soft and

brightly lit. Marion, especially in terms of the color of her dress, the curves of her hairstyle, and the softness of her posture, allows the viewers to see her vulnerability, encouraging the dawning realization that she will ultimately become "the fly" and victim.

An essential piece of the "Parlor Scene" is the stuffed owl mounted in the corner of the room. The graphic nature of the stuffed bird represents Norman's twisted mind and his intentions about Marion. He says, "I like to stuff things," which is something that becomes clearer at the end of the film (Hitchcock, 1960). Moreover, the bird adds to the overall sinister and tense environment in the parlor as it hovers over Norman, similar to a threatening and dark angel, pushing him to make harmful decisions in the future. The bird continues the narrative of the spider and the fly analogy, hinting that the force of strength will prevail in the juxtaposition between the two characters involved in the scene.

To conclude, the "Parlor Scene" from Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* allowed opening a conversation about the aspects of the dual nature of humanity that manifest themselves with the help of different factors throughout the scene. These factors include the setting, the lighting, the angle, and the mise-en-scene, all of which contribute to the complete concept of duality. The combination of the factors is consistent in the scene, with each shift being justified, coming to a culmination in order to make a differentiation between Norman and Marion. While the young woman is bathed in abundant light, and the shadows that surround her are softer, the man is depicted in a much sharper setting, which transfers his character. The interest in looking at the scene in the parlor is that it allows making connections between the nature of the characters and their role in the story. Looking at what is in front of them directly, the viewers become able to decipher the intentions of the director and his innovative approach to horror storytelling.

References

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