

UPDATED PREVIOUS CASE STUDY FOR NARRATIVE CHAPTER: *PSYCHO* (US 1960)

Psycho (US 1960) is one of the best-known films ever made, which is why we chose it for this case study. Not only are its visual images (and director Alfred Hitchcock) famous, but its music deserves separate study as part of its power. Echoes and uses of its score are regularly used in horror/suspense sequences, reminding audiences of the film's celebrated powers to shock.

A second version was made in 1998, in colour, with almost identical music and script. Though poorly received it makes a good point of comparison if you have time to watch it.

If you have missed seeing the original *Psycho*, read this synopsis of its plot below.



Figure 1 *Psycho* poster © Paramount, courtesy British Film Institute

Q: Look at this poster for the re-release of the original film.

What *narrative* expectations do you think audiences might have had as they began to watch the film?

Synopsis

Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) and her lover Sam (John Gavin) meet in her lunch break in a hotel room, as happens whenever he can come to Phoenix. He is divorced, working in a hardware store, and since he's paying maintenance to his ex-wife, and for his father's debts, he feels they cannot afford to get married.

She goes back to her work as a secretary, where her boss entrusts her with \$40,000 in cash, asking her to bank it.

Later, she drives out of Phoenix with the money. After being stopped by a patrolman and exchanging her car to evade detection, she stops at a motel, run by Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) whose mother can be glimpsed and heard in the house nearby. Unbeknown to Marion, Bates watches her undressing through a concealed hole in the wall. She seems about to return to Phoenix to confess to the theft and return the money, but is brutally stabbed to death in the shower. Norman, finding her body, puts it into a car (unwittingly also putting the money with her) which he pushes into a swamp.

Lila, Marion's sister, arrives at Sam's workplace and they begin the hunt for Marion, at the same time as Arbogast, a private detective investigating the missing \$40,000, arrives on the scene. Arbogast questions Norman, who at first denies Marion's visit to the motel. Returning later to investigate further, Arbogast is brutally stabbed to death.

When he fails to return, Lila persuades Sam to accompany her to the deputy sheriff who tells them that Mrs Bates has been dead for ten years, having poisoned the man she was involved with when she discovered he was married, and then killing herself. The bodies were found by Norman. We hear Norman speaking to his mother and insisting on taking her down to the cellar.

Lila and Sam check into the motel and begin to search it. Lila is shocked to discover a woman's stuffed corpse in the cellar and Norman, dressed in old-fashioned woman's clothing, enters, trying to stab her. Later, a psychiatrist explains that the now incarcerated Norman is schizophrenic, and had murdered his possessive mother two years after his father died, as he was jealous of her lover. He had then taken on her personality, especially at times when he was attracted to a woman, as he had been to Marion.

ACTIVITY 1

How different is this verbal account from the movie itself as you experienced it?

- Do you have any disagreements with particular emphases?
- Begin writing your own synopsis. How would you do it? Where would you begin?
- How much knowledge would you release to your reader? When?

The Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com) is full of plot summaries of other films, if you want to try these exercises on a favourite one.

Psycho and narrative theories

Let's apply some narrative theories to the film, while noting that it is hard to separate these from the cues given by generic familiarity-- with horror, and with detective thrillers.

Q: How would you describe the initial situation or equilibrium in the film (i.e. using Todorov)?

A: It seems to consist of simply this: a secretary and her lover (Marion and Sam) want to marry but cannot afford to.

Q: And the disruption to this?

A: Marion's decision to steal the \$40,000 her boss asks her to bank.

We are partly prepared for this disruption by our generic expectations as well as, arguably, Barthes's action codes. We 'read' not just the lovers' conversation about money but also the dates superimposed on the film's opening shots. These usually signal knowledge that will be needed later in crime genres

and especially the group now known as 'film noir', which often involves a guilty couple drawn into deadly crimes.

Yet that caption

PHOENIX, ARIZONA, FRIDAY, DECEMBER THE ELEVENTH, TWO FORTY-THREE P.M.

is a kind of visual cheat, since by the end of the film the theft has ceased to matter at all. It was a 'red herring', though important in character terms for our sense of Marion's change of

[from 4th edition, *CSI :Miami* case study]

Red herring: something that draws attention away from the central issue, as in '*Talk of a new factory is a red herring to take attention away from redundancies.*'

The expression alludes to dragging a strong smelling smoked herring across a trail to cover up the scent and throw off tracking dogs. [Late 1800s]

(adapted from www.answers.com)

mind just before she's murdered. When, to our surprise, this happens, a second equilibrium is set up. The surprise is partly one that would occur in whatever medium the narrative were told since Marion was the hero or central figure (with her boss as 'dispatcher', to use more of Propp's terms) and we expect her to carry that role for most of the story.

But Marion/Leigh's death also plays with the conventions of a particular media institution: cinema as a star system. Janet Leigh, then a big star, plays Marion, and we expect stars to play in the film to the end. After her death, the hero role is split between Sam and Lila (with Arbogast as helper). The audience's attitude towards Norman probably changes, but is always partly formed in the ways that Propp and Barthes suggest.

Viewers or readers *do* seem to try to make sense of characters by exactly the kinds of 'spheres of action' which Propp suggests and which we have grown accustomed to in several genres:

- Is Norman going to turn out to be a helper or victim, as the scene clearing up the shower suggests?
- Is he the false hero that we expect for a while, when we may suspect he's clearing up after his mother's killing, and we anticipate that the film may turn out to be about his defence of this mad mother?

Psycho, like any detective or mystery fiction, depends on setting up characters, codes of enigma and codes of action which *pleasurably* mislead the audience. These will work with stereotypical features of characters' actions (and within particular genres, and budgets). Does Norman's angular appearance, accentuated by lighting and camera angles in his encounters with Marion, signify 'shy young man' or 'strange neurotic'? We busily read the signs or clues, as Barthes suggests, puzzling about what's going on, what will happen next, and expecting, as Todorov suggests, the pleasure of solution with the final equilibrium or closure. In the case of *Psycho*, this consists of:

- Norman incarcerated and diagnosed by the psychiatrist as criminally insane
- Lila and Sam safe, but knowing now Marion is dead
- an unknown number of bodies (how many has Norman murdered?) including those of Marion and Arbogast, in the swamp, as well as the \$40,000, which the audience has probably forgotten about.

Q: What values are confirmed in the final equilibrium? What sense of good or evil?

Story and plot in *Psycho*

- Q: Think back to the initial equilibrium. What changes would occur to the narrative if this were constructed around Norman?
- A: Sympathy, knowledge and identification would be affected. The illusion that Mrs Bates is still alive would have to go, and Norman's madness would have to be signified. Sympathy and identification would be affected by this rearranged knowledge. For example, the plot could hardly begin with the arrival of Marion at the motel, since she would not yet be a character known to us, and her death would not therefore invite as much involvement, and horror.

ACTIVITY 2

To help you focus on plotting, story and the time shifts which relate the two, make notes on moments when the film goes into extended 'real time' (i.e. when the length of time taken by events on screen corresponds almost exactly to the length of time they would take in real life).

When does this happen, and why do you think it happens?

One example: when Norman discovers Marion's body, and begins to clean up the bathroom. The scene begins with his cry 'Mother! Oh God! Mother, Mother! Blood, blood!' over shots of the house and his running from it towards the motel.

This comparatively long scene could be made much shorter. Its narrative function seems partly to allow audiences to recover from the shock of the killing. The audience reaction was much more extreme when the film was first released: indeed, according to Anthony Perkins, the entire scene in the hardware store following the shower murder was usually inaudible thanks to leftover howls after the shower scene. Hitchcock is even said to have asked Paramount to allow him to remix the sound to allow for the audience's reaction (see Rebello 1991).

The scene also swings suspicion away from this 'nervous young man'. If audiences suspected too early on that he was the killer, it might spoil some of the 'finding out' pleasures of this mystery/thriller/horror movie (see 4th edition, Chapter 2: Narratives).

Thrillers, surprise, and suspense

Hitchcock repeatedly distinguished between '*surprise*' and '*suspense*' in film narratives. It remains a fascinating way to think about thrillers and it centres on the question of *how knowledge is released to the audience in a story*.

Hitchcock's illustration: there are two ways of filming a scene where 'three men are sitting in a room where a ticking bomb has been planted. It is going to go off in 10 minutes.' To abbreviate: neither audience nor characters know it is there. When the bomb goes off they all get a surprise.

'Suppose the story were told differently. This time, while the men still do not know the bomb is there, the audience *does* know.' so that they want the men to leave and 'now the most banal thing they say is charged with excitement...they talk on...and when one finally says, 'Let's leave' the entire audience is praying for them to do so. But another man says 'No, wait a minute. I want to finish my coffee,' and the audience groans inwardly and yearns for them to leave. This is suspense.' (Hitchcock 1959)

(Kapsis: 36)

Charles Derry, in his study of thrillers, puts this vividly. Suspense depends on the expectation that a specific action *might* take place:

'During those moments when suspense is operative, time seems to extend itself, and each second provides a kind of torture for a spectator who is anxious to have his or her anticipation foiled or justified.' (Derry: 32)

It's a disturbing reminder of the strange pleasures we take in some narratives.

ACTIVITY 3

See how far you can apply this theory to the narrative of *Psycho*. Which scene would you use?

See if it applies to scenes from other thrillers you know.

Clearly, carefully plotted events are crucial to most films, even ones that don't proceed by flashback, or seek to create tight suspense. Here, if the *plot's* ordering of events corresponded exactly to that of the *story*, we'd have a quite different kind of film, something like a psychological study of Norman. Our point of view would be affected: we'd be 'with' Norman at the beginning, and he could less easily function as the 'monster' in a suspenseful horror movie, outside understanding and sympathy (a narrative role which the word 'psycho' evokes in newspaper headlines).

Instead we'd be offered the pleasures of a developing understanding of this 'case history' -Norman Bates. Knowledge, sympathy and of course possible styles of filming would be affected. In other stories using flashback, the moments when the plot goes into the past are often trying to elicit sympathy for a character. In Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights*, for example, much is revealed about Heathcliff's childhood towards the end of the narrative, by which time he seems almost monstrous, and the insight into his treatment in childhood suddenly swings our sympathies right round, back to him for a while.

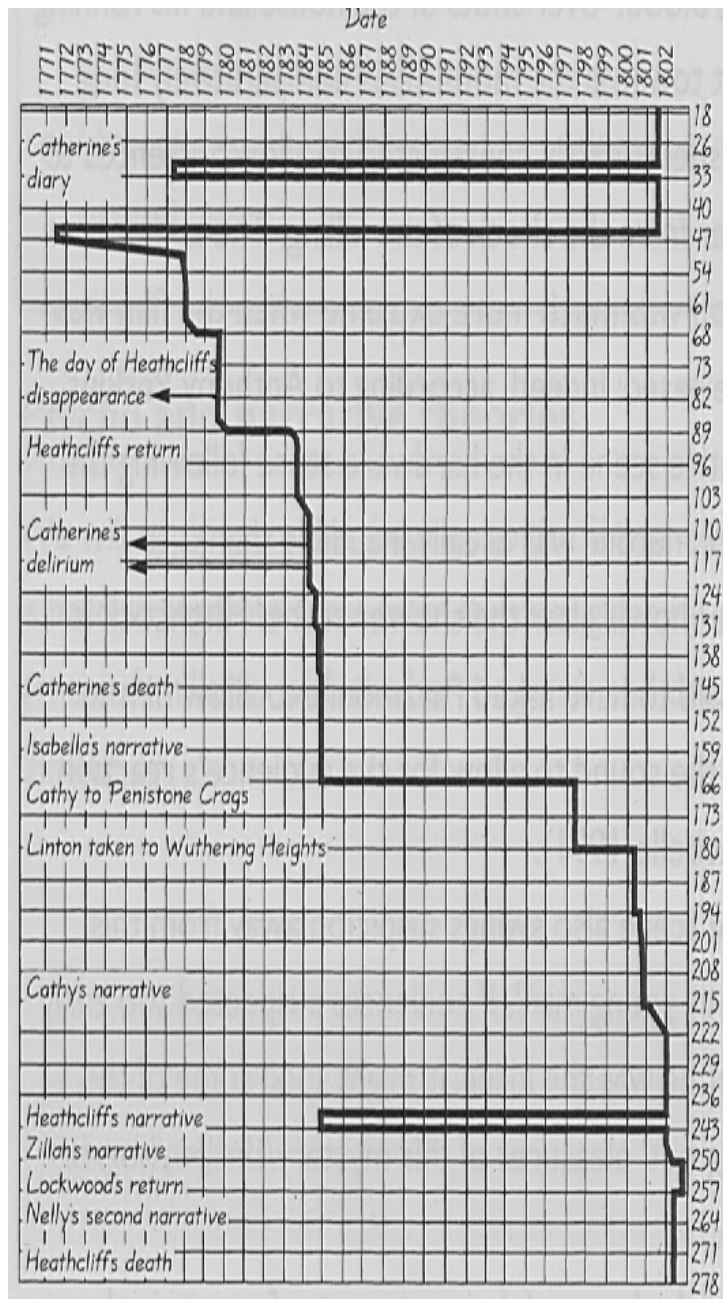


Figure 2 The narrative structure of the novel *Wuthering Heights*, shown as a graph.

It illustrates the ways that 'flashbacks' (via characters talking about earlier parts of their lives, diaries discovered, etc.) adjust the delivery of the story so as to manipulate audience interest and sympathy.

Courtesy Gill Branston

ACTIVITY 4

- Try to draw a graph or chart which will show how *Psycho* has been plotted in terms of time shifts. Draw a line that runs across the top of the graph to represent the actual time covered by the story (i.e. from Norman's childhood to his monologue in the police station. We're told he killed his parents ten years previously).

- Then draw, at the side of the graph, a line roughly representing plot (or syuzhet) time. This, of course, will be much less than the ten to fifteen years of the story. Try to proportion it according to the sections of the film, e.g. Lila and Sam set out about half-way through.
- When does the film go into flashbacks? Remember that events can be represented verbally in a film narrative, through conversations.
- What effects might these have on audience knowledge of events, or sympathy towards certain characters?

Applying Lévi-Strauss

Lévi-Strauss is less interested in the chronological plotting of a story (though that is part of his ‘syntagmatic’ group) than in repeated elements and their systematic relationship, usually across many stories, which he called the ‘paradigmatic’ aspect of myths.

Lévi-Strauss’s approach has been fruitfully applied to film and television. Underlying patterns are normally traced over a series, or a whole genre (the combat movie; or the western) or even an author’s output (Hitchcock being the prime example of someone who is credited with this ‘single author’ influence over the films he directed). It is more problematic when applied to a single film such as this. Still, you may feel it helps you to understand how the plot has been structured. Does it support the feeling that Mother is set up as the ‘real’ villain? She is the only main character (remember they can be constructed offscreen, by verbal accounts) whose story, or presence, or point of view we are not given. We know her only through the psychiatrist’s account (very sympathetic to Norman), with phrases such as ‘His mother was a clinging, demanding woman’ and ‘Matricide is probably the most unbearable crime of all – most unbearable to the son who commits it.’ Pretty uncomfortable for the mother too, but the film’s plot gives us little room to feel this. Applying Lévi-Strauss might help us see whether mothers, or the malign powers of dead or older women, are constructed in this way *in other films by Hitchcock*.

ACTIVITY 5

Jot down any repeated oppositions which strike you in this film, such as: dead/alive; mother/son; the past/the present; dark/light.

- Do they seem to fall into groups that might help to account for the movie’s power?

Psycho as a cinematic narrative

‘Norman Bates heard a noise and a shock went through him. It sounded as though somebody was tapping on the windowpane . . .’

Thus begins the novel on which the film *Psycho* was based.

- How would you continue from here?
- How would you preserve suspense, especially around the mother’s identity?

1 Like most movies, this one is told in an ‘impersonal’ way. The camerawork and plotting, let alone any voice over, do not position us with any one character’s point of view, as can easily happen in novels. (Try to imagine it told from the point of view of Marion, or Norman, or Lila.) And, working in the classic continuity system, events mostly just seem to unfold.

There are a few exceptions to the rule, when the camera seems to be openly ‘telling the story’. In the scene just after Marion has been entrusted with \$40,000, we see her dressing, the money lying on the

bed. The camera, with suspenseful music on sound track, moves from the money to her handbag and back again, as though to offer her temptation. It's like the moment after the murder, when Norman takes a last look round the bedroom and the camera and music 'tell the story', reminding us of the money lying wrapped in a newspaper.

Though different media tell stories in different ways some narrative effects can be shared by different media.

Q: What would be the literary equivalent of these shots?

Look at other ways in which film and television construct narratives (such as lighting, costume, music, cutting, voices). Explore how they work in this movie, in any particular scene.

How would you represent the chosen scene, and such elements within it:

- on radio?
- in written form?
- in comic strip form?

2 Music is key to the film's impact. Like many narratives it uses repetition of certain compositions, or musical themes, or phrases. Here Bernard Herrmann's score works with two main repeated themes, one suggesting flight and pursuit, the other resembling a series of screams (most famously in the shower scene). These are an important part of how we experience the 'clues' of the narrative. They also provide *formal* pleasures over and above that, as we register 'a story well told', as a joke can be well or badly told.

Taxi Driver is an example of another film using music by Herrmann which is crucial for its impact, and which works partly by two contrasting musical themes.

3 The repeated use of certain visual compositions (such as a full-screen menacing face in *Psycho*) is both a narrative and a broader, formal device, rather like the use of rhyme in poetry to point up connections and contrasts, or like refrains in songs.

It may be that when we see the full-screen face of Mother near the end, it's disturbing partly because it is reminiscent of the face of the traffic policeman, his eye sockets replaced by huge sunglasses, who gives Marion (and the audience) a nasty shock early on in the movie. It's also reminiscent of Norman's face, when lit so as to hollow out his eye sockets. The two sets of associations or connotations are brought together in the final shots of the film where, if you look carefully, you will see Norman's face merge with Mother's mummified one, then both dissolve into the image of a car being lifted from the swamp.

Critics have suggested the final shots are particularly satisfying because at the end of such a puzzling narrative we suddenly have explanation, and also an image of something coming into the light of day after so much repression and darkness. At any rate, it is a very visual and intensely narrative moment at the end of one of the most skilfully 'told' narratives in cinema.

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