

GAGOSIAN



Five Decades Later, Artists Are Still Obsessed with Hitchcock's Psycho

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Janet Leigh in a still from Psycho. Bettmann/Contributor via Getty Images.

There is a long history of people messing around with *Psycho*. Alfred Hitchcock's stark 1960 film about a mother-obsessed motel owner with a penchant for peeping has, in many different ways, inspired its obsessive watchers to pull it apart at its stitching. There have been attempts to slow it down, to remix it, to recreate it shot-for-shot—with each experimental endeavor deepening the haunting presence of the original film's masterful construction, and the mythology surrounding its creation.

No moment in *Psycho* has received as much intense analysis as the famous shower scene. Hitchcock was a master of corrosive directness, every shot stinging like the swipe of a sharp knife, and he was never more meticulous than in this 45-second sequence. *78/52: Hitchcock's Shower Scene*, Alexandre O. Philippe's spirited 2017 documentary named after the exact number of shots and cuts in the suspenseful passage, takes a magnifying glass to every frame in an attempt to reveal its secrets. The array of commentary—a wide range of talking-head interviews with filmmakers, academics, and general fans—is exhaustive but often banal, except when it is in the service of a close inspection of Hitchcock's formal aptitude.

What's clear is how startling the shower scene remains, almost six decades after it was made. It occurs less than an hour into the film, and quite suddenly: Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) has arrived at the off-the-highway Bates Motel in the pouring rain with \$40,000 of stolen money in an envelope. The proprietor, a lonely guy named Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) who lives with his mother in a house overlooking the motel, provides her with a room and offers some food. They talk—a pleasant enough conversation—and she decides to retire for the night. Norman peers through a hole in the wall to spy on her in her room, the first sign that something is amiss. When she enters the shower, a shadowy figure emerges and stabs her repeatedly, without remorse, and walks out of the room.

How this came together is fascinating. The shower scene, in all its jolting potency, hangs on a number of visual illusions constructed through the editing and sound, and the specific way Hitchcock composed each shot: the use of empty space in the bathroom that draws the viewer's eye to where the killer will emerge; the violent jump cuts that suggest bodily harm; the visceral impact of the sound of each stab, produced by recording a knife slicing into a casaba melon (Hitchcock sat listening to the prop man stab dozens of melons on a table before settling on the right effect).

The brisk simplicity with which Hitchcock handles this moment of death was challenged by the artist Douglas Gordon in one of his most famous installations. His *24 Hour Psycho* (1993) slowed the entire film down so it would be played over an entire day, a provocative twist on the original film's manipulation of the audience. Don DeLillo, no stranger to using visual art in his narratives, placed the watching of Gordon's video at the beginning of his 2010 novel *Point Omega*; New Yorkers will have a chance to see it themselves on November 17, when Gagosian hosts a 24-hour screening at their 21st Street location.

Other films by Hitchcock have received similar treatment. Christoph Girardet and Matthias Müller's *Phoenix Tapes* (1999–2000) compiled various scenes from Hitchcock's films into new thematic vignettes, while in *Remake* (1995), Pierre Huyghe refilmed *Rear Window*—but removed the original's production-value gloss. Stan Douglas's *Subject to a Film: Marnie* (1989), meanwhile, reimagined the robbery scene from 1964's *Marnie* as a terrifying loop of suspense, an attempt to dismantle the tension of its original structure.

But *Psycho* seems to have a special pull on the artistic mind. The most curious, and in hindsight one of the most interesting examples, was produced by Gus Van Sant: a shot-for-shot remake of the film that he made in 1998. Updating the period and filming in color as opposed to the original's black-and-white, he nonetheless was diligent to keep everything else exactly the same. Later, Steven Soderbergh would take things one step further, producing an unexpected mashup of Hitchcock's original and Van Sant's remake. He appropriately dubbed it *Psychos* (2014)—an exercise in poking fun at the obsessive nature of the film's followers, while also acting as yet another attempt to decipher its mysteries.