



SCREAM JANET LEIGH'S 'BLOOD' IN THE GORY SHOWER SCENE WAS CHOCOLATE SAUCE

Guinness Choice

Psycho

109 mins, USA, b/w

Dir Alfred Hitchcock

Anthony Perkins, Janet Leigh, Vera Miles, Martin Balsam, John McIntire



Alfred Hitchcock's horror classic *Psycho* has become a milestone of the genre, and is renowned as the first 'slasher' movie. The notorious shower scene, accompanied by Bernard Herrmann's memorable piercing musical score, has been replicated in everything from the inevitable sequels to comedy shows such as *The Simpsons*. Following hot on the heels of glossy Technicolor Hitchcock productions such as *Vertigo* (1958) and *North by Northwest* (1959), the monochrome *Psycho* seems almost drab by comparison, but this only adds to the air of menace. There are no big names in this production, and Hitchcock frustrates audience expectations by killing off his 'star', Janet Leigh, early on in the film.

The story focuses on Marion Crane (Leigh), who is on the run with money stolen from her boss when she decides to spend the night at the Bates Motel. Norman Bates (Perkins), the owner, is a twitchy young man with a domineering mother and an interest in taxidermy. After a chat with Norman, Marion decides to return the dosh, but never gets the chance – she is stabbed to death in the shower.

Hitchcock builds up the suspense with touches of very dark humour, as the audience identifies first with Marion, then with put-upon Norman. There are clues littered throughout the film, and Norman's dark history has now been so thoroughly delved into (in *Psycho 2*, *3* and *4*) that it should not seem particularly shocking when all is revealed. The fact that the audience still receives a jolt is as much due to Perkins's sympathetic playing of the central role as to Hitchcock's direction. Perkins was not a huge star prior to *Psycho*, but his performance as Norman was so strong that audiences subsequently became unable to accept him in any other role. Perkins manages to make Norman sympathetic, from his awkwardness around an attractive woman, such as Marion, to his assertion that 'a boy's best friend is his mother'.

Hitchcock, ever a master of suspense, shocked audiences of the day with the brash gore of the shower scene, often repeated, though seldom as effectively, in numerous subsequent horror flicks. There are, however, many subtle touches. Hitchcock's technique of gradually building up suspense only to follow it with a sudden release is nowhere better demonstrated than in the scene in which Martin Balsam's detective slowly climbs the stairs of the Bates Motel, only to be brutally stabbed at the top.