Teaching Mise-en-scène through Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho*

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In my Film Perspectives class—which functions as an introduction to the basic elements of film language—I have found that mise-en-scène can be a particularly frustrating concept for students to comprehend. Mise-en-scène, a French term borrowed from theatre, literally translates to “putting in the scene,” and it relates to everything the camera sees, such as costumes, makeup, props, lighting, or even characters’ movement. In this sense, the director controls everything the viewer sees within each frame.

Teaching mise-en-scène, I always return to Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960). The film contains several scenes in which Hitchcock’s use of props and lighting are worthy of critical analysis. For example, we meet Marion Crane (Janet Leigh), clad in a white bra, in the arms of her lover, during the film’s opening moments. Although she is sleeping with a married man, Hitchcock chooses a colour often associated with cleanliness and purity, thus suggesting to the audience that, at heart, Marion is a good person. Later, however, after she steals forty-thousand dollars, Hitchcock shows her wearing a black bra that symbolizes her sin and provides a strong visual to this important change in her character.

Another clever use of props occurs when the highway patrol officer, played by Mort Mills, interrogates Marion after she has fallen asleep in her car on the side of the road. When showing this scene in class, I tell my students to close their eyes and listen to the dialogue, and afterward I ask them to describe both Marion and the police officer as characters. For the officer, many students select words like “concerned” and “authoritative,” whereas they choose words like “rude” and “anxious” to describe Marion.

Then I replay the scene, only this time I tell the students to watch and listen. The most startling visual for them is the realization that the police officer wears sunglasses (Fig. 1). Because the sunglasses hide his eyes, my students argue that the police officer now appears “threatening” and “bullying.” The close-up of his face crowds the frame, making the
viewer feel pinned down by the officer’s attention, which creates a sense of uneasiness.

The use of mise-en-scène also creates an emotional shift in which the viewer moves from seeing Marion as a villain to reevaluating her as a victim. This occurs because the police officer stares directly at the viewer; thus, by placing the viewer in Marion’s tense position, the viewer feels more sympathy toward her. Kaja Silverman explains that “Psycho obliges the viewing subject to make abrupt shifts in identification,” and these shifts not only add tension to the narrative, but force the viewer to become both victim and voyeur throughout the film (“The Subject of Semiotics” 141). We, the viewers, feel that the officer is interrogating us, and we desperately want the moment to end.

This reoccurring shift between victim and voyeur is best demonstrated when Marion arrives at the Bates Motel. Immediately, the viewer feels apprehensive on account of the gothic conventions that Hitchcock employs to suggest danger: darkness, a thunderstorm, and a winding path leading uphill to an ominous-looking house that is set off in the distance. Moreover, when Marion rents a room for the night, the mise-en-scène confuses the viewer yet again. Here is a woman who has stolen forty-thousand dollars so she can be with her lover, and who has lied to the police, yet she seems weak and vulnerable when placed inside the frame (Fig. 2).

Notice how Marion is positioned on the left side of the frame, whereas Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) is positioned on the right. Since left is often seen as negative, whereas right is seen as positive, it makes sense that a thief like Marion would occupy this part of the picture. However, Hitchcock confuses the viewer by having her look up at Norman, which symbolizes her lack of power and control. As well, the threat in this shot arises from the right side of the frame because Norman is taller than Marion; he blocks a greater portion of the frame, and his face is hidden from view. These three features render Norman more sinister, and they propagate the idea that harm might befall Marion during her stay at the Bates Motel.

Norman then offers Marion a sandwich and a glass of milk, and together they retreat into his parlor to begin a friendly, yet awkward, conversation. This section of Psycho demonstrates the brilliance of Hitchcock because the mise-en-scène—specifically the lighting, props, and framing—generates mood
and atmosphere while continuing to force the viewer to make those shifts in identification. Hitchcock not only chooses to light Norman and Marion in vastly different tones, but he frames them differently within each shot while also surrounding each character with key objects that help to generate the atmosphere and suspense.

Hitchcock employs a medium shot to show Marion, and immediately the viewer notices several important details (Fig. 3). First, the objects surrounding her are mostly circular and curved: the lamp, the picture frame, and the two vessels in the foreground. Psychologists often explain that soft, rounded shapes make us feel more comfortable and secure whereas sharp, pointed objects make us feel scared and vulnerable. The placement of these objects within the frame helps to develop further Marion’s character by creating a warmth around her that endears her to us. Yes, she has lied and stolen money, but she has done so out of love for her boyfriend; she is not an evil person, but one who has made terrible mistakes.

Hitchcock chooses to bathe Marion in a bright light, which makes her the focus of our attention. There are minimal shadows in this shot, which Hitchcock places at eye-level as if the viewer is sitting across from her and engaging her in conversation. Viewers will also notice many white colours in the shot, and that Marion is positioned more toward the centre of the frame. This clever use of lighting and cinematography creates a congenial atmosphere because the clarity produced by the bright lamp, coupled with the soft shape of each object, lulls the viewer into a false sense of safety and security.

When the camera cuts to Norman, however, the tone of the scene changes (Fig. 4). The objects surrounding him are mostly sharp and angular: the candlestick, the edges of the dresser, and the two picture frames behind him. These pointed objects put the viewer on edge and generate a more sinister atmosphere, which immediately raises the viewer’s interest in, as well as his or her suspicion of, Norman. This apprehension is compounded by the way Hitchcock positions Norman in the shot. He seems wedged in between the wall and the dresser—pinned in from above by the stuffed birds—and the commotion inside the shot creates a claustrophobic feeling that plays against the casualness produced by the shot of Marion.
Whereas Marion is clearly the centre of the viewer’s attention in the previous shot, Norman fights for attention with every object that crowds inside the shot. This struggle for power and command also arises from Hitchcock’s decision to frame the shot with minimal light. Unlike Marion, Norman is surrounded by darkness, both literally and figuratively. His face is partially obscured by shadows, the brown dresser boxes him in on the left, his own shadow looms on the wall to the right, and the dark picture frames and stuffed birds rest above him.

The camera appears below eye-level, as evidenced by the angle of the picture frames, thus suggesting that the world is off-kilter and something is amiss. The positioning of the camera—while not drastically different from the previous shot of Marion—affords Norman more power because he appears higher up in the frame, which makes sense given that Marion feels vulnerable and is running from the police. While both characters harbour secrets, Norman’s is far more ominous and threatening. In fact, his dialogue mirrors the mood produced by the mise-en-scène when he tells Marion, “I think that we’re all in our private traps, clamped in them, and none of us can ever get out. We scratch and we claw, but only at the air, only at each other, and for all of it, we never budge an inch.” Norman’s words are especially true for Marion, though she doesn’t yet realize it; the Bates Motel is her own private trap where she will soon be murdered during the infamous “shower scene.”

The tone of the scene changes again when Marion brings up the subject of Norman’s mother. Hitchcock complements this tonal shift by altering the angle with which he shoots Norman (Fig. 5). Again, we notice the sharp, angular objects that surround Norman. We notice the shadows on the wall, and how Norman’s face seems half in light and half in darkness to suggest his dual personalities. More importantly, Hitchcock creates more space inside the shot, which allows the viewer to feel less restrained than in the previous shot where Norman appeared to be boxed in from all sides. But while the viewer might feel less constricted, the composition of this new shot is more threatening because of the owl that looms over Norman as if it will swoop down on him at any moment.

The owl, with its wings outspread and its gaze focused upon him, controls all of the power in this shot and renders Norman as weak and vulnerable, as
if he is the prey. Indeed, as Hitchcock told Truffaut during one of their many interviews, “Owls belong to the night world; they are watchers, and this appeals to [Norman’s] masochism. He knows the birds and he knows that they’re watching him all the time. He can see his own guilt reflected in their knowing eyes” (Hitchcock/Truffaut 282). Notice, too, that the owl is positioned on the left side of the frame while Norman is positioned on the right side of the frame. The owl, which he stuffed, now towers over him in much the same way that his domineering mother—whom he has also stuffed—continues to “speak” with him and control his actions. What we have here, then, is yet another shift in identification, thus confusing the viewer and generating even more suspense. Who holds the power during this scene? Is it Norman, or is it Marion? Both characters appear uncomfortable and defensive, yet both also voice strong opinions and attempt to control the conversation.

Whenever I teach the parlor scene, I like to have the students watch it once through with pen and paper, jotting down every single aspect of the mise-en-scène that they notice. Then we discuss their observations and break down the scene together. Finally, we watch the scene again with new knowledge. This exercise allows my students to realize the value in viewing a scene more than once, affording them a deeper understanding of how mise-en-scène is key to identifying a film’s themes, particularly through the use of props, lighting, and camera angles. As well, this exercise illustrates how a master like Hitchcock uses mise-en-scène to establish and shift a scene’s tone, as well as to develop the characters of Norman Bates and Marion Crane, thus presenting the viewer with two distinct characters who are both grappling with dark secrets and being preyed upon, two characters who are each lost in their own private traps.

**Works Cited**


