



The Moment of Psycho: How Alfred Hitchcock Taught America to Love Murder

By David Thomson

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It was made like a television movie, and completed in less than three months. It killed off its star in forty minutes. There was no happy ending. And it offered the most violent scene to date in American film, punctuated by shrieking strings that seared the national consciousness. Nothing like *Psycho* had existed before; the movie industry—even America itself—would never be the same.

In *The Moment of Psycho*, film critic David Thomson situates *Psycho* in Alfred Hitchcock's career, recreating the mood and time when the seminal film erupted onto film screens worldwide. Thomson shows that *Psycho* was not just a sensation in film: it altered the very nature of our desires. Sex, violence, and horror took on new life. *Psycho*, all of a sudden, represented all America wanted from a film—and, as Thomson brilliantly demonstrates, still does.

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Editorial Review

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In this compact book—extended essay, really—the arguably most provocative and acerbic of major film critics (see the plethoric *Have You Seen . . . ?*, 2008) concentrates on a single work, Alfred Hitchcock's influential *Psycho*. The 1960 film was groundbreaking not just for bringing sex and violence to the fore and eschewing the expected happy ending but also for its efficient, low-budget production. It was shot in just three months in the expedient fashion of Hitchcock's television series. After an introductory passage on the film's genesis, Thomson offers a close reading distinguished by insight and illumination, particularly about the problematic second half. He concludes with an analysis of *Psycho*'s impact, including an annotated list of films it influenced, especially in its treatment of sex and violence, from James Bond flicks to David Lynch's and Quentin Tarantino's bloodbaths. Thomson doesn't blame Hitchcock for touching off the subsequent wave of emotionally detached movies predicated on gory special effects but says *Psycho* opened the door to ignoring consequences "if the end product is thrilling enough." --Gordon Flagg

Review

BookPage

"[A]uthoritative.... Thomson's detailed and insightful primer is the perfect book for Hitchcock aficionados and general film fans alike."

The Weekly Standard

"*Psycho*'s impact on the movies is undeniable, a key moment in Hitchcock's *oeuvre* that has had as lasting an impact as anything the great auteur ever directed. David Thomson's rereading of *Psycho* a half-century after its release shows us just how far we've come. And in some ways, how far we've fallen."

Booklist

"Thomson offers a close reading [of *Psycho*] distinguished by insight and illumination, particularly about the problematic second half."

Film Comment

"[I]lluminating.... [T]he book's pleasures arise from reverent insights into the film's labyrinth of detail and moral math.... [T]he note Thomson closes on resonates beautifully, conveying a keen understanding of the things great movies hold for us, either in their historical moment, or some 50 years later."

SF360.org

"Critic and historian extraordinaire David Thomson's slender new book...is a delicious and incisive commemoration of the film's golden anniversary. Thomson spans the negotiations that gave Hitchcock creative control (and a financial windfall), drops in nuggets from the production and delivers a brilliant analysis of the film's structure, scenes and shots."

New York Times

"[Thomson] makes a powerful – and sometimes surprising – case for the movie's importance in film and

cultural history.”

The Boston Globe

“Thomson takes a kaleidoscopic perspective on his subject, surrounding ‘Psycho’ from all sides after carefully treading every length of the film itself. But as he astutely grasps, the story of ‘Psycho’ is as much about the moments that followed as the film itself. ‘Psycho’s’ bombshell has been continually going off for half a century; every time we leap out of our seats with fear – or fail to be similarly moved by genuine horror.”

Austin American-Statesman

“Slim, daggerlike.... [Thomson’s] prose never does unnecessary backflips as much as it moves with skill and confidence, wit and vigor, the gymnast in command of his routine.”

The Morning News

“[Thomson] wields an impressive erudition, offering an analytical point of view in the most useful kind of commentary – placing the objects of his investigation in their cultural contexts.”

Oxford America

“Opening gently with a history lesson, Thomson sets up the ‘making-of’ with some juicy backstory regarding the pre-production and casting of the rule-breaking film.... [A] bright and informative resource.”

New York Times book Review

“[Thomson’s] vast storehouse [of knowledge] is on full display here, in honor of the 50th anniversary of the release of ‘Psycho.’ (It opened in June 1960.) He skillfully locates the movie in Hitchcock’s oeuvre, linking its theme of the dangers of loneliness to ‘Rear Window’ and ‘The Birds’ and its voyeurism to ‘Strangers on a Train’ and others.”

The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles

“Thomson has all of the qualities one would want in a film writer: breadth of knowledge, unpredictable prose, humor. His off-the-cuff responses to ‘Psycho’ are provocative and offer much to argue with.”

Buffalo News

“[A] virtuoso piece of movie criticism.... [A] truly great piece of film criticism by our finest living film critic.... It tells the story of ‘Psycho’ ...in such an original and brilliant way that you’re almost hearing about a film you’ve either never seen before or only dimly and inadequately remembered.”

SF Weekly

“[A] slender, clever volume, with its deceptive breeziness, its confident scarcity of photographs, its sportive blood-red endpaper, and a general sense that Hitchcock’s most famous movie should be an ideal subject for the tirelessly observant local cinema essayist to write about.”

The Week

“Thomson captures the film’s milieu in such a ‘brilliant way’ that you’ll feel as if you’re seeing it for the first time.”

Kansas City Star

“Just in time to please the picky movie buff on your shopping list: David Thomson’s *The Moment of Psycho*.

I love this book.... Thomson is one of our best writers about cinema, combining intellectual rigor with snappy, entertaining prose. No film-professor stuffiness here.”

About the Author

English-American writer **David Thomson** is the author of many books on film, including “*Have You Seen...?*” *A Personal Introduction to 1,000 Films*, which the *New York Times* called, “passionate, illuminating, rich, and eccentric”; and the massively influential *Biographical Dictionary of Film* called “the best book on the movies ever written in English” (*The New Republic*). He lives in San Francisco with his family.

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