

There Is No Sanctuary

Subverting the Lighting Conventions of Horror in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and Bong Joon-Ho's *Parasite* (2019)

BY BROOK LOWERY
Independent Scholar

ABSTRACT

The horror film genre is known for its iconic conventions, with one of the most distinct being its use of lighting. Horror films traditionally utilize dim and shadowy lighting to build tension and fear within the audience, while bright lighting is used sparingly to break said tension and signify a reprieve from the terror. However, in both Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and Bong Joon-Ho's *Parasite* (2019), this convention is flipped on its head. This essay argues that by presenting their most gruesome moments of horror in bright light, Hitchcock's *Psycho* and Joon-Ho's *Parasite* break this genre convention by using light to signal their greatest terrors and subvert their audience's genre expectations. In illuminating the darkness of minds brought to madness in bright light, both films force their audiences to reconsider what truly makes a monster while confronting the horrors of human monstrosity head-on.

There are many classic conventions of the horror genre, with one of the most iconic being its distinct style and use of lighting. Horror narratives are haunted by darkness and, as noted by Dave Monahan and Richard Barsam, create atmospheric tension by using low-key lighting which enhances shadows and lends horror its conventional dark and eerie look (159). This convention of dim, shadowy lighting fills the audience with a sense of unease, which heightens the psychological terror that often accompanies a horror film. The figurative darkness at the heart of the horror genre comes from this psychological terror; it is the assumption that there is something lurking in the shadows, in the dark, or under the bed ready to cause harm. This knowledge of an unseen force, human or inhuman, that might bring about harm, is the most frightening thing in a horror film. The thing which the audience cannot see but knows is there, the monster waiting to jump out from the shadows and attack,

builds tension in the audience each time they see a dark shadow flit across the background of a shot or hear a bump echo from a dark corner of the screen. Thus, the simple presence of light acts as a safe haven within horror films, signifying a release of tension as this anticipated danger passes and the terror remains firmly in the dark. Or at least, it *should*. Two horror films, Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and Bong Joon-Ho's *Parasite* (2019), break and subvert this convention by having their most terrifying scenes occur in brightly lit areas rather than shrouded in darkness. In these films, it is not a monster that poses the greatest threat but rather the possibilities of a human mind brought to madness. By presenting the grim possibilities of human brutality in bright light, Hitchcock's *Psycho* and Joon-ho's *Parasite* break and subvert the horror convention of light signaling safety. In both films, light no longer signifies a moment of peace for the audience. Rather, it becomes the catalyst for tension and fear.

In defying this convention, *Psycho* and *Parasite* force audiences to confront the reality that evil does not just hide in shadows; it can truly be found *anywhere*.

As noted by Alison Landsberg in “Horror Vérité: Politics and History in Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* (2017),” there are many iconic conventions of horror, such as the “psycho killer and ... [the] haunted house,” with its style of lighting also acting as a key genre convention (632). Both Hitchcock and Bong subvert this convention in their respective films by having the horrors illuminated front and center, with the most famous and most gruesome scene of Hitchcock’s *Psycho* taking place in a blindingly bright bathroom at the Bates Motel. Much of Hitchcock’s filmography, as noted by Katarzyna Szmigiero in “‘We All Go a Little Mad Sometimes’: Representations of Insanity in the Films of Alfred Hitchcock,” focuses on “character[s] whose behaviour departs from the generally accepted social norms” (159). These topics are considered taboo—figuratively and literally dark in society—and are often concealed behind a desire to hide humanity’s darkness. Hitchcock, however, places these topics in the spotlight in *Psycho*, with the titular psycho, Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) murdering Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) in a brightly lit bathroom. The scene was shot in a studio, enabling Hitchcock to have full control over the lighting of the scene (“Psycho Filming”), including the on-screen lights above the bathroom mirror and off-screen key lighting and backlighting. Monahan and Barsam assert that lighting aids an audience’s understanding of a film as it influences how they perceive each element of a scene, including characters, mood, and narrative arcs (158). The combination of key lighting and backlighting in this shot creates a “high contrast effect” (159) which subtly enhances shadows and emphasizes the dark undertone of the scene to the audience, while maintaining an overall visual brightness (Fig. 1).

This effect is heightened by the hard light provided by the bathroom lights which bathes the scene in a blinding stark contrast. This, in turn, washes the violence in light and makes it impossible for the audience to ignore the gruesome murder being presented on screen, denying the audience the opportunity to find solace in the light. Notably, one element in the scene is kept shrouded in darkness—Norman’s face. This is accomplished using backlighting, which outlines Norman in a “rim of light” while keeping the rest of him shrouded in darkness to enhance the mystery around his actions and his identity (159); viewers are encouraged to believe that the assailant in the scene is in fact Norman’s mother (see Fig. 1). The bright light also enhances the helplessness of Marion’s situation: she is naked, soaking wet, and at her most vulnerable, being blinded by lights which—based on the traditional conventions of horror—are meant to keep her safe. Norman rains blows upon her, underterred by the supposed safety the light is meant to provide her.

Hitchcock utilizes this tactic of highlighting the human brutality at the heart of the film’s horror rather than hiding it in shadow once again in the scene where Detective Milton Arbogast (Martin Balsam) is murdered by Norman in the Bates house. As Arbogast slowly makes his way up the grand staircase, his face is bathed in bright hard light in the Bates’ foyer. Just as he reaches the second floor, the camera shifts to a birds-eye angle, where



Fig. 1 | Norman Bates’ face obscured in the bright bathroom. Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, 00:48:13. Paramount Pictures, 1960.



Fig. 2 | Norman Bates stabs Detective Arbogast in the Bates house. Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, 01:17:42. Paramount Pictures, 1960.

the second floor landing is lit in a wash of bright light, with minimal shadows cast throughout the shot (Fig. 2).

The only real shadows that are evident are those which cling to the walls and the outskirts of the shot, enveloping Arbogast in a halo-effect of light. He is standing in the brightest lit area, which subconsciously invites the viewer to relax, as they presume that nothing dangerous or horrifying should happen to him yet, as he has not entered the shadowy outskirts of the shot where danger typically lurks. There is one noticeable shadow that moves into the bright light of this halo, though, after it first appears on the right wall: that of Norman as he emerges from his hiding place, rounding the corner and attacking Arbogast with a knife (Fig. 2). Otherwise, the entire brutal murder is washed in light: as Norman swings his knife down upon Arbogast, it glints ever so slightly in the bright light, and the terror on Arbogast’s face is uncomfortably clear as he stumbles backwards and tumbles down the stairs. As Monahan and Barsam explain, traditional horror lighting creates atmospheric tension through its use of shadows which often slightly obscure the terror on screen and force the audience to mentally fill in these twisted gaps themselves (159). However, Hitchcock flips this convention on its head in both the two most iconic murder scenes within *Psycho*. In doing so, Hitchcock implies that light alone cannot not protect characters or film viewers from the very human evils that lurk in the dark—it simply amplifies the dangers that come from the shadows.

Bong’s *Parasite* expands upon this concept of centering the realities of human brutality in bright, unavoidable light

rather than hiding them in shadows in its climactic birthday party rampage scene. In the lead up to this scene, Geun Se (Park Myeong-hoon), the husband of the park family's former housekeeper, seeks revenge against the Kim family for the loss of both his wife's job and her life. He escapes the dark second basement of the Park home, where he had been hiding out for years, after attacking Ki Woo (Choi Woo-sik), the son of the Kim family. Geun-se drops the large scholar stone, a recurring prop in the film, on top of Ki Woo's head multiple times as he lay on the floor. Geun-se stands motionless in the first basement of the Park house, watching a large pool of blood form beneath Ki-woo's head, seemingly admiring his work (Fig. 3).

The shot is lit with a combination of high-key lighting and hard light, which creates a clear definition between the brightly lit foreground and the slightly dimmer background, where the majority of the shadows in the shot reside. The large pool of blood that spills from beneath Ki-woo's head is rendered a deep maroon—almost to the point of being black—in this bright light (Fig. 3), stressing the dark reality of the horrors the audience has borne witness to and haunting them with a startling visual reminder that they cannot ignore. This lighting combination also makes the gruesome wounds and dried blood on Geun-se's face more easily visible (Fig. 3), forcing the audience to confront the reality that while Geun-se is certainly monstrous for beating this young man over the head with a stone, he has also experienced brutal violence and loss at the hands of the Kim family. As he stands before the body of Ki-woo, free from the dark confines of the secondary basement of the Park home, Geun-se refuses to hide himself or his brutality from the world any longer and is ready to stand in the light of day once more.

As Geun-se makes his way out into the yard where the party is in full swing, he runs at and stabs Ki Jung (Park So-dam), the daughter of the Kim family, in her heart. He stands above her bloody body, wearing a disturbingly calm look as he eyes the young boy she was shielding. The bright blue sky fills up the frame behind him, the natural light from the sun casting a shadow across his bloodied face and making him appear even more threatening (Fig. 4).

As the rampage continues, the backyard is covered with blood, food, and a few dead bodies, all baking beneath the unrelenting sun. This scene is the most gruesome of the film, and just like the bathroom scene in *Psycho*, it is lit so that the audience cannot ignore its brutality. Throughout this scene and the entirety of *Parasite*, there is nowhere for the audience to hide from the violence that is depicted on screen, or the harsh realities of how said violence came to be, just as the Kim family cannot hide from their low socioeconomic status which forced them to begin their (ultimately deadly) scam upon the Parks. The lighting in these two shots emphasizes the disparity which lies at the heart of the film, which Alireza Farahbakhsh and Ramtin Ebrahimi elucidate in "The Social Implications of Metaphor in Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite*": "the lives of the lower class and the upper middle class in a capitalist society are intertwined in a world where the former always stands in the shadow of the latter" (88). The Kim's, who thought they had *finally* risen up from the darkness of their underground apartment and lower status, are in fact no better off now that they stand in the



Fig. 3 | Geun-se stands over Ki-woo's bloody body. Bong Joon-Ho's *Parasite*, 01:52:12. CJ Entertainment, 2019.



Fig. 4 | Geun Se stands in the sunlight after stabbing Ki Jung. Bong Joon-Ho's *Parasite*, 01:53:43. CJ Entertainment, 2019.

shadow of the upper-class Parks. The light of their victory failed to protect them from the dark repercussions of the actions they took to achieve it.

Throughout *Psycho* and *Parasite*, Hitchcock and Bong break and subvert the horror convention of light as a signal of safety for the audience in their respective films. These directors twist the convention on its head and use light to amplify the gruesomeness of their most violent scenes, placing them in the spotlight. In doing so, the films refuse their audiences the opportunity to turn away or hide from the depictions of human monstrosity as shown through murder, just like the victims of violence in both films who were left gawking at the horror of their deaths as light cascaded down upon them, providing them no sanctuary. By presenting horror in such a blinding way, Hitchcock and Bong also force their audiences to reconsider what *exactly* a monster is, as it is not always a boogeyman lurking in the shadows. Sometimes, a monster is just a person basking in the sunlight, unafraid of hiding their darkness from the world any longer. ■

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