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## PSYCHO

. . . . . function

Is smother'd in surmise, and nothing is

But what is not.—*Macbeth*

But if you look at the matter from a theoretical point of view and ignore this question of degree you can very well say that we are all ill, i.e. neurotic; for the conditions required for symptom-formation are demonstrable also in normal persons.—Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*

You have to remember that *Psycho* is a film made with quite a sense of amusement on my part. To me it's a *fun* picture. The processes through which we take the audience, you see, it's rather like taking them through the haunted house at the fairground . . ."—Hitchcock, interview in *Movie 6*

*Psycho* opens with a view of a city. The name of the city appears, followed by a precise date and a precise time, as the camera swings over the rooftops and apartment blocks. It hesitates, seems to select, tracks in toward one particular block, hesitates again before all the windows, seems to select again, then takes us through one slightly open window into a darkened room.[22] Arbitrary place, date, and time, and now an apparently arbitrary window: the effect is of random selection: this could be any place, any date, any time, any room: it could be us. The forward track into darkness inaugurates the progress of perhaps the most terrifying film ever made: we are to be taken forward and downward into the darkness of ourselves. *Psycho* begins with the normal and

draws us steadily deeper and deeper into the abnormal; it opens by making us aware of time, and ends (except for the releasing final image) with a situation in which time (i.e., development) has ceased to exist.

The scene we witness between Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) and Sam Loomis (John Gavin), while carefully and convincingly particularized in terms of character and situation, is ordinary enough for us to accept it as representative of "normal" human behavior. A leading theme emerges, unexceptional both in itself and in the way in which it is presented, though it subtly pervades the whole scene: the dominance of the past over the present. The lovers cannot marry because Sam has to pay his dead father's debts and his ex-wife's alimony; "respectable" meetings in Marion's home will be presided over by her (presumably) dead mother's portrait. From this "normal" hold of past on present, with its limiting, cramping effect on life (the essence of life being development), we shall be led gradually to a situation where present is entirely swallowed up by past, and life finally paralyzed. That the lovers are meeting surreptitiously, doing things that must be concealed from the outer world, provides a further link (still within the bounds of normality) with Norman Bates. And in both cases the "secrets," normal and abnormal, are sexual in nature.

Everything is done to encourage the spectator to identify with Marion. In the dispute between the lovers we naturally side with her: Sam's insistence on waiting until he can give her financial security annoys us, because it is the sort of boring mundane consideration we expect the romantic hero of a film to sweep aside, and we are very much drawn to Marion's readiness to accept things as they are for the sake of the relationship. This is in fact the first step in our complicity in the theft of the \$40,000. It is Sam's fault that Marion steals the money, which has no importance for her. It is simply the means to an end: sex, not money, is the root of all evil. Indeed, the spectator's lust for money, played upon considerably in the early stages of the film, is aroused only to be swiftly and definitively "placed": the fate of the money, after the shower murder, becomes an entirely trivial matter, and Hitchcock by insisting on it evokes in us a strong revulsion.

Our moral resistance is skillfully undermined during the office scene. The man with the money—Cassidy—is a vulgar, drunken oaf; he has plenty more; his boast that he "buys off unhappiness," that his about-to-be-married "baby" has "never had an unhappy day," fills us with a

sense of unfairness even as we realize how far his boast probably is from the truth: whatever he is, Cassidy does not strike us as a happy man.

The whole fabric of the film is interwoven with these parent-child references: even Marion's fellow office girl has a prying mother, and Marion's room is decorated with family photographs which look down on her as she packs. Cassidy's relationship with his "baby" takes us a step into the abnormal, because it is highly suspect: she will probably be better without the \$40,000 house, which is clearly a symbol of her father's power over her. That Marion will also be better without it is a reflection we do not allow ourselves, any more than she does. By minimizing our moral opposition to the notion of stealing \$40,000, Hitchcock makes it possible for us to continue to identify with Marion, involving ourselves in her guilt as easily and unthinkingly as she herself becomes involved. There is no clear-cut moment of decision: she takes the money home, changes, packs her suitcase, but the money lies on the bed and she constantly hesitates over it: her actions tell us that she has committed herself, but she doesn't consciously accept that commitment. We are able to commit acts we know to be immoral only if we inhibit our conscious processes: Machbeth never really knows why he "yields to that suggestion whose horrid image does unfix his hair. . . ." but the yielding itself involves the paralysis of his conscious moral faculties. So it is with Marion: the decision having gripped her (rather than been taken), she necessarily forfeits her powers of conscious will. She drifts helplessly, and we drift with her.

Her inability to control her actions rationally is illustrated in numerous incidents. As she drives, she imagines voices, conversations: Sam, her boss, Cassidy. She knows Sam will be horrified, will reject the money (she cannot finish the imaginary conversation with him); yet she drives on. Her boss notices her as her car is held up by traffic lights, and she sees him notice her; yet she drives on. Everything she imagines stresses the impossibility of getting away with it and the uselessness of it anyway; yet she drives on. A suspicious policeman sees her changing cars, and she knows that *he* knows what her new car looks like, and what its number is, and that she is throwing away an irretrievable \$700 quite pointlessly; yet she goes through with the exchange. Throughout the journey Hitchcock uses every means to enforce audience identification—the staging of each scene, the use of subjective technique, the way in which each subsidiary character is presented to us through Marion's

eyes, Bernard Herrmann's music and Hitchcock's use of it, all serve to involve us in Marion's condition. With her, we lose all power of rational control, and discover how easily a "normal" person can lapse into a condition usually associated with neurosis. Like her we resent, with fear and impatience, everything (the policeman, the car salesman) that impedes or interferes with her obsessive flight, despite the fact that only interference can help her; just as, two films later, Marrie will be helped only by events that are entirely contrary to her wishes, everything she wants being harmful to her. As Marion drives on (after the exchange of cars) we share her hopelessness and her weariness. The film conveys a sense of endless journey leading nowhere, or into darkness: as the imagined voices become more menacing, darkness gathers. Driving through darkness, she imagines Cassidy learning of the theft of the money: "I'll replace it with her fine soft flesh": Marion's verdict on herself, hideously disproportionate to the crime, will find its hideous enactment. Rain begins to fall on the windscreen before Marion—before us. She pulls up at the Bates Motel, which seems to materialize abruptly out of the darkness in front of her. She has by her actions penetrated the shell of order, and like Machbeth plunged herself into the chaos world, which finds here its most terrifying definition.

The confrontation of Marion and Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) is in some ways the core of the film: the parallel made between them provides the continuity that underlies the brutal disruption when Marion is murdered. It is part of the essence of the film to make us feel the continuity between the normal and the abnormal: between the compulsive behavior of Marion and the psychotic behavior of Norman Bates. In the "parlor" behind his office, surrounded by Norman's stuffed birds and paintings of classical rapes, they talk about "traps." Marion is brought face to face with the logical extension of her present condition. Norman tells her, "We're all in our private trap. We scratch and claw, but only at the air, only at each other, and for all of it we never budge an inch": he is defining the psychotic state, the condition of permanent anguish whence development becomes impossible, a psychological hell. The parallel between the two is clinched when Norman says to her, "We all go a little mad sometimes. Haven't you?"

It is her perception of Norman's condition that gives Marion her chance of salvation, which she takes. In answer to his question, she says, "Sometimes just one time can be enough. Thank you." She decides to

return the money the next morning. The decision this time is clearly made: she has regained her freedom of will, her power of rationality. The scene prepares us for the transference of our interest from Marion to Norman. We see Marion under the shower, and her movements have an almost ritualistic quality; her face expresses the relief of washing away her guilt.

It is not merely its incomparable physical impact that makes the shower bath murder probably the most horrific incident in any fiction film. The *meaninglessness* of it (from Marion's point of view) completely undermines our recently restored sense of security. The murder is as irrational and as useless as the theft of the money. It also constitutes an alienation effect so shattering that (at a first viewing of the film) we scarcely recover from it. Never—not even in *Vertigo*—has identification been broken off so brutally. At the time, so engrossed are we in Marion, so secure in her potential salvation, that we can scarcely believe it is happening; when it is over, and she is dead, we are left shocked, with nothing to cling to, the apparent center of the film entirely dissolved.

Needing a new center, we attach ourselves to Norman Bates, the only other character (at this point) available. We have been carefully prepared for this shift of sympathies. For one thing, Norman is an intensely sympathetic character, sensitive, vulnerable, trapped by his devotion to his mother—a devotion, a self-sacrifice, which our society tends to regard as highly laudable. That he is very unbalanced merely serves to evoke our protective instincts: he is also so helpless. Beyond this, the whole film hitherto has led us to Norman, by making us identify with a condition in many ways analogous to his: the transition is easy. After the murder, Hirschcock uses all the resources of identification technique to make us "become" Norman. He is a likeable human being in an intolerable situation, desperately in need of help and protection yet by the very nature of the case unable to obtain it. As he cleans up after his mother's hideous crime, the camera becomes subjective; they are our hands mopping away the blood. At the same time we cannot forget Marion; the intense anguish aroused in the spectator arises, as usual, from a conflict of response. Our attention is directed repeatedly to the last lingering trace of Marion which Norman almost overlooks: the money, becomes now a mere squalid bundle of paper, an ironic reminder of her life, her desires, her relationship with Sam.

*Psycho* is Hirschcock's ultimate achievement to date in the technique

of audience participation. In a sense, the spectator becomes the chief protagonist, uniting in himself all the characters. The remainder of the film is an inquiry into the sources of the psychological hell state represented by Norman Bates: a descent into the chaos world. The other characters (Sam, Lila, Arbogast), perfunctorily sketched, are merely projections of the spectators into the film, our instruments for the search, the easier to identify with as they have no detailed individual existence. Each stage in the descent adds to the tension within us: we want to know, and we dread knowing, we want the investigators to find the truth and put an end to the horrors, yet we have involved ourselves in those horrors through our identification with Norman. One is struck (bearing in mind the care with which Hitchcock always selects his players) by close physical resemblances between certain characters. That between Vera Miles and Janet Leigh can be easily explained: they are sisters; but what of that, still more striking, between Anthony Perkins and John Gavin? As they face each other across the counter of Norman's office, we have the uncanny feeling that we are looking at two sides of the same coin; and the scene in question, which seemed at first mere suspense, useful only in its plot context, becomes one of the most moving of the film. The two men look at one another, and we look at them, and we realize suddenly that they are interchangeable: each seems the reflection of the other (though a reflection in a distorting mirror), the one healthy, balanced, the other gnawed and rotted within by poisoned sex. Similarly, Vera Miles is the extension of Janet Leigh, and what she sees and that character, is, potentially, inside herself. The characters of *Psycho* are *one* character, thanks to the identifications the film evokes, is us.

Lila's exploration of the house is an exploration of Norman's psychotic personality. The whole sequence, with its discoveries in bedroom, attic, and cellar, has clear Freudian overtones. The Victorian decor, crammed with invention, intensifies the atmosphere of sexual repression. The statue of a black cupid in the hall, the painting of an idealized maiden disporting herself at the top of the stairs, a nude goddess statuette in the bedroom, are juxtaposed with the bed permanently indented with the shape of Mrs. Bates' body (the bed in which, we learn later, she and her lover were murdered by Norman), the macabre cast of crossed hands on her dressing table, the stifling atmosphere of stagnation: one can almost *smell* it. The attic, Norman's own bedroom, represents the sick man's conscious mental development: strange confusion of the childish

and the adult, cuddly toys, grubby unmade bed, a record of the *Eroica* symphony; the unexplained nature of all this carries the suggestion that what we see are mere superficial hints of underlying mysteries, a suggestion confirmed by the clasped, untitled book that Lila never actually opens (a Bates family album?).<sup>[23]</sup> Consequently we accept Norman more than ever as a human being, with all the human being's complex potentialities. The cellar gives us the hidden, sexual springs of his behavior: there Lila finds Mrs. Bates. It is a *fruit* cellar—the fruit is insisted upon in the mother's macabre joke about being “fruity”: the source of fruition and fertility become rotten.

Our discovery of the truth, of course, partly changes our attitude to what has gone before. It adds, for example, many complexities to our understanding of the shower murder, which we see now as primarily a sexual act, a violent substitute for the rape that Norman dare not carry out, and secondarily as the trapped being's desire to destroy a woman who has achieved the freedom he will never achieve: a point that gives added irony to the fact that it is her awareness of Norman that gives Marion that freedom. What it cannot do is remove our sense of complexity. We have been led to accept Norman Bates as a potential extension of ourselves. That we all carry within us somewhere every human potentiality, for good or evil, so that we all share in a common guilt, may be, intellectually, a truism; the greatness of *Psycho* lies in its ability, not merely to *tell* us this, but to make us experience it. It is this that makes a satisfactory analysis of a Hitchcock film on paper so difficult; it also ensures that no analysis, however detailed, can ever become a substitute for the film itself, since the direct emotional experience survives any amount of explanatory justification.

The effect of forward tracking shots in the film (from the opening right through to Lila's exploration of the house) is to carry us always further inside or into darkness. All the time we are being made to *see*, to see more, to see deeper: often, to see things we are afraid to see. Hence the insistence on eyes, into which the camera, our own eyes, makes us look, to see the dark places of the human soul beyond. And hence the dark glasses of the policeman: he is the only character whose eyes we never see, because it is he who is watching Marion, and hence ourselves. By the end of the film, Hitchcock has placed us in the policeman's position: we watch Norman Bates as the policeman watched Marion, and he is as conscious of our gaze as Marion was of the policeman's. On

the other side of the cinema screen, we are as inscrutable, hence as pitiless, as the policeman behind his dark glasses. We may recall Norman's remark about “institutions” in the dialogue with Marion: “. . . the cruel eyes studying you.” Norman is finally beyond our help. Much of the film's significance is summed up in a single visual metaphor, making use again of eyes, occurring at the film's focal point (the murder of Marion): the astonishing cut from the close-up of the water and blood *spiraling* down the drain, to the close-up of the eye of the dead girl, with the camera *spiraling* outward from it. It is as if we have emerged from the depths *behind* the eye, the round hole of the drain leading down into an apparently bottomless darkness, the potentialities for horror that lie in the depths of us all, and which have their source in sex, which the remainder of the film is devoted to sounding. The sensation of vertigo inspired by this cut and the spiralling movement itself, are echoed later as we, from high above, watch Norman carry his mother down to the fruit cellar.

The cellar is another clear sex symbol. And what Vera Miles finds there at the end of the quest are once again eyes: the mocking “eyes” of a long-dead corpse as a light bulb swings before its face: the eyes of living death, eyes that move without seeing, the true eyes of Norman.

The psychiatrist's “explanation” has been much criticized, but it has its function. It crystallizes for us our tendency to evade the implications of the film, by converting Norman into a mere “case,” hence something we can easily put from us. The psychiatrist, glib and complacent, reassures us. But Hitchcock crystallizes this for us merely to force us to reject it. We shall see on reflection that the “explanation” ignores as much as it explains (the murder as symbolic rape, for example). But we are not allowed to wait for a chance to reflect: our vague feelings of dissatisfaction are promptly brought to consciousness by our final confrontation with Norman, and this scene in the cell, entirely static after the extremes of violence that have preceded it, is the most unbearably horrible in the film. What we see is Norman, his identity finally dissolved in the illusory identity of his mother, denounce all the positive side of his personality. “Mother” is innocent: “she” spares the fly crawling on Norman's hand: it is Norman who was the savage butcher. Thus we witness the irretrievable annihilation of a human being. The fly reminds us of Marion, who wasn't spared: the act constitutes a pathetic attempt at expiation before the pitiless eyes of a cruel and uncomprehending society. For a split

second, almost subliminally, the features of the mother's ten-year-dead face are superimposed on Norman's as it fixes in a skull-like grimace. The sense of finality is intolerable, yet it is this that makes our release possible: we have been made to see the dark potentialities within all of us, to face the worst thing in the world: eternal damnation. We can now be set free, be saved for life. The last image, of the car *withdrawing* from the dark depths of the bog, returns us to Marion, to ourselves, and to the idea of psychological liberty.

*Psycho* is one of the key works of our age. Its themes are of course not new—obvious forerunners include *Macbeth* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*—but the intensity and horror of their treatment and the fact that they are here grounded in sex belong to the age that has witnessed on the one hand the discoveries of Freudian psychology and on the other the Nazi concentration camps. I do not think I am being callous in citing the camps in relation to a work of popular entertainment. Hitchcock himself in fact accepted a commission to make a compilation film of captured Nazi material about the camps. The project reached the rough-cut stage, and was abandoned there, for reasons I have not been able to discover: the rough-cut now lies, inaccessibly, along with vast quantities of similar raw material, in the vaults of the Imperial War Museum. But one cannot contemplate the camps without confronting two aspects of this horror: the utter helplessness and innocence of the victims, and the fact that human beings, whose potentialities all of us in some measure share, were their tormentors and butchers. We can no longer be under the slightest illusion about human nature, and about the abysses around us and within us; and *Psycho* is founded on, precisely, these twin horrors. For Hitchcock it was a "fun" picture, and a streak of macabre humor ("Mother . . . what is the phrase? . . . isn't quite herself today") certainly runs through it. Is it, then, some monstrous perversion? Many have found it so, and their reaction seems to be more defensible than that of those (must we include Hitchcock himself?) who are merely amused by it (" . . . make us think twice about stopping at any building looking remotely like the Bates motel . . ."). David Holbrook, for example, remarks (presumably with *Psycho* in mind, since his book appeared in 1962), "Of course, if we lived in the world of detective stories and Hitchcock films we may take all this sordidness in a light-hearted spirit as a snuff-like piece of stimulation. But if we are responding to

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poetry and drama our senses should be sharpened . . ." (*L'arrégaré Revisited*). Yet this seems to be a short-sighted and insensitive verdict: if one is responding to *Psycho*, one's senses should be sharpened too. No film conveys—to those not afraid to expose themselves fully to it—a greater sense of desolation, yet it does so from an exceptionally mature and secure emotional viewpoint. And an essential part of this viewpoint is the detached sardonic humor. It enables the film to contemplate the ultimate horrors without hysteria, with a poised, almost serene detachment. This is probably not what Hitchcock meant when he said that one cannot appreciate *Psycho* without a sense of humor, but it is what he *should* have meant. He himself—if his interviews are to be trusted—has not really faced up to what he was doing when he made the film. This, needless to say, must not affect one's estimate of the film itself. For the maker of *Psycho* to regard it as a "fun" picture can be taken as his means of preserving his sanity; for the critic to do so—and to give it his approval on these grounds—is quite unpardonable. Hitchcock (again, if his interviews are to be trusted) is a much greater artist than he knows.