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Postmodern Funhouse: The Sly Underpinnings of Hitchcock’s *Psycho*

Striking fear into the hearts of men is no easy task, and few have done it as effectively or for as long as master film director Alfred Hitchcock. So powerful was his grasp on the elements of film that his name has become synonymous with cinematic terror. Although his filmography is studded with gems, much of Hitchcock’s legacy is tied to *Psycho*, a film firmly lodged in the popular consciousness. *Psycho* provides chills as a ripped-from-the-headlines slasher flick, but the macabre surfaces conceal its deeper, mordant cultural resonances. In *Psycho*, many of Hitchcock’s major tactics fall under the umbrella of postmodernism, a movement in the latter half of the twentieth century largely focused on injecting further ambiguity and skepticism into the cultural and artistic mores of the time. Hitchcock’s methods include, but are not limited to, a specific focus on developing a playful mood, his exploration of levels of audience participation within the confines of a film, and his preoccupation with surfaces. Each of these techniques contribute to the post-modern subtext of the film, consistently calling attention to the artifice at work in the film. Although made within the confines of the last vestiges of the classic Hollywood studio system, *Psycho* distinguishes itself as a subversive postmodern cinematic text.

To unpack the various meanings at work in *Psycho*, one must first address Hitchcock’s stated intentions with the film. As cited by Michael Haley in his collection *The Alfred Hitchcock Album*, Hitchcock deems *Psycho* to be “a film made with quite a sense of amusement… rather like taking them [the audience] through the haunted house at the fairground” (103). This quote indicates not only the black streak that informs Hitchcock’s unique sense of humor, but also that which pervades his major films,
especially *Psycho*. Hitchcock’s intentions are made clear in his advertisements for the film. While most trailers focus on slicing and dicing the film into small manageable bursts to whet the appetites of the unassuming public, the ad campaign for *Psycho* pursued a more audacious tactic. The preview is comprised of the man himself, Alfred Hitchcock, guiding the camera through the set of the Bates motel. In a sense this is the perfect advertisement for the work—*Psycho* in microcosm.

Hitchcock is the dominating presence in the film. From the beginning we are privy to dastardly deeds done by less-than-savory people. Yet, even as the brutality is ratcheted up (culminating in Marion’s death), the audience remains engaged and more specifically *entertained*. This effect derives from the way Hitchcock presents the various elements within the film to create a work that “consistently questions itself and the context it seems to fit within” (Nealon 141). The traditionally positive and pure elements of society when viewed through Hitchcock’s lens are rendered resoundingly impure. Caroline, Marion’s pestering co-worker, needed tranquilizers to survive her own wedding; Tom Cassidy heartily recommends the practice of “buying off unhappiness” to turn it into something approaching happiness; police and detectives fail to provide satisfactory protection; and in the Bates family one certainly begins to doubt that mother knows best. This is contrasted to the immoralities within the film. Sam and Marion’s affair, Marion’s theft, and Norman’s killings are, without exception, attractively presented. The affair titillates, turning Marion into an erotic symbol (Thomson 28). By the time of the theft, Marion has won the allegiance of the audience. Even the film’s most legendary element, the shower scene, can today be viewed as more giddy than gory. It plays more as symphony than tragedy. It is a feat of timing and rhythm with precise and effective choreography.
Traditional horror films dare the audience to look at the screen; *Psycho* dares us to look away and we simply cannot.

Beginning with Marion’s fateful journey to flee Phoenix, viewers sense that in *Psycho*, we are coming along for the ride. Therein lies the appeal of the film. It goes beyond its salacious plot trimmings. The true genius of the film “lies in its construction” (Berardinelli web). Although Hitchcock’s sense of authorial control is never a question throughout the film, he acknowledged that he was working with the audience very much in mind, saying, “[y]ou might say I was playing them [the audience], like an organ” (qtd. in Ebert online). Therefore, it becomes necessary to frame all analysis of Hitchcock’s choices with the audience in mind. At the time of its release, Hitchcock made as many waves with the ad campaign as he did with the film itself. Hitchcock insisted that no one be allowed to enter the theater after the film had begun. The ads made it clear that this was in the audience’s best interest, as it would allow them to better experience the utter shock of the film’s initial twist. Hitchcock was putting viewers through the wringer before they even entered the theater.

As for the film itself, it defies convention and flaunts expectations at every turn. At the end of the first act, it abruptly transfers the mantle of protagonist from Marion Crane to Norman Bates. The transfer makes sense. After all, these are the only two characters in the film that truly matter. In the words of critic David Thomson, “they are the only two players in the film whom Hitchcock liked or was interested in” (39). As a mainstream Hollywood director, Hitchcock’s interest in these two people, one a thief, the other a psychologically fractured killer is in and of itself subversive of audience expectations. *Psycho* was released in mid-1960, still very much in the shadow of the outwardly wholesome, domesticated Eisenhower era. To have a film focused on such behavior in the era of *Leave it to Beaver* was not only bold, it was unprecedented in mainstream American cinema. *Psycho*’s low-rent aesthetic of highway towns and motel rooms is unique in the typically more elaborate and glamorous Hitchcock oeuvre. In an era when films were bought and sold based on star power, Hitchcock bumps off poor Janet Leigh (herself only a moderate star at the time) by the close of the first act. Audiences thought they knew what they could expect from the movies, especially the
ones made by “Master of Suspense” Alfred Hitchcock, but the moment that shower
curtain opens to the ascending strings of Bernard Herrmann’s score, all bets are off. No
one and nothing is safe, not even the lifestyles of the rich and famous.

Apart from its more coy and wily elements, Psycho is also a film preoccupied
with surfaces and appearances. By virtue of the funhouse construction of the film,
Hitchcock cannot be bothered with traditional character development. The four major
characters of the piece—Norman, Marion, Sam, and Lila—act as doubles for one
another. In Lila, we find traces of Marion. Both are conventionally attractive blondes, yet
the sexual vivacity of Marion that her screen time so effectively showcases is dulled and
diluted in Lila, who can seem pestering and frumpy in comparison. These parallels
perhaps could be written off due to the sister relationship between the two, except that the
more interesting parallels
between Sam and
Norman undermine any
sort of quick fix. Norman
and Sam share a similar
facial structure and hair
color. Clearly, Sam is
meant to represent the
more stereotypically
strapping male suitor, whereas Norman is best characterized as meek and uncertain. Yet,
throughout the film our impressions of the two men are colored in surprising ways.
Norman, despite his compulsions, comes off as a caring and compassionate young man,
shy but capable of deep understanding. Hitchcock, in a move of swift and delicious irony,
makes Norman into “the most sensitive and kind person the picture has to offer”
(Thomson 36). Norman’s final conversation with Marion before her death is the film’s
most intimate scene. Although the two start the scene as total strangers, it is clear that
they have had a deep effect on one another by the scene’s close. In contrast, Sam seems
increasingly boorish and bullying as the picture unspools. He’s certainly less interesting
than Norman. Indeed, we learn precious little regarding Sam in the movie’s first half.
Despite her claims of love, Marion spends relatively little time considering Sam’s views of her actions. His hypothetical thoughts never enter her mind on the run from Phoenix, indicating that her love is uncertain at best (Thomson 36). Her deepest emotional connection in the film is with Norman, and Sam seems to share a more matrimonial relationship with Lila than he does with Marion. Yet, in their momentary connection, Marion and Norman shared something more lively and meaningful than Sam seems to be capable of imagining. This lively connection, of course, must end in death. Hitchcock is more than a Master of Suspense; he is an ironist supreme.

_Psycho_’s endurance as a piece of popular art is quite a feat. With _Psycho_, Hitchcock explored cutting-edge, yet subtle filmic ideas, toying with audience perception and engagement. The film’s overriding mood stands as a counterpoint to the brutality of the narrative. Even in narrative terms, the film is curious. Many of the characters lack depth and dimension, yet that effect too is purposeful. These strands are tied together by Hitchcock’s gleeful blurring of the lines between high and low art; he fully embraces the low rent, motel aesthetic without sacrificing his signature level of craft. _Psycho_ shatters the preconception that Hollywood classics represent conservative, staid filmmaking. With this film, Hitchcock lays down the seeds of post-modernism that filmmakers like Quentin Tarantino, David Lynch, and Michael Haneke toil over to this day. It is a film where commercial aims exist in equal balance to artistic ambitions, where those goals are allowed to be complementary. It holds a mirror to a polluted world in order to reveal the cracks in the surface, an impure subject made enthralling through pure cinema; a fact made all the more apparent by the cultural endurance of the film, but also by the sly methods of Hitchcock’s directorial hand.

Works Cited