

HITCHCOCK'S *PSYCHO*: A NOT SO DIVINE COMEDY

Alfred Hitchcock, who enjoyed shocking verbally as well as cinematically, remarked of his most shocking film *Psycho* that it was "made with quite a bit of amusement ... a fun picture". For audiences of the time, *Psycho* seemed light worlds removed from "amusement" and "fun", more the epitome of the director's life-long ability to combine Gothic macabre (as in *Rebecca* and *Rope*), psycho-analytic manipulation (as in *Spellbound*, *Strangers on a Train*, and, later, *Marnie*), and light-of-day false leads ("Maguffins", as Hitchcock called them) and anti-cliches (the essence of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, *The Lady Vanishes*, and *North by Northwest*). The Gothic, the psycho-analytic, and the red-herring techniques are all abundantly evident in *Psycho* in the eerie Bates home, the mother/son role of the central character Norman, and Marion's theft of a large sum of money and her anxiety over the consequences. And the film's great success at the box office (still evident in the sequels more than twenty years after) certainly suggests that audience response was strong in ways not implied in Hitchcock's remark. Yet seen at a remove in time and in a context of certain remarkable films that closely preceded and followed it (*Rear Window*, *Vertigo*, and *The Birds*), the thesis of *Psycho* suggests certain classically comic devices or situations that will be examined here. Basically, they are 1) the theme of the adolescent innocent boy caught between the rival claims of two generations of women (for typical purposes, mother vs. wife/girl friend), 2) the outcome as basically a happy one for the protagonist of the story (it should be remembered that Aristotle viewed the *Odyssey* as "comic", and Dante chose the title of his Christian epic for its conclusion in Paradise), and 3) the manipulation or involvement of the audience in a measure of the foolish or ridiculous. Here one must recall Bergson's stricture that "the comic demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart, an appeal to intelligence, pure and simple". Obviously, there is much in *Psycho* and its companion films that is extremely painful to any normal or healthy sensibility, however detached and analytical. Granting this, it will be my purpose to establish a comic rationale that may help us interpret Hitchcock's remark as something other than merely perverse. A brief summary of the stories in question may be helpful at this point.

In *Psycho* (1960), Norman Bates, in the role of his mother, murders Marion Crane, the young secretary-turned-thief he has received at his motel and eyed through a peep-hole as an indication of his attraction toward her. After a second murder (of an insurance investigator), he almost kills Marion's sister who has attempted to solve the disappearance. The film ends with Norman diagnosed as a transvestite totally immersed in his female character.

In *Rear Window*, a few years earlier (1954), Hitchcock gives us Jeffries, the injured photographer who has used his recuperation time watching his city apartment neighbors and fantasy-shaping their lives, with one of his fantasies becoming horrific reality in Thorwald the wife-murderer. Meanwhile,

Jeffries has fended off the amorous advances of his beautiful girl friend Lisa as well as the mundane advice of his nurse Stella. In the course of his murder uncovering, he has enlisted the assistance of both his women, literally using them as his legs. The film's close finds Jeffries doubly crippled, both legs broken, with Lisa and Stella still in attendance.

For *Vertigo* (1958), perhaps the most widely discussed of all Hitchcock's films, the acrophobic detective Ferguson falls in love with the apparently suicidal Madeline Elster, whom her husband has employed him to protect. After her death-fall from a mission tower, Ferguson turns from the consolation offered by his long-time friend Midge to a new fascination for a Madeline look-alike, Judy, whom he dresses and grooms as the dead woman before he discovers her real identity as part of a murder plot of the real Madeline engineered by his employer. The film ends with the nightmarish repeat of a death-fall from the mission tower and Ferguson's second loss of "Madeline".

Three years after *Psycho*, Hitchcock offered *The Birds* (1963), with Mitch Brenner, a young lawyer, as the romantic interest of Melanie Daniels, a San Francisco socialite who follows him to his mother's home on the northern California coast, on the excuse of offering a birthday present of love-birds to his sister Kathy. Melanie's visit in Bodega Bay is marked by a mysterious and murderous invasion of thousands of birds threatening the life of the town and destroying Mitch's former girl friend Annie, as well as nearly killing Melanie herself. The close has Mitch, his mother, and sister preparing to leave the besieged town with Melanie in critical condition.

It is not necessary here to examine all the implications of the male-female relationships in these plots, but there is a sense of triangulation (woman-man-woman) common here that deserves comment. In all four stories, the male is the center of counter-claims on him, sometimes simple (as with Lisa's and Stella's determination that Jeffries marry and settle down) and sometimes far more complex. If in *Rear Window* we have a mother-figure and wife-figure combining to stage-manage the young man in question, in *The Birds*, we have the wife-figure's pursuit matched by the mother-figure's possessiveness. And in *Vertigo* and *Psycho*, there is the complication of the male's obsession with a dead woman, as against the attractions of mundane feminine warmth, friendship and perhaps the promise of more. Ferguson and Norman cope with these claims in dramatically different ways, yet both situations result in the destruction of the attractive feminine force (Judy and Marion). Without pressing the point too far, it should be remembered that for American audiences of these films the Phillip Wylie theme of "Momism", the smothering of the male by the female, was at least an alternative possibility to that of the sexploitation of the female by the male--and a popular theme for 1950s comedy. Seen in this light, *Psycho* gives us a timid, inhibited, and repressed young man in something like the Wylie mold, unable to experience any kind of normal gender relationships. Norman's collection of stuffed birds not only anticipates the iconography of the later film but points up his retreat from "live" relationships; actually, he preserves his dead mother not only in himself but as another exhibit in his collection. As a study of gender relationships, then, *Psycho* offers a central male figure whose dementia offers

a frightful yet strangely touching solution to his problem: If you can't beat them, join them. (Of this, more presently). Like Jeffries, Norman is a *voyeur*, like Ferguson, he creates a kind of mannikin, himself, with women's clothing, like Mitch Brenner, the hospitality he offers the attractive young woman--in a house "occupied" by his mother--proves deadly. It is as if Hitchcock himself were creating a theme-and-variations tetralogy on the Wylie thesis that the American male may be a kind of damsel-in-distress, and threatening distress to others.

In regard to the classical assumption that comedy amounts to a happy (or at least satisfying) outcome for the central character, let us consider the possibilities. Ordinarily, the outcome involves something physical or material, the winning of a woman, a throne, or a treasure. But on another level, the outcome might involve wishfulfillment or something like it: the central character (protagonist rather than hero would be the preferable term here) might not merely win something but might lose something he ultimately wants to lose. Here we may find another clue to *Psycho* as "comic", and not only *Psycho* but also its companion pieces noted above. In *Rear Window*, Jeffries uses his commitment to his career as photographer to fend off the ravishing Lisa, and ultimately by making himself a kind of human camera lens, he penetrates a dark and deadly domestic situation and literally "sees" justice done. He even finds a perverse kind of reward for his achievement. With both legs broken, he enjoys his ongoing patient status, with the dutiful attention of his feminine nurses and extended opportunity for his *voyeurism*. In *Vertigo*, Ferguson, who is after all an ex-detective, solves the Madelaine Elster murder mystery, and like the mythic Pygmalion creates his own Galatea that is totally a death-wish, far more so than the carefully orchestrated performance of Madelaine/Judy in leading him on. Solving a crime and creating in his mind and another's flesh the "perfect woman" may well make him technically the most successful of all Hitchcock's protagonists of the period in question. Mitch, the young lawyer of *The Birds*, finds himself at the close in a far more conventional role, as the defender (if only marginally successful in averting total disaster) of the household.

But the ultimate problem-solver may be Norman, whose wretched existence has been dominated by "mother" and a side interest in taxidermy. In effect he loses his own identity and obliterates his own insufficiency as Norman by assuming the witch-like mother image that has brought him to this state. The mother image enables him both to guard the dark secret of the household and to look after the weakling child that is his public *persona*. And in dispatching Marion and Arbogast, the insurance investigator, to the depths of the swamp, in effect he adds two more specimens to his collection of dead creatures. Given the pathetic circumstances of Norman's life, he has coped in a grotesque fashion, and his final total withdrawal from reality in his asylum cell is perhaps the only self-preservation possible for him.

On yet another level, *Psycho* shows a curious affinity with the Gothic red-herring tradition exploited by Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey*, where the impressionable young heroine pursues one false/misleading clue after another that ultimately lead nowhere. The significant point here is that Hitchcock manipulates not only his fugitive heroine Marion but the audience

as well. Whereas *Rear Window* builds on a visual dimension of seeing the outside through Jeffries' voyeurism--his mental camera lens, so to speak--*Psycho* from the very first scene (a panning down from the sunlit Arizona exterior to the privacy of a hotel room where Marion meets her lover) invites us as the audience to venture from the outside to the inside. We observe Marion and observe *with* Marion, and the result is a rich montage of false impressions and false clues. With Marion, we imagine the real danger to be detection of her theft and flight, and the major suspense moments in the first half of the film are totally misleading: the patrolman's mildly suspicious interest in her parked car and her exchanging the car for another one, and the stolen money. (None of this figures in any way in the outcome of the story). We are relieved, as she is, to encounter a motel with a vacancy sign in a driving rainstorm. And we vicariously share the comfort of a warming shower after coming in from the storm. It is only with Marion's murder in the shower, that we awaken to circumstances far deeper and darker than the girl's flight. Students of the film have duly noted its extensive use of mirrors and mirror-images, which by implication involve us in the action. In this sense, the comic dimension of the fool seeing himself in the behavior of others is given a grim twist. We never lose a certain empathy with the demented Norman who seems (and in a way is) "a nice young man" who wants to do the right thing. The right thing for him is a far cry from what we conventionally expect, but that is our problem in the film. It has been our perception of Norman rather than Norman himself that has been deceptive, and if he has "embalmed" the money along with Marion, we are well aware that money-madness has nothing whatever to do with him. It is almost a variation on the theme of burying the loot along with the victim slain for it. Given Norman's dementia, he is no more villainous than the birds who create such murderous chaos in Bodega Bay. Aberrations of nature may make for chaos and death, but surely not tragedy, which is a drama enacted in the minds of sane men. All of which is yet another reason for concluding that *Psycho* may be the darkest of dark comedies, and perhaps Hitchcock's ultimately ironic statement on the theme of human existence as a puppeteering performance worth the scrutiny of an imaginative lens-focus.

Finally, *Psycho* offers an interesting point of comparison with perhaps the strangest (and certainly one of the least popularly appreciated) of Hitchcock's films, *The Trouble with Harry* (1956). Here, the central character is a corpse, dead before the start of the story, that becomes the responsibility and guilt-fixation of almost all the live figures in the plot. As Harry is buried, dug up and re-buried and as the relationships of the live characters are clarified, we as the audience want him laid to rest both physically, psychologically and spiritually. When we finally learn at the close that Harry's death has been "natural" rather than humanly caused, we relax with the concerned group. In the case of Norman in *Psycho*, for all of our sympathy for his wretched situation and our appreciation that his story lies outside conventional morality, we detach ourselves from him at the close almost as from a corpse. And this in itself serves to separate us from the human involvement essential in tragedy. We have drawn certain erroneous conclusions from evidence offered us. And if we cannot laugh, we can only admire the artistry of the deception.

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