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Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*: A Case Study
Terrifying Transformations in Film Reception

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Today, Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* is one of the director's most famous films, iconic in the history of American popular culture, referenced time and again in various media, inspiring sequels, prequels, television series, and serving as an interesting platform for debate and analysis for scholars and cinephiles alike. Although now credited by many as the first slasher film and renowned for its unconventional plot structure and bold depictions of violence and sexual themes, reviewers writing in the 1960s did not find Hitchcock's risk-taking nearly as impressive as one might think given the film's box office success and the subsequent critical acclaim. Comparing highbrow and lowbrow sources presents several parallels as well as areas of diverging focus that upon further dissection may indicate why *Psycho* initially generated such mixed reviews. In line with Janet Staiger's conclusions on filmic interpretation in the 1960s, *Psycho* exemplifies similar delineations in critical response in terms of emphasis on authorship/style and subject matter, how the two coincide, and whether or not these aspects reflect on the quality of the film as a sophisticated social commentary worthy to be classified as "art," or as mere spectacle and perverse entertainment. However, while these distinctions are indeed identifiable within the sampled reviews, this essay will also endeavor to contextualize the film on a larger scale.

In stark contrast to the post-modern perspectives now more typically associated with the film, most of the reviewers of the time express a sense of mingled disappointment and revulsion, that a "heavy-handed" Hitchcock (McCarten 70) "bears down too hard" ("The New Pictures" 53) in this feature as opposed to some of his former films, with the highbrow critics taking on a much more condescending tone. However, in the context of Staiger's article, it is interesting to note that both high and lowbrow reviewers tend to examine the film in relation to Hitchcock's larger body of work, as it applies to the idea of authorship as a means of unifying a text (180). Although the lowbrow journals focus slightly more on plot summary, characters, and those

portraying them as opposed to style and formal elements, they also clearly demonstrate an awareness and interest in the idea of the impact of authorship on the story being told. Both Crowther and Walsh, of the *New York Times* and *America* respectively, reference Austro-German psychiatrist Krafft-Ebing's research on sexual psychopathy and its potential influence on Hitchcock's treatment of the subject matter. Contrast this to Robert Hatch's review for *The Nation*, where he writes that "there is no real mystification... anyone with Sunday-supplement knowledge of psychology and a modest sophistication of mystery-story construction will easily be abreast of the plot" (18) .

The language exemplified above implies a level of intellectual prowess of an assumedly well-read individual familiar with more esoteric principles, whereas the diction in the lowbrow articles maintains a more generic tone, placing no extra pressure on readers to be familiar with topics not expressly addressed in the text. However, while the lowbrow critics explicitly cite a specific expert where Hatch assumes his readers do not need to be spoon-fed such information, the fact that all three reviewers touch on the field of psychology remains significant. Although its mentioning is logical given *Psycho*'s subject matter, it may also suggest that mass audiences were not necessarily perceived as non-intellectuals by the reviewers writing for them, or alternatively that perhaps the discrepancy between average American moviegoers and so-called intellectuals who favored art cinema over Hollywood pictures was not so entirely black-and-white, prompting the relevance of Staiger's circular influence theory as described on page 186 of "With Compliments of the Auteur."

On the other hand, the increased focus on authorship in the lowbrow reviews may simply be attributable to Hitchcock's pre-established reputation. The general consensus could be summarized as *Psycho* falling short of expectations even as it fulfills them. In "Merriment to

Murder,” McCarten argues that Hitchcock does not come close to rivaling his other recent successes, though he certainly creates an eerie atmosphere with “his usual *éclat*,” (22) a word which here may connote the negative in parallel to what Walsh describes as “deliberately meritorious in conception and treatment” (443). And while the film is touted as “expertly gothic” in *Time* (53), a notable sense of ennui stippled the lowbrow reviews as much as the highbrow as far as construction is concerned, implying that the film felt predictable and sub-par structurally speaking, especially in regards to the first half and the denouement. The *New Republic* and the *New York Times* both cite pacing problems (Kauffman 22; Crowther), with McCarten remarking on clumsy characterization (70). What little praise Kauffman offers is decidedly double-edged, condemning what he deems to be Hitchcock’s abuse of his otherwise masterful editing and use of sound to the point of shocking offense (22). In *America*, Walsh captures what seems to be the overlying issue, criticizing Hitchcock for favoring such shock value over “observing the ordinary rules of good film construction” (443).

At the same time, both highbrow and lowbrow reviewers express a distinct revulsion towards the graphic violence and sexual content *Psycho* depicts. In considering their readerships, it seems they each are quite earnest in conveying just how horrendous of a viewing experience the film is, stressing their personal discomfort as much as if not more than the attention they pay to any of the filmic conventions, performances, or general storyline. Thus a unique irony is created. On one hand, yes, the values associated with high and low culture are clearly demonstrated in the tone, diction, and slight variance in areas of emphasis between the various reviews. Yet on the other, they all more or less consistently claim the same thing with respect to what they seem to believe their readers should take away from the film. So, what does this say about film reception during the time, and how do we make sense of it?

Despite the overwhelming domestic and international success *Psycho* would soon experience, this initial negative critical reception from across the board fits given the historical context during which the film was produced and released. Given the erosion of the Production Code just beginning at the time, reviewers were not accustomed to the kind of gratuitous violence and sexual content *Psycho* so freely exhibited. Though still very much a part of the age of modernism, we can gather based on the textual evidence between the various reviews, employing the traditional reading strategies of the past did not coincide as harmoniously where this film is concerned. Consequently, evaluating formal elements and emphasizing authorship to determine artistic and/or entertainment value in the case of *Psycho* does not reveal as much in terms of readership stratification or criteria affecting or significant to interpretation since in comparing the high and lowbrow reviews, it becomes apparent that the issue of shock value, appropriate content and appropriate handling of said content governs the reviewers attentions so wholly that they are unable to recognize that it is the unprecedented nature of the film they so unanimously resist that they should be embracing in order to more accurately critique the film.

The critics' frustrations seem to stem from the fact that *Psycho* does not fit easily into the distinguishing traits of either art cinema or classical Hollywood cinema. What results falls quite neatly in line with Bordwell's method for classifying different reading strategies (Staiger 180). Although according to the highbrow reviews, *Psycho* follows many of the conventions normally indicative of "art," having an unconventional plot and less goal-oriented characters, they cannot bring themselves to call it "art" because the then-grotesque imagery and controversial themes do not culminate into a serious, social message in a way that is fully understandable and congruent with the dominant ideologies of the time period. Thus they are forced to explain the nature of the

film via authorial expressivity, which in turn manifests as a negative opinion of Hitchcock's directorial style.

The lowbrow reviewers suffer a similar problem to the opposite effect. Because the graphic depictions were so shocking at the time, it makes it difficult to classify the resulting feeling as one of entertainment and not aversion, also leading them to blame the director for subverting expectations and failing to follow the rules general audiences are becoming more intuitively aware of. Because *Psycho* deviated from "Hollywood fare" but did not lay claim to a serious, social message at the time of its release, it provides for an interesting case study regarding the early stages of ideological transformation and cultural upheaval of the period that not only would forever alter American society, but the way highbrow and lowbrow critics would interpret the films that followed and the considerations they would have to make about their readerships given the new social consciousness and counterculture.

With its release concurrent with the beginning of revolutionary social change and its impact on how movies were made and regarded from within the industry and by the public, Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* presents a remarkable opportunity to analyze these changes in film reception. Because it dealt with more mature material just slightly ahead of its time, it allows for an interesting look at how reviewers would classify films for their artistic or entertainment value in a traditional sense as well as how the developing cultural changes influenced storytelling, other creative modes of production, and the various reactions to both as America transitioned from the modern era into that of postmodernism. In effect, it helps generate implications and patterns for how and why Americans consume media based on marketing techniques, personal interest, and different tiers of consciousness, and how all those factors have shifted over time.

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