Through a Lens Darkly: Horror Cinema as Historical Artifact and an Examination of Hitchcock's *Psycho*

Vincent Pisano

Horror Cinema as Historical Artifact

The story of the motion picture was from its beginning a tale of horror. While the earliest films have generally been accredited to the efforts of Thomas Edison in the United States and the Lumiere brothers in France, a little-known pioneer had previously made a motion picture in Leeds, England in October of 1888, but his story would be one of tragedy and mystery. Louis Le Prince invented a camera and recorded his family including his son, Adolphe, his in-laws Joseph and Sarah Whitley, and family-friend Annie Hartley dancing in a garden behind the Whitley's home. The film runs only about two seconds. Within ten days of the filming, 72-year-old Sarah Whitley was dead.

In 1890, Le Prince prepared an exhibition of his work in New York but first returned to France to take care of family business. There he boarded a train, waved good-bye to his brother, and was never seen again. Many theories tried to account for his mysterious disappearance, including one which accused Edison of an assassination plot, but Le Prince was likely the victim of robbery and murder, an unfortunately common fate among lone travelers at the time. In 2003 a photo was uncovered of an unnamed drowning victim in the Paris police archives, dated the year of his vanishing. It strongly resembles Le Prince. With Le Prince unable to unveil his creation to the world, his son Adolphe fought against Edison through court proceedings to gain his father recognition as the inventor of the motion-picture camera, to no avail. Another horrible ending: two years after testifying against Edison, in 1902, Adolphe was shot dead while duck hunting on Fire Island, New York.[1]

[1] Ian Young, "Louis Le Prince, Who Shot the World's First Film in Leeds," BBC News, June 23, 2015, https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-33198686; "BBC Education –

Horror and cinema have always been inextricably linked. For instance, the Edison produced *The Execution of Mary Stuart*, an eighteen-second film from 1895, shows the beheading of the titular Mary, and is the first film to not only employ trained actors but also to use editing effects (a jump-cut to replace the actor playing Mary with a dummy at the moment of decapitation). Viewers' tastes for the grizzly and macabre were already whetted when the nickelodeons began rolling. Around the same time in France, Georges Méliès was also discovering the jump-cut, and put it to work in 1896 to direct what historians consider the first horror film, *Le Manoir du diable* or *The Devil's Castle* (released in the United States as *The Infernal Palace*). In this work, Méliès incorporated a plethora of gothic imagery, from a skeleton and ghosts and bats to Mephistopheles himself. The fantastical works of Méliès reveal, from their earliest incarnations, why the genre of horror and the art of motion pictures are so perfectly suited. As Mark Gatiss has eloquently mused, "The cinema was made for horror movies. No other kind of film offers that same mysterious anticipation as you head into a dark auditorium. No other makes such powerful use of sound and image. The cinema is where we come to share a collective dream. And horror films are the most dream-like of all, perhaps because they engage with our nightmares."[2] These collective nightmares - contemporary anxieties, cultural traumas - are the subject of this writing.

Historians have long examined film as artifact, using the moving image to glean insights into a variety of realms. They have looked at film's representation of history, at its use as evidence of historical fact, and at the history of the film industry and the art form itself.[3] The horror genre offers a prime opportunity to study the fourth dominant reason for the historical study of film, as it reflects the social and cultural history of its time. Horror in particular exploits the fears and societal wounds which mainstream culture all too often dismisses or ignores. An examination of horror films exposes the historical traumas from which a culture is recuperating, and may even serve

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Local Heroes Le Prince Biography," BBC Education, November 28, 1999, https://web.archive.org/web/19991128020048/http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/local_heroes/biogs/biogleprince.shtml

[2] Mark Gatiss, *A History of Horror*, directed by John Das (2010; London: BBC).

[3] For more on this, see John E. O'Connor, *Image as Artifact: The Historical Analysis of Film and Television* (Malabar, Florida: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company, 1990).

to help heal those exposed wounds. Linnie Blake has stated that nations tend to deny trauma's role in national identity or that they bind up the wounds of trauma too soon, while horror denies them this and exposes nerves that may be raw or festering.[4] She argues that a "critical engagement with a nation's horror cinema offers a significant means of not only grappling with the traumatic past and in so doing measuring the effects of social, political and cultural transformation of the nation on its citizens, but of exposing layers of obfuscation, denial or revisionism with which those wounds are dressed in service of dominant ideologies of national identity."[5] Horror also functions beyond peeling back the bandage, for it can also administer a rehabilitation (no matter how painful the process):

> Horror cinema's specific subgenres… have been shown not only to allow for a mediated engagement with acts so disgusting or violent that their real-life realization would be socially and psychologically unacceptable, but for a re-creation, re-visitation and re-conceptualization of traumatic memories that lie buried deep within the national psyche… In this, the power of horror may be to effect a certain productive re-engagement with the traumas of national history, their cultural legacy and the possibility of being (and narrativizing) otherwise.[6]

When real horrors are too hurtful, their artificial representation on the screen can assist in cultural processing. It may be safer to engage them through the security of cinema, where the traumas can manifest as monsters, maniacs, or malformations and the like. There, at least, for ninety or so minutes, they can be confronted and their power as trauma diminished. The historian may analyze the horror film to discern the unresolved cultural wounds that the filmmakers are exhuming to reveal the effects of recent events upon society and the ways in which they have chosen to deal with or to ignore the injuries.

Horror films have engaged with historical trauma since the silent era. A prime example is 1920's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, a masterpiece of German Expressionism which emerged just after the cataclysmic violence of

[4] Linnie Blake, *The Wounds of Nations: Horror Cinema, Historical Trauma, and National Identity* (Manchester University Press, 2008), 6.
[5] Blake, *The Wounds of Nations*, 23.
[6] Ibid., 187.

the Great War. The film depicts the titular Dr. Caligari sending out his sideshow somnambulist to murder in the night. In a twist, the film is actually the delusion of a madman, and the oddly angled artificial sets help to visualize that insanity to the audience. The film's writers, Hans Janowitz and Carl Mayer, both veterans of the war, insisted that their script was a clear injunction against the atrocities and betrayal that they had experienced. As Janowitz would write: "It was years after the completion of the screenplay that I realized our subconscious intention… The corresponding connection between Doctor Caligari, and the great authoritative power of the Government that we hated, and which had subdued us into an oath, forcing conscription on those in opposition to its official war aims, compelling us to murder and be murdered."[7] The trauma of the war also appeared in American horror cinema in the embodiment of Lon Chaney, star of *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925) and many Tod Browning collaborations, whose depictions of deformed characters and amputees evoked the war-scarred soldiers who returned from the front lines to haunt the psyche of a nation. W. Scott Poole writes that "Chaney had replicated, as film after film in this era did, the disfigured faces of veterans, exploded by shrapnel and Maxim guns. No one in the Western world could have looked at the visage of Lon Chaney and not thought of" those "who hid their injuries with marionette-like facsimiles just as the Phantom did… No longer could the gore of battle be unseen."[8] The trauma of the war can still be seen in the following decade's horror films, such as 1934's *The Black Cat*, in which two veterans plot each other's demise. At one point Hjalmar Poelzig, played by Boris Karloff, intones to his rival, "You say your soul was killed and that you have been dead all these years. And what of me? Did we not both die here… fifteen years ago? Are we any the less victims of the war than those whose bodies were torn asunder? Are we not both the living dead?"

The historical analysis of horror films offers a second benefit - it reveals the contemporary cultural fears and anxieties under which the motion

[7] Quoted in Steve Haberman, *Silent Screams: The History of the Silent Horror Film* (Baltimore: Midnight Marquee Press, 2003), 36.
[8] W. Scott Poole, *Wasteland: The Great War and the Origins of Modern Horror* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2018), 94

picture was created. Often filmmakers, sometimes consciously but more times not, tap into the *zeitgeist* of unease that permeates a culture. They exploit the growing tensions and worries of their era to create their monsters and madmen. Sometimes the films reflect these fears and anxieties overtly, or sometimes function through allegory. There have been moments when these films have resonated with audiences on powerful levels, even reshaping the culture.[9] They become the stuff not just of nightmares but of folklore, staining the fabric of cultural and national identity. Whether the viewer who watches the flickering images understands it or not, the horror film appears to understand *them*. The abyss gazes back and looks with recognition.

One period in which horror cinema clearly channeled newfound anxieties was in the alien and creature-features of the 1950s. The U.S. had closed the Second World War, humanity's bloodiest conflict, with two atomic detonations on Japan, unleashing an unprecedented terror upon the modern world. As the yield of these weapons increased, it seemed as though civilization was creating the means to its own end. The Doomsday Clock, introduced in 1947 in the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, illustrated how close to "midnight" society was in terms of nuclear threat, meaning how close the world stood to destroying itself through nuclear means. In 1953, at the height of the Cold War, as the Soviet Union built its own arsenal, the clock stood at two minutes before midnight, the closest it had come during the time of tension between the aggressive superpowers.[10] In the fifties, it was no longer the figure in the dark that struck terror in people's hearts, but the blinding flash and what would follow. The nuclear bomb was a Pandora's box of deadly possibilities, and what it meant for humanity's survival no one could say with certainty. Enter Howard Hawkes's production of *The Thing From Another World* (1951), one of the first American horror films to be "no longer removed to the Gothic world of the past but placed squarely into the continuous world of the present."[11] A vegetable-based alien is a stand-in for

[9] Kendall R. Phillips, *Projected Fears: Horror Films and American Culture* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005), 7.
[10] As of this writing, in 2019, the Doomsday Clock has sat at two minutes before midnight for the past three years.
[11] Phillips, *Projected Fears*, 58.

the unknown scientific horrors that await society, and the film reveals the possibility that neither science nor the military may be enough to save us. Instead, it is the ability of unconnected individuals to band together that wins out. As Kendall R. Phillips writes, "Such good [personal] character could, the film suggests, overcome any invading threat."[12] This trend moves through the decade and sends a clear message: if Americans can stick together and not destroy the country from within, it may yet survive the unknown future. However, the anxieties persisted, seen more clearly in the giant creature films. While Japan was working through its nuclear trauma in the embodiment of a rampaging Godzilla in 1954, America was wrestling with its own atomic demons, displaying senses of guilt and anxiety about the monster it had created in the deserts of New Mexico in less than a decade prior. In *Them!*, the first "giant bug" feature, huge ants, products of atomic test radiation, have killed a number of citizens. The film closes with this telling exchange:

> Robert Graham: Pat, if these monsters got started as a result of the first atomic bomb in 1945, what about all the others that have been exploded since then?
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> Dr. Patricia Medford: I don't know.
>
> Dr. Harold Medford: Nobody knows, Robert. When Man entered the atomic age, he opened a door into a new world. What we'll eventually find in that new world, nobody can predict.

The preceding examples demonstrate the from every decade since the birth of the motion picture, horror has held a lens (and sometimes a mirror) to the dark dreams of its time. It is arguably the genre that reacts quickest to the occurring *zeitgeist*. It operates in the psychologically charged modes of allegory, expressionism, myth and folklore.[13] Yet despite its deep connection to human culture and society it has unfortunately been met with little respect. Horror, it should be clearly understood, deals with the negative emotions: fear, dread, disgust, paranoia, and terror. Its intention is not to coddle or reassure, but to confront and challenge, to shock and speak uncomfortable

[12] Ibid., 58.
[13] Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 231.

truths. The horror genre does not necessarily create new fears for audiences, but rather exploits those which are already present. To be sure, most horror films are of low quality and formulaic, following the tired rituals set forth by superior predecessors, and these films generally aspire to heights no grander than the lowest common denominator. If these films tap into the fears of the time, it is likely accidental. Others seek to offer pure exploitation with little to no pretense of artistry. For these reasons, and despite horror as having been an integral part of cinema from its conception, the genre has been at most times reviled, ignored, or condescended to by mainstream Hollywood and film critics. The term "horror" as been seen as anathema to good taste and respectful standing, leading even some filmmakers to avoid identifying their disturbing and terrifying films with the genre. For instance, William Friedkin, director of one of the genre's most revered films, *The Exorcist* (1973), for decades refused to call the film horror. "It won ten Academy Award nominations," he once said. "How can that be horror?"[14]

Horror is undoubtedly the black sheep of cinema, yet therein lies its power to the historian. It is film unfettered by the niceties of etiquette. It is naked and raw, and it does not ask to be liked. The films are almost always of relatively low budgets, meaning lower financial risk and fewer studio heads interfering in the director's vision. In these ways, it is more honest than other genres, and offers the historian an avenue through which to view society in the places where it tries to hide. Blake has written that "horror cinema can be seen to fulfill a function that sets it apart from other more 'respectable' branches of the culture industry: providing a visceral and frequently non-linguistic lexicon in which the experience of cultural dislocation may be phrased; in which the dominant will to repudiate post-traumatic self-examination" and contemporary anxieties "through culturally sanctioned silence may be audibly challenged."[15] There are many possible reasons for this, though a compelling one is offered by Carol J. Clover, who has recognized that "horror is a marginal genre that appeals to marginal people…

[14] Quoted in Jason Zinoman, *Shock Value: How a Few Eccentric Outsiders Gave Us Nightmares, Conquered Hollywood, and Invented Modern Horror* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011), 236.
[15] Blake, *The Wounds of Nations*, 189.

who may not have the same investment in the status quo."[16] Regardless of the reasons, one lesson remains clear: where mainstream culture seeks to obfuscate, horror exposes. The historian who watches the skeletons on the screen need not look far to find them within the closet.

By way of example, we will examine Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 film, *Psycho*. There are several reasons for choosing this film. Firstly, it has been long revered and exhaustively studied. Indeed, analysis of this film helped to develop American film studies. Its story is ingrained within American culture as it "remains one of the most-seen black-and-white movies of all time,"[17] and the infamous shower scene the most studied sequence in film history.[18] *Psycho* is also a cultural touchstone within the horror genre and within American culture at large. During this period, films such as Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom*, Georges Franju's *Eyes Without a Face*, and Mario Bava's *Black Sunday* also saw their release, and with them "there seems ample support for the notion that this is the time when modern cinematic horror came into being."[19] As Stephen Prince has written on the film's role in creating modern horror:

> Things have changed in the modern period, with *Psycho* (1960) being one of the threshold films that mark a separation between eras. In that terrible killing in the shower, Hitchcock put horror in the here and now and linked it with graphic violence. It has stayed there since. As that film ended with the shot of Norman's (and Mother's) grinning face, Hitchcock suggested that madness and chaos endure because they are not explicable. This is a deeply disturbing admission, which undermines our belief in rationality and an existence whose terms can be controlled or, at least, understood. In its savage assault on the audience and its belief systems, *Psycho* furnished the signpost for modern horror and for our contemporary sense of the world. Monsters today seem to be everywhere, and they cannot be destroyed.[20]

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[16] Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, 231.
[17] David J. Skal, *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror* (New York: Faber and Faber, 1993), 323.
[18] Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, 41.
[19] Stephen Jay Schneider, "Toward an Aesthetics of Cinematic Horror," in *The Horror Film*, ed. Stephen Prince (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 143.
[20] Stephen Prince, "Introduction," in *The Horror Film*, ed. Stephen Prince (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 4.

Within the horror genre, *Psycho*'s impact was profound. It had wide reaching influence, the most obvious being that the film "revolutionized the then small sub genre of serial killer movies"[21] and served as the "progenitor of slasher films."[22] More profoundly, though, it proved that horror could be found next door, and the monster could be us. It revealed a world in which there were no easy answers, or answers at all. This uncertainty affected the horror films that followed, for "post-1960s horror can be seen to actively discourage an easy acceptance of cohesive, homogenizing narratives."[23] Culturally, *Psycho* represented a transition in American culture. For Wheeler Winston Dixon, *Psycho* was "the film that truly put an end to the 1950s."[24] The fifties, a decade largely associated with rigid conformity, family values, economic security, and censorship, was directly assaulted by a knife-wielding crossdresser. In truth, the film could be viewed as both a culmination of that decade and a departure from it. Nevertheless, it served as the hinge by which cultural change swung. A historical reading can reveal why the film resonated with audiences and what anxieties were exploited.

Hitchcock's *Psycho*

Moviegoers walking out the theaters after seeing *Psycho* in 1960 didn't know what hit them. The film had defied expectations, challenged social norms, and pushed the boundaries of decency. It had also tapped into their creeping fears and validated them. They now believed that Alfred Hitchcock, a household name, was dangerous. "I felt raped," confessed filmmaker Peter Bogdanovich, who saw the film in an initial press screening.[25] Some critics turned against Hitchcock; however, it wasn't long before film theorists and general audiences alike began to see something truly revolutionary within the film.

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[21] Zinoman, *Shock Value*, 29.
[22] Caroline J.S. Picart and David A. Frank, "Horror and the Holocaust: Genre Elements in *Schindler's List* and *Psycho*," in *The Horror Film*, ed. Stephen Prince (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 212.
[23] Blake, *The Wounds of Nations*, 14.
[24] Wheeler Winston Dixon, *A History of Horror* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 75.

[25] Quoted in Zinoman, *Shock Value*, 41.

Hitchcock could have anticipated a backlash. Getting the film made posed its own challenge. As Robert Bloch, author of the novel upon which the movie was based, recalled, "Paramount absolutely didn't want to make it. They didn't like the title, the story, or anything about it at all."[26] David Thompson writes that "Paramount said they were frightened of *Psycho*. The killing was brutal yet ordinary. The setting was commonplace. The script called for a bathroom and a lavatory, as well as an extended slaughter!"[27] In the end, Paramount agreed, but there were catches, including providing a meager budget of $800,000 (compared to *North by Northwest*, Hitchcock's previous release, which had been given $3.3 million), and barring the director from using the studio lot for filming.[28] Hitchcock figured out ways to proceed, part of which involved using Universal's facilities on the cheap.

Paramount had good reason to worry. Powell's *Peeping Tom* opened in March 1960, three months before *Psycho*. His tale of a young man who kills women with a spike attached to his camera was met with savage criticism and nearly ruined Powell's career. However, Hitchcock preempted criticism in a number of ways and helped to alleviate it before it erupted. While *Psycho* was his first true horror film and a departure from what audiences had come to expect from him in his already long and successful career as a maker of thrillers and crime dramas, those who watched him on his popular television show, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, might have recognized similarities with the tales of killers which appeared on that program. Hitchcock used this familiar persona to introduce future moviegoers to the Bates house in a tongue-in-cheek trailer which starred himself touring the Bates Motel. In fact, he used the same film crew from the show. Due to his deal with Paramount he owned sixty-percent of the film and had final say on most things like the final cut and the advertising. He was able to enforce unprecedented rules upon the public such as, in order to preserve the shocking twist, not allowing audiences into the theater once the film had started. This went against contemporary practices of simply showing movies continuously and having ticket buyers

[26] Quoted in Phillips, *Projected Fears*, 61.
[27] David Thompson, *The Moment of Psycho: How Alfred Hitchcock Taught America to Love Murder* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 17.
[28] Phillips, *Projected Fears*, 62.

walk in at all times during the runtime. A clever businessman, Hitchcock had no doubt taken note the success of B-movie directors like Roger Corman and William Castle (who himself copied much from Hitchcock). For instance, Castle's fright gimmicks are reflected in Hitchcock's daring of audiences to enter the theater. Whereas Castle's audience was mainly kids and teenagers, however, Hitchcock's sights were set their adult parents.

Audiences knew they were in for something shocking, but they were still unprepared for how deeply *Psycho* would undermine their expectations and push the boundaries of accepted decency, in ways both large and small. An example of the latter is difficult for modern viewers to appreciate: Hitchcock showed American moviegoers the first flushing toilet on screen. To understand just how subversive this moment was, one should consider that the pilot episode of *Leave It to Beaver* in 1957 was nearly cut because its script called for a toilet - the censors compromised and only the tank was shown. Just a few months before *Psycho*'s release television comedian Jack Paar had a portion of his show removed by censors because a joke he told referred to a "W.C." (water closet), and he quit in protest. As Thompson has mused, "It really is quite exhilarating to see what tender creatures we were in 1960."[29]

"We all go a little mad sometimes"

Of course, audiences wouldn't have had much time to think about a toilet, for something far more shocking was occurring in the bathroom. The killing of Marion Crane (played by Janet Leigh) in the shower affected viewers on a number of levels. From the start of the film, she is shown to be the central character, and audiences would have fully expected her presence throughout the entirety of the film. But Hitchcock kills her, "removing our most beloved character and the apparent star of the film in one frenzy of violence - perhaps the most violent passage until then in American film."[30] Marion is attacked in her most vulnerable moment, as the water is washing away her guilt just as she has decided to return the money she had stolen.

[29] Thompson, *The Moment of Psycho*, 56.
[30] Ibid., 53.

Norman Bates takes not only her life, but her movie. Hitchcock at turns places the audience in the position of the voyeur, the killer, and the victim. For the shower scene, he wanted the audience to feel the blade. He wrote notes in the margins of the shooting instructions: "The slashing. An impression of a knife slashing, as if tearing at the very screen, ripping the film."[31] Death has come not just for our heroine, but for theatergoers. Harvey Greenberg has noted that "it is incomprehensible that Janet Leigh should simply cease to be. Never before had a star of such magnitude, a female sex goddess, been so utterly expunged in midstream. Thus Hitchcock drives home the incontrovertibility, the awesome finality of death… With Leigh gone, the comfortable conventions of the Hollywood suspense vehicle have been totally violated."[32] For Thompson, "the real measure of the breakthrough that had occurred - in the name of pure cinema - is in the bloodletting, sadism, and slaughter that are now taken for granted. In terms of the cruelties we no longer notice, we are another species."[33]

What Hitchcock understood, the censors denied: America was ready for violent entertainment. In fact, it had long been ready. For instance, during World War II American soldiers became the primary consumers of the cheap, portable, and escapist entertainment of comic books.[34] After the war they continued to read comics, gravitating especially to stories with mature themes of criminal violence and supernatural horror, like those found in the EC Comics titles *Tales from the Crypt* and *Vault of Horror*. By 1954 such comics were under attack, especially by the publication of Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*, which claimed that such entertainment damaged children's well beings and contributed to juvenile delinquency. To avoid outside censorship, comic publishers created the Comics Code Authority (CCA), which instituted a strict policy that, among other things, declared that "scenes of excessive violence shall be prohibited. Scenes of brutal torture, excessive and unnecessary knife and gunplay, physical agony, gory and

[31] Quoted in Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, 52.
[32] Quoted in Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, footnotes, 203.
[33] Thompson, *The Moment of Psycho*, 67.
[34] For more on this, see Cord A. Scott, "Comics and Conflict: War and Patriotically Themed Comics in American Cultural History From World War II Through the Iraq War" (Ph.D. diss., Loyola University Chicago, 2011).

gruesome crime shall be eliminated." In addition, "no comic magazine shall use the word horror or terror in its title," and "all scenes of horror, excessive bloodshed, gory or gruesome crimes, depravity, lust, sadism, masochism shall not be permitted."[35] While this effectively ended violent horror in comics, within a few years Americans could begin to see gore and bloodshed in the movie theaters via the imports of Hammer Film Productions, whose *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957) and *Horror of Dracula* (1958) displayed blood in its full-colored glory. These films, while graphic for their times, were set in a distant past and were still seen as fantasy violence not intended to be taken seriously by American adult audiences. Hitchcock, however, brought it right to where Americans lived.

American adults in the fifties had real violence to worry about. Murder seemed to be everywhere. The growth of local television news may have increased the amount of stories reported of spree killings in rural America, making the violence seem more omnipresent.[36] The 1958 killings of the teenage Charles Starkweather caused an uproar in middle America. Reports about the quadruple homicide of the Clutter Family began appearing in *The New York Times* in 1959, the same year that Bloch's novel was published. Bloch had based Norman Bates on the crimes of Ed Gein, also known as the Plainfield Ghoul. In 1957 police in Wisconsin found a farmhouse of horrors. After Gein's mother died in 1945, he had boarded up parts of the house to leave them preserved as she had them, but the rest of the house contained human remains used as decorations, upholstery, and clothing. In addition to repeated grave-robbings, Gein had murdered two women: one of the bodies was found in a shed - headless, hanging upside down and sliced open as one would dress a deer.[37] Hitchcock sensed the American fear of, and fascination with, these real-life murders, and pushed against the censors to depict his extended, violent killing of Marion Crane. He may have been inspired by the lucrative B-movie trash of Roger Corman, whose horror and exploitation films targeted and starred young people, for "Corman had seen that rock and roll

[35] Scott, "Comics and Conflict," 275.
[36] Thompson, *The Moment of Psycho*, 15.
[37] Ed Gein would inspire the creation of other horror icons, notably the killers in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991).

signaled a teenage audience, ready for a new level of violence, splashy, gaudy, and lip smacking."[38] Whatever the indicator, time would quickly prove his instincts correct. In 1963 low-budget filmmaker Herschell Gordon Lewis released *Blood Feast*, which in the first two minutes gave audiences that which was denied to them in *Psycho*: female nudity, graphic gore, and bright red blood. Lewis had felt that the film had "cheated." He complained that "Hitchcock showed the results but not the action."[39] Lewis's film was poorly written and terribly acted, but it gave audiences a full helping of the violence that they had only tasted in *Psycho*, and it would go on to earn enormous profits. That same year Mario Bava in Italy released, *Blood and Black Lace*, an early example of a *giallo*, a horror subgenre which normally features a crime plot and showcases beautiful women being stalked and killed - themes brought to light in *Psycho*. It is therefore noteworthy that, as Jason Zinoman states, "With the possible exception of Hitchcock, no director working in the sixties had more influence over the horror genre than Bava."[40] American directors increasingly chafed at censors, inserting more sex and graphic violence so that by 1966 only 59% of movies released in the US carried the Production Code seal.[41]

And then there's the shower: a place of privacy where one is supposed to be hidden. Then, suddenly, the curtain is pulled back and a knife descends. This violation of assumed security cannot be understated. For Philip J. Nickel, "horror's bite is explained as a sudden tearing-away of the intellectual trust that stands behind our actions. Specifically, it is a malicious ripping away of this intellectual trust, exposing our vulnerabilities in relying on the world and on other people."[42] There has been much commentary regarding the scene of Marion washing as a baptism of sorts - a cleansing of her sins as she commits to making things right again. David J. Skal's analysis is typical and insightfully contextual:

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[38] Thompson, *The Moment of Psycho*, 17.
[39] Quoted in Zinoman, *Shock Value*, 33.
[40] Zinoman, *Shock Value*, 35.
[41] Ibid., 105.
[42] Philip J. Nickel, "Horror and the Idea of Everyday Life: On Skeptical Threats in *Psycho* and *The Birds*," in *The Philosophy of Horror*, ed. Thomas Fahy (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010),
28.

> Marion Crane…who has impulsively stolen $40,000 and run away, decides to return the money and return to society. The shower is a transitional symbol of her purification, of her reinitiation into the social group. Her murder… became a powerful image of the collapse of basic social contracts and human relatedness: like us, Marion Crane wants advancement, security. She makes a mistake, but plays by the rules and seeks forgiveness - acceptance, only to have her cleansing transformation turned into bloody sacrifice. There is no God, it seems - at least not a just one. The disturbing scene became one of the most influential images in film history with good reason: it undermined all expectations and formulas - just as the sixties themselves were doing on almost every social, political, and artistic level.[43]

In addition, some have seen the shower as evidence of evoking past traumas, especially those involving the Nazi atrocities of World War II. Some commentators have claimed, for instance, that "the aesthetic of *Psycho*'s shower scene evokes images of the prototypical victim of the Holocaust gas chamber" and that, in the interpretation of Kevin Gough-Yates, the "sequence relates to the whole social guilt of mass murder and the propensity to pretend it does not exist."[44] Robin Wood makes another connection:

> *Psycho* is one of the key works of our age. Its themes are of course not new… but the intensity and horror of their treatment and the fact that they are grounded in sex belong to the age that has witnessed on the one hand the discoveries of Freudian psychology and on the other the concentration camps. I do not think I am being callous in citing the camps in relation to a work of popular entertainment… But one cannot contemplate the camps without confronting two aspects of their 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.[45]

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[43] Skal, *The Monster Show*, 378.
[44] Picart, "Horror and the Holocaust," 210. Caroline J. S. Picart and David A. Frank also argue that *Psycho*'s shower scene had a direct influence on Spielberg's shower scene in *Schindler's List* (1993), which they believe should also be classified as a horror film.
[45] Quoted in Thompson, *The Moment of Psycho*, 146-147.

The all too human capacity for evil marks Norman Bates as the iconic monster of the era. He didn't arrive from outer space or from the misty Gothic past. He was a human killer whose murderous instincts could be understood through ordinary psychology (at least the film's version of the science). Mankind's most feared monster is, in the end, itself. We are our own worst enemy. Even the Norman's name is suggestive. Noël Carroll believes Norman stands for *Nor-man*, meaning that he is "neither man nor woman but both. He is son and mother. He is of the living and the dead. He is both the victim and the victimizer. He is two persons in one. He is abnormal, that is, because he is interstitial."[46] This duality harkens back to Wood's assessment of abuser and abused. However, perhaps more useful is Nickel's assessment where he suggests that Norman stands for *normal*: "Norman represents an everyday person whom we find, in the journey of the film, to have an abnormally dark side. The paranoid scenario in the film is about the dark side of seeming everymen."[47] Norman's crimes are monstrous, yes, but just like the seemingly unassuming Ed Gein, perhaps what is most disturbing about him is just how damned ordinary he otherwise is. This helps to understand the effectiveness of the film, for "if there was a crucial edge in the casting, it was that both Perkins and Leigh were appealing, and like people from next door."[48] Both victim and perpetrator are us. *Psycho*, therefore, "enables us to confront the fact that this Monstrous Other, Norman Bates, lurks within each of us, with our voyeuristic and violent impulses."[49]

Mental illness and psychiatry were subjects of great interest in postwar America, especially as soldiers returned home from an environment of extreme stress and trauma. There was also, more significantly with regard to *Psycho*, a movement towards deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill. Nazi euthanasia practices gave pause to Americans and led them to examine their own mistreatment or neglect of mental patients. Photo essays in *Life* magazine, such as "Bedlam 1946," and the 1948 film *The Snake Pit*, based on

[46] Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 39.
[47] Nickel, "Horror and the Idea of Everyday Life," 25.
[48] Thompson, *The Moment of Psycho*, 19.
[49] Picart, "Horror and the Holocaust," 217.

the semi-autobiographical novel by Mary Jane Ward, depicted the horrid conditions of asylums. The film, in particular, led to reforms in the American institutional system.[50] Norman references the negative view towards institutionalization when Marion innocently suggests he have his mother committed, and responds defensively, "What do you know about caring? Have you ever seen the inside of one of those places? The laughing, and the tears, and the cruel eyes studying you? My mother there?" Mental illness suddenly seemed far more prevalent than before, or at least more readily acknowledged within public discourse. By 1963 American psychiatrist Karl Menninger could declare, "Gone forever is the notion that the mentally ill person is an exception. It is now accepted that most people have some degree of mental illness at some time, and many of them have a degree of mental illness most of the time."[51] As Norman puts it more simply to Marion, "We all go a little mad sometimes. Haven't you?"

"You make respectability sound disrespectful"

If *Psycho* had only played upon the fears of human violence and insanity, it would have been enough. Yet Bloch's story and Hitchcock's adaptation play into other more subtle contemporary anxieties. The fifties was a decade marked by economic prosperity and conspicuous consumerism. One's status could be easily read by the suburban home and appliances on display. However, the pressures of keeping up with this capitalist race proved to be stressful and burdensome for many. *Psycho* explores economic anxieties through its two main characters, even from the opening scene of Marion and her boyfriend, Sam. The camera pans through their window into a drab rented room just after they've had sex. The conversation quickly turns to money problems and respectability, which Marion desires. Sam says that he is "all for" respectability, "but it requires patience, temperance, with a lot of sweating out. Otherwise though, it's just hard work." He is currently in financial straits due to alimony payments and is living in a room behind a

[50] Cynthia Erb. ""Have You Ever Seen the Inside of One of Those Places?": *Psycho*, Foucault, and the Postwar Context of Madness," *Cinema Journal* 45, no. 4 (2006): 45-63.
[51] "Menninger's Thoughts on Mental Illness, Freud, War," *Associated Press*, July 18, 1990, https://www.apnews.com/9b1f6df687fedbe000e64d15bdd35ce1

hardware store, and this is keeping the two from marrying and fulfilling the societal expectations that their intimacy demands. Thompson makes the point clearly:

> And here we need to stress one quite remarkable thing: an American film has begun (in the famously developing city of Phoenix - a miracle of new urban life) in which the hopes and desires of two mature people are overshadowed by lack of money and social freedom. Look at a hundred other films from the '50s and you will not find the same cramped air. As a rule, the rooms are larger and brighter than they would be in reality, waiting to be filled by the hopes and energies of the era. Most films of the '50s are secret ads for the American way of life. *Psycho* is a warning about its lies and limits.[52]

It is the desire for social conformity - to become a wife with a home - and the respect which accompanies it that motivates Marion to steal the money. When she comes across Norman, she finds that economic anxieties exist in the countryside as well as within the city. The Bates Motel has fallen on hard times as the highway has moved customers away. Norman and Marion talk of being in traps. When Norman says he doesn't mind it anymore, Marion says he should. He responds, "Oh, I do - but I say I don't." The two characters serve as stand-ins for Americans who felt trapped by circumstances and expectations, though few at the time were willing to admit their feelings.

The modern world also bred new anxieties. Cities were crowded but impersonal. New highways not only moved people away from traditional centers but also isolated them within their own cars, away from the elbow-rubbing of public transit. The sought after suburban home was separated from its neighbors, and frequently the picket fence served as divider both functionally and symbolically. This had negative effects, for "unlike either the urban neighborhood or the rural farm, the suburban home was founded on its separation from both the world of work and from the world of others… Having achieved domestic seclusion, however, the suburbanite was seen as both isolated and confined."[53] Bloch drew on the disquieting suspicion that such

[52] Thompson, *The Moment of Psycho*, 24.
[53] Phillips, *Projected Fears*, 66.

settings cultivate, for he "places his novel within the context of the modern world, a world composed of isolated strangers who know little of one another, a world in which people are unpredictable and hence potential threats."[54] These fears are essential to the film, and it is for this reason that "*Psycho* is the keystone of modern horror, articulating the dread of ordinary people feeling trapped and immobilized in a world otherwise full of rapid change."[55] It reveals that we can never truly know a person, that each person we come across can have a hidden existence - potentially vile - that they keep behind closed doors. For instance, Marion had worked for her employer for seventeen years and had earned his confidence, thus he never believed she would have taken the money he had entrusted to her. Additionally, when the sheriff is approached regarding Norman as a subject of suspicion, he thinks he knows the young man well enough that he can call him on the phone and take him at his word. *Psycho*, in essence, reveals that "the idea of community is hollow."[56] The seclusion promised by suburbia also came with its own anxieties, as shown through Norman's story. As Phillips writes, "The Bates family and their creepy Gothic home suggest the reality lying behind the optimistic veneer of suburbia. The family, left in isolation, becomes twisted and distorted."[57] Ed Gein served as an extreme example. Perhaps the often dreamed of "house in the country" isn't so appealing a prospect after all.

It is little wonder, then, that the theme of surveillance would play such a large role in a film which exploits fears of The Other in our fellow man, especially in the context of Cold War anxieties. This spying is shown to deal "will almost all aspects of society."[58] The act of watching and being watched took on a new dimension in American homes in the fifties as more households began gathering around television sets. Suburbia, as noted above, was a new concept, and the rules and expectations were therefore unclear. Television shows set in that environment, in essence, allowed suburbanites to watch idealized depictions of themselves. Phillips drives the point home: "Television

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[54] Mark Jancovich, *Rational Fears: American Horror in the 1950s* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), 257
[55] Skal, *The Monster Show*, 378.
[56] Thompson, *The Moment of Psycho*, 155.
[57] Phillips, *Projected Fears*, 74.
[58] Jancovich, *Rational Fears*, 297.

functioned as a kind of mirror - albeit an unrealistically positive and optimistic mirror - into which suburban Americans could spend hours gazing. The narcissism of television was also, of course, voyeuristic. Television allowed families to spy through the window of other people's lives, seeing their dramas and tragedies, their foibles and follies."[59] *Psycho* is replete with examples of spying and voyeurism. Marion is a character seemingly under continual surveillance - from city life which can view her at her desk through the large windows where she works, to the lustful gaze of the wealthy Tom Cassidy, to the patrolman in mirrored sunglasses who trails her, to finally Norman spying on her through a peephole as she undresses. Thompson takes it further, suggesting that "even as the picture ended - with the whole thing made clear; too clear, perhaps - there was another face gazing back at us, grinning or enduring. A face that knew we were watching, with a mind sensitive or cunning enough to know that maybe the whole thing had been about watching."[60]

The trend toward suburbanization went hand-in-hand with the primacy of the idealized vision of the nuclear family. Through this search for security, however, new fears were discovered. Eric Avila writes that:

> Suburbanization… inspired a cultural emphasis on the stability and coherence of the nuclear family. The primacy of the detached, single-family dwelling provided a space in which postwar Americans could cherish their idealization of the nuclear family… Yet the concerted attempt to preserve the primacy of the nuclear family faced many obstacles. Communists, homosexuals, and racial minorities, for example, were viewed as dangers not so much to the individual or to the society at large, but rather to the stability and coherence of the American family.[61]

For *Psycho*, however, the threat to the American family comes not from without, but from within. Norman, after all, committed matricide after finding his mother in bed with her lover. He could certainly be seen as an example of

[59] Phillips, *Projected Fears*, 68.
[60] Quoted in Picart, "Horror and the Holocaust," 217.
[61] Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 100.

the juvenile delinquency which so spooked fifties' popular culture: a young man unhinged - Ed Gein in the boyish body of Charles Stockweather, who had murdered his girlfriend's parents and strangled her two-year-old sister. Family values, indeed.

"A boy's best friend is his mother"

However, Bloch and Hitchcock turn to another contemporary anxiety to explain Norman's insanity: that of the persona which occupies and ultimately dominates his psyche - Mother. While many look back at the fifties as an era which revered the mother figure and the mother's role in raising children, the cult of domesticity is really a product of an earlier era. Looking upon mothers as the ideal cultivator of patriot sons had long since passed, replaced within the war years by malicious suspicion and condemnation. Instead, psychologists of the 1950s "warned against the 'Momism' that would result from sexually frustrated mothers who would turn their sons into passive weaklings, 'sissies,' potential homosexuals, 'perverts,' or easy prey for the communists."[62] Stephanie Coontz, writing in *The New York Times*, explains further:

> Stay-at-home mothers were often portrayed as an even bigger menace to society than career women. In 1942, in his best-selling "Generation of Vipers," Philip Wylie coined the term "momism" to describe what he claimed was an epidemic of mothers who kept their sons tied to their apron strings, boasted incessantly of their worth and demanded that politicians heed their moralizing.
>
> Momism became seen as a threat to the moral fiber of America on a par with communism. In 1945, the psychiatrist Edward Strecher argued that the 2.5 million men rejected or discharged from the Army as unfit during World War II were the product of overprotective mothers...
>
> According to the 1947 best seller "Modern Woman: The Lost Sex," two-thirds of Americans were neurotic, most of them made so by their mothers.
>
> Typical of the invective against homemakers in the 1950s and 1960s was a 1957 best seller, "The Crack in the Picture Window," which described suburban America as a "matriarchal society," with the average husband "a woman-bossed,

[62] Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 102.

> inadequate, money-terrified neuter" and the average wife a "nagging slob." Anti-mom rhetoric was so pervasive that even Friedan recycled some of this ideology in "The Feminine Mystique" — including the repellent and now-discredited notion that overly devoted mothers turned their sons into homosexuals.[63]

Norman appears quintessentially symptomatic of many of these fears. It should be recognized, of course, that the audience never gets to meet his real mother, only the version of her which Norman has created in his mind. Therefore, the film should be viewed as an exploitation of Momism, and not as an actual condemnation of mothers.[64] Nevertheless, his version of Mother, according to Dr. Richmond after he has examined Norman, "was a clinging, demanding woman, and for years the two of them lived as if there was no one else in the world." Before the viewer is shown the twist, Norman comes off as a shy, sensitive, reclusive, slightly effeminate young man, who declares that "a boy's best friend is his mother." He seems entirely unthreatening to Marion (let alone to communists). At a time in which mothers were being characterized as dangerous to young men who must reject their influence to achieve normal hetersexual independence, Norman proves unable to do so. His failure is so complete, in fact, that he *becomes* Mother.

Significantly, Mother is the only actual mother in the film. Marion and her sister, despite being in their thirties, are childless. Marion mentions that her mother's picture is on the mantle, suggesting that she has passed on. The sheriff and his wife appear to also be without children - highly uncharacteristic of the idea of family in the late 1950s.[65] It is this and only this version of motherhood that the film wants us to focus upon, and that version is decidedly old fashioned, tapping into the changing mores of the time, especially those involving sex. Elaine Tyler May writes that "during the postwar years, sexual values as well as sexual behavior were in flux… these years marked the widespread acceptance of 'sexual liberalism,' which included tolerance for noncoital forms of premarital sex, some measure of 'intimacy

[63] Stephanie Coontz, "When We Hated Mom," *The New York Times*, May 7, 2011, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/08/opinion/08coontz.html
[64] Jancovich, *Rational Fears*, 300.
[65] Ibid., 296.

with affection,' a heightened expectation for erotic fulfillment in marriage, and an explosion of sexual images in the media."[66] The latter can he seen in Hitchcock's advertising for *Psycho*, which overtly emphasized sexuality. There is no sign of Norman (likely to protect the film's twist), yet one sees Janet Leigh in her underwear and John Gavin shirtless. If one did not read the print, they might be excused for thinking these were still images from a pornographic film. Truly, the story does not appear to find its fears in sexual feelings, but rather in their repression. It reveals characters who, like Marion and Sam, feel that they must bear the burden of shame and hide their coitus in a rundown apartment, or like Norman, whose sexual attraction to Marion drives Mother to killer her. Indeed, Mother is the personification of traditional prudery, as when her voice carries from the Bates house as she chastises Norman, "No! I tell you no! I won't have you bringing strange young girls in here for supper - by candlelight, I suppose, in the cheap, erotic fashion of young men with cheap, erotic minds… I refuse to speak of disgusting things, because they disgust me! Do you understand, boy?" Hitchcock gives us architectural indicators to reinforce this, making Mother's domain the old Gilded Age mansion - a representation of old fashioned values and sentiment - while Norman finds respite in his cramped office at the modern motel (his room in the mansion is like a child's room, once again recalling fears of Momism). Visually, the vertical mansion on the hill dominates the horizontal motel, just as Mother dominates Norman. Just as Hitchcock was pushing at film sensors, so the film seems to be warning audiences against the moral guardians among them.

"He was always bad"

Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* assaulted audiences not only with a knife in a shower, but with their own fears. It tapped into the anxieties surrounding violence, financial stress, security, familial relationships, and changing sexual attitudes. The film inspired future directors in the horror genre, both for what it did and didn't do. It showed that America was ready for on-screen violence, that audiences desired acts more graphic and gruesome to satiate their

[66] May, *Homeward Bound*, 102.

morbid curiosities and to confront their own fears about death and violence. Countless imitators followed, including Francis Ford Coppola's first full directorial effort, *Dementia 13* (1963), and helped give birth to the slasher and *gialli* subgenres. It also served to inspire other filmmakers to tackle fears of rural America, such as Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), which serves to represent "the inexhaustible rural slasher genre that has done so much to make the American hinterland a gothic haunted house for paranoids on the road."[67] Like Norman Bates, the character of Leatherface was also based loosely upon Ed Gein. John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) makes direct reference to *Psycho*, naming Dr. Loomis after the character of Sam Loomis and casting Janet Leigh's daughter in the lead role. Yet these directors were as much inspired by as frustrated by Hitchcock's work. Many believed that he diminished the film's power by over-explaining Norman at the end (which is also in the novel).[68] Peter Bogdanovich, for instance, who had felt "raped" upon seeing the film in 1960, purposefully did not give his killer a motive in his 1968 horror film, *Targets*, in direct rebellion against the esteemed director.[69]

Whatever its possible faults, *Psycho* and Hitchcock's follow-up, *The Birds* (1963), resonated with an American culture in transition in the 1960s. Nickel states that "these films initiate a new era of the horror genre in contemporary film, and each epitomizes different strands of that genre. The films are landmark horror films in part because, unlike some of their predecessors, they offer no moral reassurance that humans can dispel or effectively fight against the threats they represent."[70] This futility characterizes modern horror (or New Horror), notable for using familiar settings and demonstrating that evil can exist in even the most civilized minds. It showed, too, that evil can exist without explanation.[71] The enemy may not come from beyond, but from within. Hitchcock helped to take horror to the next step by showing America a vision of itself through a lens darkly. A

[67] Thompson, *The Moment of Psycho*, 126.
[68] Zinoman, *Shock Value*, 31.
[69] Ibid., 43.
[70] Nickel, "Horror and the Idea of Everyday Life," 19.
[71] Zinoman, *Shock Value*, 208.

historical analysis of the film reveals a culture struggling to reconcile expectations with reality and losing faith in its own optimistic narrative. The belief in community and cooperation that marked American horror films of fifties crumbled into the disunity and defeat of sixties horror films such as *The Last Man on Earth* (1964) and *Night of the Living Dead* (1968).[72] America, like Norman, was going through a crisis of identity, struggling between traditional conservatism and liberal change. And like his victims, there were bodies in the swamps.

[72] An Italian production but based on the American novel *I Am Legend* (1954) and starring American actor Vincent Price.