Chapter 11
‘If Thine Eye Offend Thee...’: Psycho and the Art of Infection

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Once all the narrative surprises of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) have been discovered and its more obvious emotional provocations understood, I find that the most potent sources of my uneasiness while viewing it are still unaccounted for. Discomfort with this work is, in my experience, an endlessly renewable response; it is like a slowly spreading stain in the memory. The film feels as stifled and stifling as the indecipherable mind of its protagonist, Norman Bates. Not only does Psycho contain no point of release for the viewer – it also remains unclear what precisely the viewer expects (or needs) to be released from. *Psycho* offers a number of gestures of release – a snarling tow chain cramming a vehicle out of a swamp, Marion’s slowly upraised arm as she sits in the tub after the shower stabbing – which turn out to be no release at all. In the latter episode, for example, Hitchcock caresses us, in the dying woman’s presence, with a hope of recovery, then immediately crushes it out as Marion extends her arm beseeingly to us (why don’t you do something?), clutches the shower curtain and collapses to the floor. Marion’s gesture to save herself answers our felt need, then instantly turns that need against us. Part of Hitchcock’s complex achievement in the film is gradually to deprive us of our sense of what ‘safe ground’ looks like or feels like.

*Psycho* properly belongs in the company of such works as Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘Berenice’ and Georges Bataille’s *Histoire de l’œil*. These narratives, in addition to achieving their respective forms of pornographic intensity by impersonally rendered shocks, also attach the same obsessive significance to the eye as metaphor. Metaphor rather than object: the eye asserts its value and power chiefly through its ‘migration toward other objects’, as Roland Barthes has suggested in his essay on Bataille’s *Histoire*. The true content of the narratives has much less to do with the fate of characters than with the fate of an image – the eye – as it undergoes repeated metamorphoses. Perhaps because the eye seems to represent identity simultaneously at its point of fullest concentration and maximum vulnerability, it naturally functions, in works so deeply concerned with aggression, as the principal locus of metaphoric transformation and exchange. The eye, after all, is the ultimate goal for any act of violation; it is the luminous outward sign of the private soul one wishes to smudge with depravity. But the eye is also profoundly linked with repression, and here it becomes threatening to the violator as well. Everything from the realm of experience that has proved damaging to the self, that has inflicted psychic wounds, has been channelled through the eye. Inevitably, the eye will be the vehicle of recurrence.

In Poe’s ‘Berenice’, there is an effort to limit the eye’s potency by treating it as though it were inexpressive to the point of blankness. ‘The eyes [of Berenice] were lifeless, and
lustreless, and seemingly pupilless, and I shrank involuntarily from their glassy stare to the contemplation of the thin and shrunken lips." The narrator flees from the overwhelmingly oppressive presence of the eye, persuading himself in the process that the eye cannot see whatever it is that the narrator himself is afraid to see, that is, what he is struggling to repress. In his desire to avoid Berenice’s gaze, however, he begins to fix his attention on her mouth, which instantly acquires the characteristics of a substitute eye. The mouth becomes an organ of intellect, whose teeth are oddly endowed with the eye’s sensitive and sentient power. As Daniel Hoffman has pointed out, Poe requires us to consider, perhaps for the first time, the ways in which mouth and eye resemble each other. Each is an orifice of the body, surrounded by lips or lids which seem to open and close by a will of their own. Each is lubricated by a fluid of its own origin, and each leads inward... toward the mysterious interior of the living creature. The eye and mouth also take on the attributes of the ‘opening’ that most frightens the narrator (and, in all likelihood, the author as well), and that forms the content of his repression: the vaginal orifice. The mind has made the latter unthinkable by confusing its properties with the mouth’s. The vagina, too, is furnished with teeth that demand to be removed (‘long, narrow, and excessively white, with the pale lips writhing about them’). In ‘Berenice’ the eye’s transformations can be construed entirely as an effort to block the passage of forbidden material to the conscious mind. With the sort of hideously perverse logic that we encounter in Poe’s most distressing tales, the eye must turn into the thing it dreads in order to be spared the sight of it.

Georges Bataille’s Histoire de l’œil may appear, at first, to offer a less suitable analogue for the workings of Psycho than Poe’s ‘Berenice’. Hitchcock resembles Poe in his relentless preoccupation with repressed material. The spread of a massive, buried hurt or wound seems, as in Poe, to paralyse Hitchcock’s narrative from within, finally rendering all of its wary, questing-for-order surface activity beside the point. Bataille, by contrast, foregrounds his horror, coolly displays it in a naked state, and plays with it at close range, like an intimate. The sordid and vicious so fully define the surface action of Histoire that the reader can’t easily feel that this surface is potentially a screen for something worse. Bataille’s story, nevertheless, strikes me as blocked in much the same way that Poe’s and Hitchcock’s are. His central overdetermined image—the eye, once again—feels like the only solid thing, the only living variable in a world of corpulating phantoms. (The characters dwell in a world so frail that mere breath might have changed us into light.) Eggs and their metaphoric substitutes—eggs, a saucer of milk, a bull’s testicle—are visually ‘there’ for us in a way that nothing else is. Bataille imagines a world in which the eye, divorced from a specific personality and body, can pursue a life of pure objecthood, witnessing with pristine detachment acts of staggering vileness. Even when the eye becomes the focus of these acts (to be caressed, licked, pissed upon, punctured), it somehow always seems to float free in the end, aloof and intact. Bataille’s repeated emphasis on the slicing and spilling open of eyes has the quality of a magician’s demonstration: however mutilated the ceremonial object appears to be, it is perfectly restored in an instant. Though continually assaulted, the ‘eye’ of the narrative can never go blind.

punishment inflicted on the eye is not only a means of severing someone’s ties with the world (as in the case of Oedipus); it can also be a way of reducing one’s consciousness to the status of an object, so that one must learn to deal with consciousness entirely in object terms. The torture of the eye can mark a refusal of inwardness. One can’t get past the literal eye, Bataille insists. Nothing stands behind it. Bataille’s psychical strategy is to make his inner world so ossified and remote that no living experience, no emotionalised thread of memory can adhere to it. When Bataille addresses us in what we are meant to accept as his own voice in the final section of Histoire de l’œil, he disturbs us more thoroughly than at any point in his previous litanies of the monstrous. He recounts memories of his childhood—an utterly frozen landscape—as though they belonged to someone else. His hideous family ordeals are assigned the same value, and given precisely the same sheen of obscenity, as the events of the preceding narrative. Bataille’s language refuses at every point to possess what it touches: it is truly a dead language. One finds it almost inconceivable that it could have been formed from the inside, that a life could speak through it.

Tonally, Bataille’s endeavour to empty himself through indifference approximates (in function and effect) the austere, insulating wit of Hitchcock’s Psycho. The best account of Bataille’s attraction to the possibilities of indifference occurs in a passage from his study of Manet’s paintings: ‘Manet’s was supreme indifference, effortless and stinging; it scandalized but never deigned to take notice of the shock it produced... The stuff indifference is made of—we might say its intensity—is necessarily manifested when it enters actively into play. It often happens that indifference is revealed as a vital force, or the vehicle of a force otherwise held in check, which finds an outlet through indifference.’ Bataille’s Histoire aspires to show us the paradoxical vitality of an indifference without limits. This indifference might be said to commence at that hypothetical point in the life of an endless scream when the sound is so customary that it is no longer worthy of notice. Personal pain is generally regarded as the one area of experience to which insensibility cannot extend. If, like Bataille’s forever entranced character, Marcelle, we were to become so lost to our feelings that we had no way of ‘telling one situation from another’, we would still be alive to the shock of physical torment. It is this last bastion of aliveness that Bataille desires to level out. What Histoire’s narrator reports are agonies without personal dimensions, sensations that mimic those of misery but that somehow exist in a flat, calmed state. By granting pain a significance, by making any form of emotional concession to it, we only increase its power over us. Let us rather do life the appropriate disservice of denying to all of it the force of a lasting impression. Indifference alone rescues us from the humiliation of engagement.

Wit is Hitchcock’s less conspicuous means of announcing his indifference, his refusal to be engaged or soiled by his transactions with suffering. The persistent presence of wit in Psycho should not be mistaken, in the calmness of its operations, for a mitigation of brutality. Psycho’s wit is hard and deeply ingrown; it stays well below the surface of action, strangely unavailable (on a first viewing) to characters and audience alike. It is only with Norman’s final speech that the director’s mode of joking seems to merge with the awareness of a figure within the film’s world. When the mysteriously mocking voice of Mrs Bates at last reaches us, we cannot avoid the feeling that in its ironically ‘vacant’ depravity it is the one voice we have heard that genuinely expresses the film’s tone: ‘It is sad when a mother has to speak the words that condemn her own son.’ Bataille once wrote that ‘decent people have gelded eyes. That’s why they fear lewdness.’ Mrs Bates,
whose sockets are both full and hollow, directly scrutinises us (the viewers) with the gilded eyes of decency. She speaks quietly to us of a mother’s duty to put an end to a bad son while we are confounded by the sight of her effortlessly inhabiting the lost son’s body. (Yet another case of a character’s gaze turning into the image it is forbidden to see.)

One is not really permitted to go anywhere with this image, or with the speech that accompanies it. Everything about them is sealed in, like the dead eye ‘soaked with tears of urine’ that peers out of Simone’s womb near the close of Histoire. We are almost beyond the language of ‘implications’ here. Mrs Bates’s speech, imposed on Norman’s rigid features, is offered as the impenetrable punch line of the joke that is Psycho. In the widest possible sense, we are left in the dark.

For Hitchcock, who is as sedate and comfortable in his chair as Mrs Bates is in hers, wit always has the right to assert its innocence. It provides the inner life with a means of guarding itself absolutely in the very act of unveiling. Wit opens a place for the self to stand, composed and invulnerable, at a vast remove from any sense of pain that could damage it or spoil its game. Wit allows one to punish to one’s heart’s content, in the manner of Mrs Bates, and yet remain blameless. It is the public guarantee that a crime or sin (regardless of appearances) has not quite been committed. The underlying content of art that compulsively seeks out some form of ‘joke container’ for the expression of disorder may be understood as ‘the holding back from things’, a phrase Sanford Schwartz has recently applied to the early paintings of de Chirico. The pictures are about waiting, keeping oneself clean and untouched. The undercoating of nightmarish dread in them comes from someone who fears making a certain move.

The fear of making a move is pervasive in Hitchcock’s work, but it achieves special prominence in Psycho, where neither the characters nor the imagery seem to possess any alternative to immobility. Perhaps it is the complete dissociation of authorial self from an imagery that is struggling to express it that gives to Psycho, ‘Berenice’ and Histoire de l’œil their ‘infected’ character. The normal poetic activity of making metaphors becomes precarious in these words because images have somehow lost the capacity for internal growth. An image cannot build beyond itself, provoking new connections with the ‘world at large’ when it is entirely cut off from the impulse, desire or need that called it into being. Instead of widening its range of associations, it can only replicate itself obsessively, craving the origin that is denied it, futilely attempting to burrow inward. The artist cannot neither separate himself from his dominant image nor see it plainly enough to penetrate it. Art that lacks all mobility, as this art does, can only fester in the place where it’s stuck – and hence communicates by infection, spreading the mess that can’t be gotten rid of to whatever it touches. Bataille, Poe and Hitchcock cannot – in the works we’re examining – give their oppressive metaphors any outward, public meaning except that of shock; but they are equally blocked from carrying the ‘eye’ image inside. It is the interior, above all, from which this image is in flight. Like Scottie Ferguson, standing traumatised at the edge of the Mission Bell Tower in the final shot of Hitchcock’s Vertigo (1958), unable to take a single step forward or back, these narratives can only articulate the hopeless stasis that has engendered them.

Having made some progress in establishing the nature of the metaphor we are concerned with, I will try to show how it operates in the shower-murder sequence of Psycho.

Once more we are confronted with a narrative situation in which a vicious, morally appalling act (murder this time), that would seem to demand our full emotional engagement, is subordinated to an eye’s encounter with visual analogues. Why are we encouraged to notice, while Marion Crane is being stabbed, that the shower rose, Marion’s screaming mouth and finally the drain into which her blood flows all correspond, at some level, to the victim’s concealed eye? In a culminating extreme close-up, this eye contemplates us with the alert fixity of death, while a false tear, formed by a drop of shower water on Marion’s face, announces that emotion (of any kind) has no further part to play here. The tear might as well be a fly: nothing is but what is. Why does Hitchcock linger so long over this image, and why does the match cut between the drain and the corpse’s eye seem so conclusively to define the imaginative centre of the film?

Oddly enough, Marion does not appear to lose her place in the world of Psycho after being brutally slain. Instead, one has the feeling that she has at long last found her proper relationship to that world. When Hitchcock’s camera seems to emerge from the darkness within the drain through Marion’s eye, and then cases back further to reveal her twisted head insensibly pressed against the floor, the camera comes as close as it ever will to caressing the object placed in front of it. We are being invited – before we have had any chance to recover our equilibrium – to participate in the camera’s eerie calm by looking at things in the ways that the camera instructs us. How evenly dead this girl is. How perfectly and compliantly she harmonises with the other blank surfaces in her environment. Turbulence has surprisingly given way to an order, a settled view, that nothing can put a stop to.

The camera elects to remain in a room that is temporarily deprived of any human presence. Its purpose in doing so is to tranquillise this setting by invoking an aesthetic response to it. The fearful disarrangement of the bathroom space that horror has just visited is not simply curtailed, it is denied. By the time Norman rushes into the motel room, discovers the body and turns away from it in panic-filled disbelief, his response is already disproportionate to ours. His anxiety subtly registers as an overreaction. Norman’s agitated gestures fly in the face of the hypnotic stillness and order that the gliding camera of the previous scene proposed as normative, reasonable.

For a number of years now, the standard means of justifying the shower murder to viewers who find it repellent has been V. F. Perkins’s argument that Hitchcock’s skilful montage succeeds in ‘aestheticizing’ its cruelty. After all, we never actually see the knife penetrating Marion’s flesh; we are only required to imagine it. Clearly this line of defense needs to be re-examined. There seems to be an underlying assumption that an aesthetic effect automatically acts as a cleansing agent, or as a guarantee of moral discretion in the creative process. But as we have seen in the case of ‘Berenice’ and Histoire de l’œil, even the most unsavoury, abhorrent imagery can be made to yield a powerful aesthetic impression.

Before drawing any conclusions about the formal lucidity of Hitchcock’s conception of the shower sequence, one would do well to consider the massive weight that this episode achieves within the total narrative structure. In Robert Bloch’s potboiler novel, from which Psycho was adapted, Marion’s death – far from being the central action in the plot – is matter-of-factly reported in a single, terse sentence. If it is appropriate to
point out that Bloch made nothing of an event that Hitchcock responded to with astonishing imaginative intensity, it is also appropriate to inquire why Hitchcock made so much of it. Does it seem either dramatically feasible or fitting that a female protagonist whose status in the narrative never rises above that of pitiable victim should be disposed of in so extravagant, prolonged and visually intoxicating a fashion? Is Marion's shabby, useless death a proper occasion for a virtuoso set piece? Surely an abbreviated, less conspicuously artful presentation would honour the victim more, if the meaning (in human terms) of what transpired figured at all in the artist's calculations.

The consequence of Hitchcock's aestheticised rendering is, instead, to enlarge the minutiæ, in the manner of a pornographer prowling around flailing torsos, seeking out details to close in on. Hitchcock wants to make the act of slicing wholly legible, as opposed to merely visible. To show the knife piercing flesh might cause the viewer to avert his gaze. Hitchcock designs the stabbing to be as salaciously riveting as possible. We are meant – in fact, positively encouraged – to see it all, both what he shows and what he refrains from showing. The blanks that his editing leaves can only be filled in one way. Marion's degradation is increased immeasurably by our awareness that nothing in the moment-to-moment scrutiny of her ordeal is random or accidental. The entire murder feels densely inhabited by the director himself. What are we to make of his calm determination to extract a kind of classical shapeliness and beauty from this broad, unbeautiful pour of chaos?

It is impossible to understand the vision that Psycho as a whole is expressing in any terms other than those used in the shower sequence. But, as I have to demonstrate, Marion's murder refuses to accommodate any of the humanised or aesthetically dignified meanings one would be inclined to project onto it. I am sure that Hitchcock was not trying to deceive us when he said that the shower sequence had no meaning, as far as he was concerned. He placed it in that strangely apotic realm of 'pure cinema', where images, like poems, should not mean but be. For an image simply 'to be', in Hitchcock's terms, it must be acknowledged as something with no depth – the screened image is both literally and ontologically flat. As Garrett Stewart has suggested in his essay on Keaton's Sherlock, Jr. (1924), the most formidable illusion of movie space is that we seem to be looking into a frame 'past which is recess and perspective'. Hitchcock's style is predicated on the belief that the surface of a screened image is absolute. It never yields to anything 'within'. The only interior it has is supplied by the mind of the spectator.

For Hitchcock the passage of material from life to the cinema involves an immediate (and total) subtraction of unmanageable elements. Film is not a medium for introspection. Disordered activity of any sort has no place there. Hitchcock conceives the act of building a patterned sequence of images as a means of asserting control over a 'problem' without ever being required to examine it. In designing a series of shots, the mind can limit itself to lateral motion. There is no need to 'look down', to probe past the image surface. One can always substitute further complications of formal arrangement for the distasteful messiness of analysing one's position. Joseph Stefano, the screenwriter of Psycho, memorably described Hitchcock directing a nude model in the shower sequence. He stood on a platform above the shower in his dark business suit, a model of rectitude and composure. One sensed that Alfred Hitchcock does not stand in front of naked women, and that he has precisely this feeling about himself, so that for him she was not naked, and that was that.

Arranging a composition for the camera is the way to demonstrate that its content is manageable. And the only level on which this content has to be seen and accounted for is the level of form. It is possible, therefore, for Hitchcock to work in the very midst of his obsessive fears and unacceptable desires, yet not be confronted by them. His negotiations with obsession are never carried on from the inside. He has only to 'frame' his anxiety, flatten it into an image, for it to be held in place. Viewers, of course, as he well knows, will very likely 'dirty' themselves as they imagine the experience that he has at no point felt obliged to touch. They cannot keep the images at a regulated distance (and thus handle them with the proper delicacy) because they did not control the process that brought them into being. Control, as always for Hitchcock, is to be understood here as the ability not to internalise. However much he may be stirred by his proximity to the extremes of sadism in the shower killing, he is persuaded that the search for visual order is a permanent safeguard against fixation, and that he can endlessly brood upon the separate details of the action while keeping his perceptions chaste. Hitchcock's decision to link the 'eye' throughout the shower sequence with as many other ovals as possible derives from his conviction that any painful subject can be stabilised if one locates a point of concentration apart from the 'thing itself'. There is invariably something distinct from the business of suffering to claim one's attention.

But eyes and eye surrogates, as the examples of Poe and Bataille make clear, are never safe resting places. In fact, the three Hitchcock films that seem to me the purest (and most extreme) embodiments of his imaginative concerns (Rear Window (1954), Vertigo and Psycho) make an affliction of the eye their ascendant theme. Vertigo's credits present us with a mask-like female face in which only the nervously moving eyes betray any distress. The camera then proceeds to move into one of these eyes, passing mysteriously through the pupil and coming out 'behind' it – thus marking a path to which Hitchcock will return in Psycho. Only in the latter does he reverse his direction, as the dark drain 'proposes' a withdrawal from an eye that is dead. Interestingly, all of the eyes that matter in Psycho are counterparts of this dead eye - cruel, staring or frozen, they seem to hold only one expression. And eventually we discover that this single, ominous look, forever resurfacing like a figure in a nightmare, has belonged from the outset to Norman Bates.

Earlier, I suggested that Norman's voice at the end of Psycho is the only authentic voice we hear in the film. It is simultaneously revealed – at that instant when he finally meets the camera's gaze and looks directly at us – as possessing the only acceptable pair of eyes. The man whose stare has become an awful and limitless conjunction of emptiness is Psycho's one true seer. The hobby of this seer, one recalls, was taxidermy, which allowed him to conduct studies of birds to find out how eyes 'die' (or, as in his mother's case, fail to die – transformed into living wounds that the son must try to heal). The film as a whole is equally concerned with the process by which eyes surrender their identity (or life) to Norman. By a spectacular feat of absorption, Norman ultimately manages to contain the entire world of the film in his pitiless glare.

Psycho's next-to-last image is a dissolve of Norman's face into the mumified features of his mother, for a moment he seems to peer through the empty sockets in which his eyes are now imaginatively sealed. The dissolve could continue almost indefinitely,
however, because Hitchcock’s key imagery in the film is nearly all constructed on
the same principle: Mr. Lowery’s accusing glance that launches Marion’s flight by car; the
policeman’s sunglasses looming gigantic over her as she wakens from sleep; Marion,
throughout her nocturnal journey, peering toward us anxiously from behind the wheel
of her car as we share her thoughts. (At one point, when imaging Cassidy’s threat to
replace his stolen money ‘with her fine, soft flesh,’ she smiles in close-up, and her
expression hauntingly duplicates Norman’s final, mocking look.) Following Marion’s
introduction to Norman, we are shown the silent company of stuffed night birds that
‘watch’ Norman in his parlour, one of whose wings are extended so that it appears for-
ever in passage toward its prey; when Marion has left the parlour, we see Norman’s eye,
in mammoth close-up, intently fixed upon his hidden peephole—a large, dark, circular
gouge in the wall with a single point of light at the centre. (The hole—eye linkage clearly
prepares us for the comparison of eye and drain.) And as the shower sequence con-
cludes, there is a close-up of a toilet bowl flushing down a torn scrap of paper that
Marion doesn’t wish anyone to see. By this juncture, as we have already observed, the
eye is fully available for complex metamorphic exchanges with other objects. The toilet
bowl, like the drain, is yet another visual sign for the eye evacuating its contents.

Once Marion is dead, and Norman sets about eliminating all traces of her presence,
two additional eye metaphors emerge. Thus Hitchcock completes the series that began
with Norman at his peephole by circling back to him and, in effect, showing how Mar-
ion’s eye has resolved itself into his. There is an overhead close-up of the circular rim
and black interior of Norman’s pair as first his bloodied cleaning rags and then the mop
with which he has cleaned the sides of the tub are thrust into it. Here, and in the more
potent image that soon follows—the top of Marion’s car forming a ghostly white spot
in the middle of an encircling swamp—the hollow eye of the drain is replaced by more
clothed and retentive ovals: eyes filling up rather than emptying, but only with unwanted
things. Norman contrives to make whatever disturbs him disappear from sight, but
instead, like the vehicle suspended in the swamp, the objects of his anxiety look back at
him.

Norman relates to his field of vision as though it were somehow interchangeable with
the field of consciousness. (In this respect, he resembles Hitchcock.) The successful
manipulation of perception is taken to mean that the mind is under equally strict direc-
tion. Life, for Norman, has gradually been reduced to an endless tidying up of his barely
manageable visual space. His is forever devising fresh hiding places for his mother’s (and
his own) garbage. Anything that his mother judges depraved (i.e., anything provoking
strong desires in Norman—and mother always knows) must be dropped from the per-
ceptual frame. ‘Out of sight, out of mind’ is the chief article of faith in the Bates
household. If one thinks about it carefully, one realises that the dramatic situation in
Psycho literally dictates that Norman and his ‘mother’ can never see the same things at
the same time and never see them in the same way. They are constantly vying for pos-
session of the same visual field; whoever ‘sees’ at a given moment is empowered to make
an interpretation, but the meaning of the visual field alters radically as control of it shifts
back and forth. The question that I feel is necessary to consider is, where does Norman’s
vision go, where does his knowledge and desire hide during those intervals when he is
not permitted to absorb what his eyes perceive?

Norman’s extreme but eminently logical solution to his impossible filial bind is to
learn how to see and do the things that are forbidden to him without actually seeing
anything. That is to say, the fact of his presence and involvement in acts that are liter-
ally unthinkable for him is ‘dropped from the frame’. As his mother blindly wields the
knife, Norman’s eyes are somewhere else, trying to stay focused on what is decent. It is
doubly imperative then that he do a thorough cleaning job when something bad happens
because he must expunge the event from both public and personal view. As Norman
desperately suppresses his own powers of vision, he comes to believe that the work of
seeing has been taken over by the inert forms that fill his landscape. His closed
world has truly become a beast with a thousand eyes, whose sole end is to keep him
under surveillance.

Norman’s perception is restricted to the order he manages to maintain within his
frame. Beyond that increasingly close-at-hand point where order ceases, he encounters
a blank wall. But the various ‘holes’ he has filled for the sake of order—the swamp, the
fruit cellar, the parlour with its mounted birds, his mother’s corpse—have sprouted eyes
whose awareness is rooted in that ugly disorder Norman has gone to such pains to eradi-
cate. The blank space where Norman’s vision tapers off is the place where theirs begins:
‘they’ can see further because ‘they’ can see into things. And because Norman’s carefully
limited outer world has become hopelessly confused with his inner world, he expresses
any form of looking as a violation. As he tells Marion in his parlour, he knows what it
feels like to have ‘cruel eyes’ studying him. His survival, however, depends on his ability
to keep the perception of this undifferentiated other split off from his own. He cannot
allow himself to imagine, even for a moment, what it is those alien, impenetrable eyes
might know about him.

This aspect of Norman’s predicament helps to explain the omnipresence of mirrors
and reflections in Psycho. Beginning with Marion’s decision to steal $40,000, which she
arrives at while looking at herself in the mirror, almost every interior scene prominently
features a mirror that doubles as a character’s image, but that no one turns to face. In
Marion’s case, as James Naremore points out in his valuable Filmguide to Psycho,
the ability to confront her own image is lost after the theft.15 This is one of the many
ways in which Marion’s surrender to her ‘nameless urge’ serves to draw her ineluctably
into Norman’s frame of reference. After Marion is repeatedly shown attended by reflections
of herself that she does not acknowledge (in the bathroom of the used car lot, at the
motel registration desk and in the motel room itself), the pattern is given a sudden, dis-
quieting twist. While Marion is stationed in profile beside the motel’s dresser mirror,
Norman stands in for the reflection in the following series of shots. In Hitchcock’s
shot—countershot cutting between Norman and Marion, we notice that the profile views
of the two facing figures are perfectly symmetrical. Norman occupies the extreme right-
hand side of an imbalanced frame, Marion the extreme left-hand side in alternate shots:
mirror images.

Norman’s imprisonment in the midst of steadily more ominous reflections is shad-
owed forth in Marion’s situation at the motel. In the world of Psycho, whenever one
picture of the self cracks or is denied recognition, another more dangerous image must
form in its place. Inside the crack, so to speak. Marion refuses to look at herself, so
Norman will look for her. He will reflect her life by making it into a likeness of his own,
although he doesn’t understand (any more than she does) what this will entail. Once this life mirroring has commenced, it proceeds on a number of levels. Norman seems to stand in for Sam Loomis, Marion’s lover, as well as for her (the physical resemblance of the two men has been noted by many critics). The last, frustratingly inconclusive meeting of the two lovers is replayed in a more sombre key by Norman and Marion.

Sam Loomis, who is not strong enough to act upon his love (or whose love is not strong enough to require action), gives way to an even weaker Norman, whose emotional energies have been strangled and for whom ‘falling in love’ can only mean what it means to Scottie Ferguson in Vertigo: falling into the void at one’s centre. Norman’s eye for beauty is really an incurable appetite for nothingness. And yet strength of a certain kind exists in Norman. He is sufficiently strong to punish a desire for love that has no right to assert itself (mother says so) and nowhere to go. Unlike Sam, he will carry things through to an end point: if Marion can only threaten and confuse him as an image of love, she can be made to reflect him in some other way that will allow for a completing action.

Marion had stolen the money, as she sees it, because she chose to stake everything on love. She flees by car through the night, driving, she imagines, toward her love, but at some point in her journey passes ‘through the looking glass’ and ends up facing Norman instead, a ghastly inversion of that love. Then Hitchcock, having revealed the things that prevent love from becoming what it wants to be in the world of this film, discloses what is left for it to become. ‘On the right hand could slide the left glove’, as Robert Graves wrote in his poem ‘The Terraced Valley’, ‘Neat over-under.’

Norman’s courtship of Marion revives, in ghostly fashion, many of the gestures, conversational topics and objects of attention present in Psycho’s opening love scene – whatever filled the intervals between Sam and Marion’s dispirited, unsatisfying embraces. The meal that Marion ‘didn’t touch’ in the hotel (and that Mrs Bates wouldn’t permit her to touch in the intimate precincts of her household) is finally completed with Norman in the motel parlour. Both Sam and Norman are given a moment where they throw open a window in response to the felt pressure of Marion’s presence – Sam, out of discomfort with her talk of marriage; Norman, in his embarrassment at being alone with Marion in her bedroom. (The sudden, rasping sound of the venetian blinds as Sam jerks them up matches the sound and motion of the shower curtain being torn open.) Marion counters Sam’s suggestion that they leave the hotel together by pointing out that he hasn’t got his shoes on. These are the jokes of their final separation. Sam remains behind, and we last observe him standing motionless, staring down at his stocking feet. Just before Norman leaves Marion’s motel room to go up to the house to arrange for their private supper, he registers his guilty delight at her acceptance of his invitation by stammering instructions to get herself settled ‘and – and take off your wet shoes’. The removal of her shoes will serve to hold her there in the bedroom until his return – that is to say, in this particular bedroom, the site of all his secret ‘erotic investigations. For Norman, requesting a woman to take off any article of apparel signals a daring advance in intimacy; the mention of shoes is his nervous, shorthand approach to ‘Why don’t you slip into something more comfortable – and revealing’.

Later, in the parlour, Norman picks up the thread of Sam’s earlier talk about ‘traps’. Sam had described his life as a confinement within the ‘tiny back room’ of his hardware store. (After Marion’s death, Hitchcock provides a long-shot view of Sam at his desk in this room, from a camera positioned in the main doorway of the store. This shot neatly matches the hallway perspective of Norman seated at the kitchen table of the Bates’s mansion directly before the shower scene. The mammoth interior of this house visually dwarfs him; the only spaces that he feels free to occupy in his own person are ‘out of the way’ rooms behind the main living area.) Sam had also complained to Marion about having constantly to ‘swear for people who aren’t there’. In the parlour scene, Norman vastly extends the scope of Sam’s plight. ‘We scratch and claw, but only at the air, only at each other. And for all of it, we never budge an inch.’ There is no distinction to be made between ‘the air’ and ‘each other’. We want the world to at least double itself for us when seen through eyes of love, but it remains intractably single (whatever our delusions to the contrary). We are always much ‘further out’ than others think, to paraphrase a line of British poet Stevie Smith, ‘And not waving but drowning.’ The only movements we make that are truly answered are those we see in our mirrors. And this, too, is empty space; we are forever thrown back on ourselves, possessors of nothing.

The only fully spontaneous moment Sam and Marion have together – one in which Marion’s desperation is as much in evidence as her attachment to her lover – occurs when she runs towards Sam for an extended embrace in front of the large screen of a closed venetian blind. The next time Marion is placed before such a screen, it has become a shower curtain. Now it is Norman who is coming toward her, to be joined with Marion in a different kind of embrace. Touching and caressing have, of course, been the subverted element in Marion’s halting variation on Marion’s assignation with Sam. He has only managed to touch her nakedness with his eye. At last he presents himself to her without barriers – on her side of the curtain-screen – and enacts his ‘violent feeling’ for her in the only way possible for him.

From Marion’s standpoint, the shower (prior to the attack) is both a moral cleansing and an act of self-restoration. Afterwards, she will once again be able to meet her own gaze in the mirror. But as we have seen, Norman has replaced the image she turned away from. Having lost sight of herself once, while in the grip of compulsion, she is denied any chance to find her way back. In the course of her journey to Bates’s motel, she has had to escape from one distrustful, accusing face after another. ‘Who are you and what are you doing?’ is the unsung question in every conversation. And Marion could not begin to formulate an answer. Everything conspires to turn her world inside out. In this condition, she at last sights upon the sympathetic image of Norman Bates, someone whose look she is not afraid of. He offers to keep her company in the darkness. As she listens to him divulge the story of his barren life, he becomes more troubling, but at the same time she begins to recognise herself in his tormented presence (or thinks she does). She sees him as the instrument of her salvation: ‘This could be my life; I must not let it be.’ Having reached this understanding, Marion turns away from Norman, just as she withdrew from the uncomfortable figure regarding her in her mirror at home. But she is forced to confront this dim, hovering reflection one more time in the shower episode.

In Hitchcock’s exceptionally demanding metaphoric scheme, where the eye is the faculty for ‘unseeing’ and mirrors are present only so that they can be avoided, the shower murder, as I’ve previously argued, is the point of greatest metaphoric blockage, and consequently, greatest pressure for release. It is the place where Hitchcock, like Bataille and...
Poe (but equally like Norman and Marion), can neither separate himself from the image, nor see it plainly enough to penetrate it. Hitchcock goes to such extreme lengths to create the impression that Norman and Marion and Sam mirror each other because the world of Psycho is traumatically fixed; it has no capacity for enlargement. Everything in it seems to be formed at the point of rupture in Norman's vision – the blocked passage between his public self and 'lost' private self. This is the point at which nothing can ever be seen or taken in. In his brilliant study of metamorphosis in literature, The Gaping Pig, Irving Massey suggests that 'trauma, like art, develops at the point where imitation replaces action... We mimic what we cannot fight off.' The shocks in Psycho all seem to erupt from within, as they do in dreams, where characters form and reform under the pressure of a single image, and where all movement leads to the same place. ('And for all of it, we never budge an inch.')

I have already compared the shower curtain to the screen of the venetian blind in the hotel room. (And recall that Hitchcock's camera, anticipating Norman's shadow slowly advancing behind the curtain, introduced itself in Psycho by entering like a phantom behind the venetian blind and probing the dark opening of a eye-like window. This first descent into a vacant eye is the action that brings the film's world into focus.) The curtain also invites comparison with a mirror. Norman's dark silhouette serves as a mirror for Marion when she whirls to face it because all the unresolved elements in her experience seem to converge in it with hallucinatory force: the car windshield wiper making 'knife strokes' against the rain; the policeman's huge, disembodied head in dark glasses staring her awake that morning; the swooping owl in Norman's parlour; Norman's visible desire for her; his anxious, lonely eyes suddenly turning rigid and glowing as he leaned forward in his chair; her fear of being captured and exposed; and ultimately, ending at the place where she (and the film) began, her own body lying motionless (on a bed/bathroom floor), eyes fixed upon a man looming over her: Sam/Norman. Marion's recognition – that this death is meant for her and not anyone else, that all her confused strivings have been directed to this goal, which imitates her life and in which she fends off like a traumatic recollection – solves nothing, of course. It simply places her squarely on the hopeless ground she is doomed to occupy: 'Now I know where I am.' This is more than the viewer can say as the film's action comes to a dream-like halt with the death of its apparent subject, and then – inexplicably – continues.

When Hitchcock's camera finally relinquishes its hold on Marion, after fully expressing its fascination with her immobility, it moves out of the bathroom and over to Marion's night table, where her stolen money lies in a newspaper. The camera registers uncertainty about what its subject should now be; it does not appear to know what's looking for. This is an uncertainty shared by all of Psycho's remaining characters. Once Marion's theft, her guilt and the money itself have been eliminated as concerns of the film, Hitchcock contrives to keep the subject of Psycho physically absent and morally indefinable. It is pushed out of everyone's reach. No one, including Norman, is in possession of what is withheld. To the extent that it can be identified at all, Psycho's 'issue' becomes the silhouette behind the curtain – an image poised to shatter at the eye's moment of contact with it, like the double reflection that starts Marion's sister Lila during her search of Mrs Bates's bedroom. (As Lila turns to accost the woman behind her, what she discovers is her own distraught face in the looking glass.) Psycho's missing subject is perhaps best described as a figure glimpsed but never quite seen: a dim outline in a lighted upstairs window; the spectral imprint of a rigidly coiled form on a mattress. On a first viewing, we chiefly feel it as a threat of recurrence that is under no one's control.

The various subjective filters through which the search for answers is carried forward (Arbogast, Lila, Sam) seem to know less and less about the quality of dread that fills the air. Our only link with these characters is the act of searching, but they are only able to search for things that we know are not there. (Marion rolled up in a curtain; the money rolled up In newspaper.) They futilely retrace each other's steps and imitate each other's actions, without ever having the sense of what their eyes need to connect with. In effect, they are all the same character, existing only to pass through the rooms of the motel and house, exposing themselves to the disturbing features of a landscape that will never be made clear. This composite searcher belongs to the 'inside world' as surely as Norman Bates does. From Norman's side of the mirror, it is the stranger's search which poses the danger of uncontrollable repetition: it is the shadow of his trauma that seems to draw nearer with Arbogast's and Lila's furtive movements through his domain. They are closing off his mental exits, sealing him in. The only place for him to hide from the object of his dread is within the object itself: 'Hold me, mother; hold me tight. I'm afraid to go to sleep.' As long as mother is there to protect him, the dark places can't be opened. To quote Massey once again, trauma 'may be a thought that has never been killed, that has never been set off from the self.' Norman's murders are attempts to eliminate a thought that must not take form. Killing is, paradoxically, the deepest place of forgetting.

It remains to inquire why so many of the films made by Hitchcock in this period place the problems opposing the characters so fully in the realm of mind, but out of the mind's reach. Hitchcock's customary starting point in a film project was a situation in which outer circumstances had somehow passed out of one's control. The emphasis shifted decisively in Vertigo, where inner circumstances become the unmanageable factor. As anyone who has studied Hitchcock's style is aware, the basic building block in his narrative structures is always the reacting look of his characters. Major scenes are typically conceived as an intricate juxtaposition of glances with various objects and figures to which the perceiver has a clearly defined emotional relation. Hitchcock generates suspense by uniting the viewer's gaze with a character who, for some reason, is prevented from seeing his situation whole. Characters are menaced either by details they've failed to see or by the sheer mass of what they do see. The audience generally has no difficulty in reading a character's look because they know what to make of the objects set before them; they understand why the character finds those things important.

In Vertigo Hitchcock is no longer dealing with 'transparent' reactions. The precise nature of Scottie Ferguson's relationship to what he sees is in doubt from the beginning. How his eye sees becomes vastly more important than the information it is given to process. His perceptions reflect a mounting internal strain and distortion; there has been a poisoning at the source. The camera in Vertigo repeatedly performs hypnotic circling movements around its subjects so that everything comes to be seen in the light of Scottie's disorder. Circling also defines Scottie's problematic visual relationship with the objects that seriously engage him: they form a vortex for the eye. He stands helpless under their spell. For example, Scottie discovers that he is in love with Madeleine as he
stares himself into a haunted state. Being in love means not being able to look away, being so utterly lost to the properties of one image that no other is in any meaningful sense visually alive. Whatever is associated with the beloved is hyperfetishised — which is to say, rendered static, immutable. If Madeleine would return his love, she can only prove the genuineness of her feeling for him by remaining forever the same, exactly as he first saw her.

Scottie has been immobilised by a profound emotional shock in the film’s opening scene (a policeman attempting to rescue him as he hangs suspended from the side of a building, loses his balance and plunges to his death). Scottie attempts to free himself from this trauma by exchanging his fear for what he takes to be love, but the only form of love he is open to is one that will reproduce or imitate the conditions of that original shock. He requires a love that will not participate in the dangerous flux of reality — that will stay frozen, suspended, at a fixed distance. The cure for vertigo, he believes, is to make something in his world stand perfectly still. There is no need to question his own immobility in the presence of one who is compelled to share it. Naturally, a love with trauma at its base must eventually find its way back to that trauma. Both of Madeleine’s declarations of love to Scottie are quickly followed by the sight of her falling from the tower of the Mission Dolores. Madeleine’s plunge to annihilation is at once an absolute barrier to love and its only possible expression. The vision of her descent possesses Scottie completely. The real reasons for Scottie’s continual resubjection to the image that blinds and paralyses him are not those manufactured in the external plot. What numbs the viewer, finally, in Vertigo is that all of its mysterious occurrences seem called into being by a terrible inner necessity. To meet the demands of Scottie’s love, Madeleine must literally fall through the hole of his gaze. It is only there, where love empties itself and dies, that he is able to see her.

In The Birds (1965) it might appear that Hitchcock has returned to the realm of purely external aggression, but an examination of its structure reveals that the terms of inquiry are a further elaboration of those in Vertigo and Psycho. Once again, and in a most daring manner, Hitchcock effects a strange separation between his characters and a subject that resists formulation, perhaps even widening the gap that we feel in Psycho. As so many critics complained at the time of The Birds’ release, the painstakingly elaborated network of psychological relationships that is Hitchcock’s primary focus for roughly the first half of the film has only the most tenuous pertinence to the bird invasions that dominate the second half. The latter seem to function more as an interruption than as an extension of the film’s thematic concerns. Furthermore, one is not convinced that the birds have any role to play in the elucidation or working through of the characters’ difficulties. They appear to be there for their own sake, and Hitchcock consistently baffles our efforts to make anything of them.

I would argue that, like the ‘dead eye’ in Psycho, the birds are a metaphor caught in transit — one that can only repeat itself because it has no capacity for growth or conversion. The birds are the ‘forgotten’ image in Hitchcock’s world, the shadow behind the curtain (“so vacillating and indissolubly one”) that cannot quite be seen for what it is or truly named. For that reason it is empowered to translate everything (at any moment) into its own dark language. Only once in the course of the film does Hitchcock provide us with direct visual evidence of the worst that the birds can do: in a lake of silence, the camera executes three harrowing jump-cut moves toward the corpse of Dan Fawcett, whose pecked-out eyes have become rings of blood. The ‘shock that has no end’ is the secret quarry of The Birds. By the end of the film, each of the surviving principal female characters — Melanie, Lydia, and Cathy — has been steeped in a trauma that she will never be able to decipher. The child, Cathy, is obliged to stand by a window and watch, stunned, as the protector who had just pushed her to safety behind the door is swiftly mutilated. Lydia, upon her discovery of Dan Fawcett’s corpse, rushes from his house in a daze and struggles, for what seems an eternity, to find a word or a scream that can be fitted to what she has beheld. No sound will come forth, and thereafter her main activity in the film is to listlessly survey the contents of her household, waiting for them to resume their former connection to her, or hoping perhaps to stare them back into some form of sense. Melanie, who is subjected to a long, tremendously savage attack near the film’s conclusion, offers us, as one of her last gestures, a ‘scowling of the empty air’ in front of her in a desperate attempt to stave off a horror she can still see. The Birds, then, is also about the process of being caught in spaces from which there can be no mental advance.

In Psycho Hitchcock’s camera can never complete its search for ‘Norman Bates’ because from the very outset it is so firmly fused with the object of its quest. The camera eye, in effect, is seeking to uncover itself, recalling once more the moment when Lila is trapped between the two facing mirrors in the Bates’s mansion. It is in this sense that Psycho demands consideration as a personal film. Both the proclivities and areas of withdrawal in Norman’s mode of vision — in fact, his whole strategy of structured avoidance — faithfully reproduce Hitchcock’s own method of screening the world, where exposure is always an act of concealment. The landscape of Psycho is one that no one inside the film knows how to look at, and the camera merely reinforces the characters’ arrested gaze. In no other Hitchcock film does the camera close in on so many objects that refuse to disclose their significance. The nearest thing to a penetration of the interior is Lila’s exploration of the Bates’s house, but here, as before, whatever the inquiring eye approaches seems instantly to escape what it designates. Moreover, like the front door of the Bates’s dwelling, which appears to move toward Lila as soon as it looks into view, the space seems sentient, as though a living thought were trying to remember itself through these objects (the bronzed hands; the flower-patterned sink; the imprint of the bed; Norman’s dolls and stuffed animals; and the untitled book that Lila prepares to open as the scene ends). Lila’s function in this episode is like that of the silent menial at the close of Poe’s ‘Berenice’, who merely points at the objects that need to be seen until they are recognised and can ‘freeze’ the eye that knows them. But in Psycho there is no final shock of recognition. Everything we have witnessed in the film ultimately appears to have been pulled through the hollow sockets into which Norman’s face dissolves in the last scene. In the strikingly simplified visual field of Psycho’s conclusion, there is only a rigid form against a blank screen. The psychiatrist’s explanation that has just ended has no more to do with what we now see than Marion’s money had to do with her as she lay on the bathroom floor, her eye firmly fixed on nothing. All movement has subsided except for that of the steadily advancing camera. When Norman meets its gaze, the camera halts, as though transfixed by its own reflection. The image dissolves to reveal a half-submerged object, coated with filth, rising toward us from the swamp; and here Psycho ends.
Notes
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13 See Massey, Gaping Pig, p. 6.