Matthew A. Sheldon

Response Paper 1

Cult Films 308

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Hitchcock's Psycho (1960) & Intertextual Frames

When reading Umberto Eco's essay on "Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage", I immediately thought of Alfred Hitchcock's horror classic *Psycho* (1960). Yes, I know *Psycho* is presently considered a highly popular and acclaimed film by critics and audiences alike but similar to *Casablanca* (1942) when initially released, it wasn't looked at as a work of art. Despite great box-office success *Psycho* received several mixed reviews from critics when it first opened with some completely offended by the film's depiction of sexuality and violence. Also like *Casablanca*, *Psycho* had a slightly problematic and disjointed development throughout its creative process, which Eco states can be a major element of an inevitable cult movie.

For instance, Hitchcock was constantly hassled by the censors who were highly enforcing the Production Code at the time when developing *Psycho*. The censors demanded for minor changes to the shower sequence insisting they could actually see a glimpse of Marion's (Janet Leigh) breast. They also argued over the film's opening sequence where Marion is seen wearing a bra in bed with her married lover Sam (John Gavin). And laughably there was also some minor controversy over an onscreen shot of a flushing toilet which never appeared in a mainstream

American movie before then. Eco believed that most cult films should have a fan base who can perfectly quote its characters and many of the movies iconic moments. "It must provide a completely furnished world so that its fans can quote characters and episodes as if they were part of the beliefs of a sect, a private world of their own" (Eco, 3). "A man's best friend is his mother" and "She wouldn't even harm a fly" are just a few of the memorable quotes in *Psycho* that fans and even people who haven't necessarily seen the movie can quote.

Eco also states that in order to transform a work into a cult object "one must be able to unhinge it, to break it up or take it apart so that one then may remember only parts of it" (Eco, 4). There are many separate parts of *Psycho* that always seem to stick out with the viewer regardless to the story as a whole: Marion fleeing town with her employee's money. Being spotted by her boss when stopping at a traffic light. Marion's uncomfortable rapport when being questioned by a patrol officer. Her nervously paranoid purchase of a new car when arriving at the dealer's. Marion stopping at Bates Motel and her strangely tense conversation she and Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) have inside his parlor. Marion's iconic murder in the shower and Norman quickly cleaning up the murder scene. Norman's questioning by the police investigator Arbogast (Martin Balsam) and Arbogast's murder ascending the staircase. And of course the inevitable twist ending when Marion's sister Lila (Vera Miles) discovers Norman's mother's corpse in the basement of his home. These separate parts of *Psycho* when carefully deconstructing the film are more than enough to warrant this film as a definite cult classic.

In his writings Eco gives examples on how *Casablanca* works as a living textuality and I want to argue that *Psycho* does so as well. To understand living textuality one must understand that texts are created by texts and they speak independently from the intentions of their authors. "A cult film is proof of that, as literature comes from literature, cinema also comes from cinema"

(Eco, 4). *Psycho* is based on the 1959 novel by Robert Bloche, which is loosely based on the case of Wisconsin murderer Ed Gein. Even though the screenplay is relatively faithful to the novel, Hitchcock casted actor Anthony Perkins in the role of Norman Bates, whose visual characteristics were completely different from the character described in Bloche's novel. Interestingly enough the character of Marion only occupied the novel's 17 chapters but Hitchcock decided to expand her character to almost half of the narrative. He also decided to open the story with Marion and instead have Norman Bates be introduced 20 minutes into the story, ultimately having him take over the lead narrative immediately after Marion's unexpected murder.

Eco explores the semiotic categories of living textuality which can be found throughout the mechanics of a cult film and distinguishes them between common and intertextual frames. He explains that common frames are the data-structures representing stereotyped scenarios which involve "dining at a restaurant or going to the railway station" (Eco, 5). Intertextual frames are stereotyped situations which come from the previous textual tradition "for example, the duel between the sheriff or the Hero fights the Villain and wins" (Eco, 5). *Psycho* seems to take from both frames and like *Casablanca*; the film also encompasses what Eco calls a "magic frame" which is the key ingredient that transforms a movie into a cult movie. The magic frame serves as intertextual archetypes which "indicate a pre-established and frequently re-appearing narrative situation that is cited or in some way recycled by innumerable other texts" (Echo, 5).

Hitchcock purposely uses several intertextual archetypes throughout *Psycho*, as the film clearly is an homage and a reimagining of various different movie genres. When filming *Psycho*, Hitchcock used several creative aesthetics which went against everything Hitchcock had ever done before, especially when comparing *Psycho* to many of his more recent elegant thrillers like

Rear Window (1954) and *Vertigo* (1958). Hitchcock deliberately wanted to shoot *Psycho* in black and white, not use his usual expensive crew who just recently worked on *North by Northwest* (1959) and film it on an extremely small budget of only 800,000 dollars. Hitchcock wanted more of a gritty, visceral feel to the movie, which had more in common with the cheap exploitation films of the 1950's. The archetype elements of *Psycho* obviously resembled the parts of various different genres, like the gritty noir quickies of *Detour* (1945) or *Kiss me Deadly* (1955); the gothic Universal monster movies throughout the early 30's like *Frankenstein* (1931) and *Dracula* (1931); the B movie exploitation horror movies of William Castle and Hammer Films like *House of Haunted Hill* (1959) and *Dracula* (1958); and the artistic European thrillers like *Eyes Without a Face* (1960) and *Diabolique* (1955). Similar to what Eco describes using *Casablanca, Psycho* "is a cult movie precisely because all the archetypes are there…and because the characters live not the 'real' life of human beings, but a life as stereotypically portrayed by previous films. It is 'the movies'" (Eco, 10).

Eco also states that what makes a movie truly become a cult film is the subconscious textual awareness of the magic archetypes within a movie (Echo, 11). For instance, more recent films today like *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *Kill Bill* (2003) and *Star Wars* (1977) all incorporate intertextual awareness where even the spectators themselves become aware of the films various formulas, clique's and purposes. Spectators who walk in to see *Psycho* don't seem to make the connections or understand the references as easily. Which is interesting since Hitchcock didn't keep quiet on what kind of movie he essentially wanted to make, bluntly stating while promoting the film where exactly *Psycho* got much of its inspiration. Hitchcock once stated that *Psycho* "belongs to filmmakers" and "It wasn't a message that stirred the audiences, nor was it a great performance...they were aroused by pure film." But what Hitchcock did not

intentionally do was brilliantly take the already established textual elements within the confines of the horror genre and create an entire new sub-genre. *Psycho* which was once originally looked at by many as being simply a shocking, grotesque and exploitative cult film later was relabeled as not only the first psychoanalytical thriller but the very first slasher movie as well.