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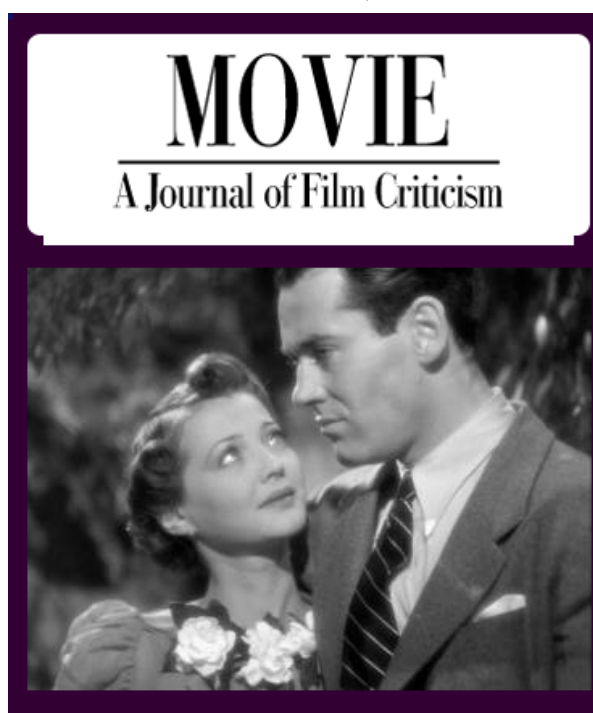
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## The Texture of Performance in *Psycho* and its Remake

Gus Van Sant's *Psycho* (1998), a 'shot-by-shot' remake of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), is, amongst many other things, an immensely valuable teaching tool for those of us in academic film studies. As an experiment, I recently took a first-year undergraduate seminar where we looked closely at the parlour scene from the original and remake on screens arranged side-by-side. What I found is that the structure of contrast provided a greater and more sustained concentration on moment-by-moment detail than looking at the Hitchcock scene alone could reasonably have hoped to achieve. Faced with the juxtaposition, even those students who had previously tended toward imprecision and generality began to make sharp observations. Most promisingly, students were responding to the session as an exercise in providing grounds for critical discrimination, rather than, say, as a game of formalist spot-the-difference. Why was the parlour scene in the remake so dreary? What made the Hitchcock scene so compelling to watch by contrast? The evaluative dimension gave students cause to refine one another's descriptions and judgements, buoyed by what seemed a collective realisation of one very good reason for studying films closely in the first place: namely, that details *matter*, that they make all the difference.

This is one of many things Raymond Durnat teaches in his eccentric and astute book, *A Long Hard Look at 'Psycho'*. As Durnat puts it: 'The superiority of *Psycho*, over its apparent genre, lies not in its structure, but in its fine detail (what Leavis used to call "texture").' (Durnat 2002: 102). Encouraged by the seminar experience and inspired by Durnat's book, I decided to see if the remake could profitably serve as a study aid for my own examination of the 'texture' of performance in the film. With each new viewing of Hitchcock's *Psycho*, I find the acting contributions of Janet Leigh and Anthony Perkins ever more decisive in its achievement. Yet for all the critical commentary on *Psycho*, there are few accounts that access the fine detail of those contributions.<sup>1</sup> Van Sant's remake offers a concrete point of contrast from which to do so.

What follows is a comparative analysis of the two versions of the brief scene on the porch between Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins / Vince Vaughn) and Marion Crane (Janet Leigh / Anne Heche), just prior to their more sustained dialogue in the parlour. Uncharacteristically, Durnat's chronological voyage through the movie skips over this scene altogether. It is certainly an 'in-between' sequence, set in the space between cabin and office, a preliminary to the longer and more celebrated parlour scene. To summarise the narrative context: Marion has stolen a substantial amount of money from her employer's client and is driving in haste to California where she plans to join her lover. Having stopped off en route at the Bates Motel, she meets Norman, a diffident young man who runs the office and tends the cabins under the watchful eye of his domineering mother. Norman offers Marion something to eat and goes up to the house to fix some sandwiches. From her cabin, Marion finds a hiding place for the stolen money and overhears an argument from the house in which Mother accuses Norman of having a 'cheap erotic mind' for wishing to invite a strange woman with an 'ugly appetite' to supper. He screams at her to shut up, and returns with a tray to the porch, where Marion waits outside her cabin door. The dialogue for the following passage is retained word-for-word in the remake, as follows:

*Norman comes around the building and walks along the porch towards Marion.*

Marion: I've caused you some trouble.

Norman: No. Mother – my mother – what is the phrase? – she isn't quite herself today.

Marion: (*indicating the tray*) You shouldn't have bothered. I really don't have that much of an appetite.

Norman: Oh, I'm sorry. I wish you could apologise for other people.

Marion: Don't worry about it. Well, as long as you've fixed the supper, we may as well eat it.

*She stands by the open door of her cabin, but Norman hesitates.*

Norman: It might be nicer, and warmer, in the office.

*He goes into his office, smiling, looking for her to follow. Marion looks after him, then closes her door and follows him.*

Besides dialogue, Van Sant's reconstruction of this short interchange stays remarkably true to the camera angles, blocking, set design and tempo of the original film. But absent from the reconstruction are precisely the details, ironically, which make Hitchcock's film rich. Take, for instance, the ostensibly tiny difference between the way Perkins rounds the corner of the motel and the way Vaughn emulates the movement. Both performers execute the pause mid-turn, with the tray at stomach height, having just



profiles at almost equal height. In Van Sant's imitation, Marion is held out-of-focus and closer to the centre, compressing the space through which Norman will advance, and the move to side-on view emphasises a significant height differential, the effect of equilibrium disappearing entirely as statuesque Norman looms over the now-diminutive Marion. Vaughn's move along the walkway is slower, more self-pitying; he makes eye contact with



mounted a single large step from around the corner of the building. In both films the pause is meant to register Norman's embarrassment on discovering Marion outside her room and realising that she must have heard the commotion from the house. In both films it allows Norman to gather himself, after the distressing quarrel with Mother, to face the public world once again. But Vaughn's steady, almost robotic turn with the tray highlights a detail of Perkins' performance so slight that it would likely otherwise go unremarked. Only Perkins allows the topography of the setting (downhill into upward step) to justify a little teeter on his left leg, so the corrective shift of his body weight as he moves towards Marion becomes a resumption of balance from a position of instability.

That sense of equilibrium-regained is echoed in the visual composition of Hitchcock's shot, in that it places Norman and Marion at either side of the widescreen frame and keeps them both in focus across the depth of the space. When the camera moves to show them from the side, the symmetry across the frame is maintained by their mirroring

Marion and the uniform lighting emphasises the rubberiness of his skin. By contrast, Perkins' approach is arranged with a more intricate lighting system so that shadows flit across his body and angular face; he breathes a sigh which doesn't seem to grant relief from his troubles. The delivery of the tray is an act of modest heroism, a defiance of Mother's orders, and the import of this miniature rebellion is



conveyed by the way Hitchcock's camera curls in an arc around Norman, precisely co-ordinating with his movement so they come to a stop together. Such elegant camera moves have hitherto been associated with Marion; this gesture is the first shift towards an alignment with Norman's plight that will become total in a few scenes' time. The equivalent move in Van Sant's film is neither particularly smooth nor especially co-ordinated with Norman. Describing a wider arc, the camera comes to settle long after Vaughn has got into position and into the first lines of dialogue, the sense of synchronisation lost in a sea of fidgets.

What a difference an inflection makes! The same is true of vocal performance. The general flatness of delivery in the reconstructed scene highlights the extent to which Janet Leigh and Anthony Perkins are fully 'inside' the film, grasping the multiple implications of particular lines and picking them out through intonation. For example, on the line 'I don't really have that much of an appetite', Leigh's delivery de-accentuates the end of the phrase, giving marginally more weight to 'don't' than to 'appetite' ('I really *don't* have that much of an appetite'). The distribution of emphasis is finely judged to register that Marion is *unthinkingly* picking up on Mother's earlier use of the word 'appetite' ('Go tell her she won't be appeasing her ugly appetite with my food, or my son!'). The character's inflection reveals to Norman that she has heard not just the tenor but also the substance of the argument from the house, which in turn gives sense to his subsequent pause and line ('...Oh... I'm sorry') as an expression of regret that she had to overhear such nasty things. In the Van Sant version of the scene, by contrast, that sense is entirely absent. Heche's delivery runs 'really' into 'don't' with minimal stress and turns 'appetite' into a warble, inflecting its first syllable ('I really don't have that much of an *appetite*') and thus forming a new word rather than one already voiced. Vaughn's drawled reply ('Ah I'm sorry ...'), as much as it makes sense at all, therefore becomes a mere apology for having forced supper on a guest, which in turn makes a non-sequitur of its second half ('... I wish you could apologise for other people'). Here the remake loses the thread of its own script.

It also misses the potential thematic significance of the line and the word 'appetite'. Mother's use of the word has already conflated literal hunger and sexual desire as things that are wanton and disgusting. To hear Marion's line as a response to Mother, as we are able to hear it in the Hitchcock film, is to sense her acceptance of the conflation even as she refuses its application to her. Decent, to Marion, as to Mother, means unwanted. Having been on the road for more than 24 hours without, to our knowledge, having stopped off to eat, she must be in need of sustenance. It therefore becomes significant that she inflects the line as an offhand refutation of Mother's slur. She seems almost to take pride in her capacity to keep appetite at bay, a symptom of a will to respectability we heard voiced in connection with parental expectation in the film's opening scene. There, the image of an untouched sandwich might have first seemed an emblem of her sexual voraciousness, which is roughly how Sam interprets it ('Never did eat your lunch, did you?'). On reflection, it can seem a cryptic message to her lover, that until he satiates her desire for respectability she will not be satisfied by food. Marion's compulsion to stave off appetite thus finds a mirror in the emaciated Norman, who staves his off with murder and candy.

As Hitchcock's film develops in the subsequent parlour scene, Marion sees something in Norman's miserable situation which apparently motivates her to make amends for her crime and return the stolen money. As it turns out,

that chance for redemption is seized from her in a moment of senseless violence and unutterably cruel irony. Hitchcock finds it crucial for that effect that Marion first shows humanity toward Norman in the scene on the porch and offers him a little consolation from his own troubles in the form of willing company. The idea finds expression in a combination of two gestures: Marion warmly folding her arms as she tells Norman not to worry, followed by a generous step back across the door of her cabin when she suggests they eat the meal. The latter movement is



accompanied by another of those elegant repositionings of the camera, this time underlining her offer by pulling back precisely to accommodate both figures across the widescreen frame. For the first time, we have a camera movement which is aligned with both Marion *and* Norman, albeit in different ways: it co-ordinates with Marion's physical movement whilst expressing something of Norman's emotional perspective, a momentary expansion of space. Van Sant's film recreates the surface appearance of these gestures but gives them meanings which are at odds with what is retained of the scene's rationale. Where Janet Leigh had folded her arms on the line 'Don't worry about it', Anne Heche waits until *after* the line and only as she starts to back off from Norman. Leigh incorporates a shrug into the folding of her arms, an amiable gesture of reassurance matched by relaxed shoulders and a kindly smile; Heche's arm-folding, by contrast, is a bony, defensive gesture, neutralising the offer of companionship by making it seem unwilling. An unwanted connotation of seediness is somehow brought out by the camera's ungainly retreat, which in its effort to follow her rearward shuffle performs a clumsy bob, cutting off half of Vaughn's towering head for a second before correcting itself. From our vantage she appears to stand *in* the doorway, squirming with her neck and shoulders, anxious even as she needlessly goes through with it that he might misread this beckoning as a sexual invitation. Indeed, the lack of motivation for making such an offer, together with its evident non-spontaneity, makes this squirming seem like an expression of the *actress's* discomfort as much as that of the character.

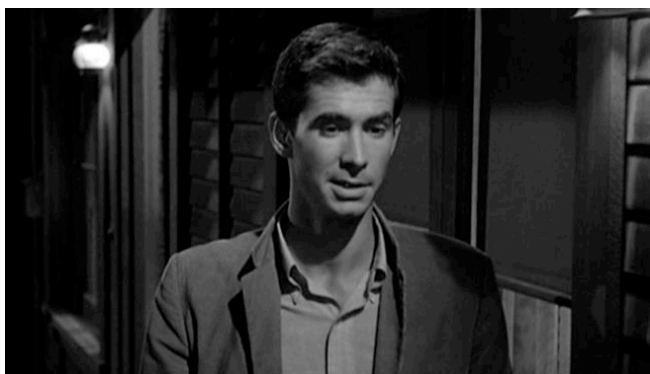


By contrast, Marion's invitation in the Hitchcock film is credible precisely because it hasn't crossed her mind to think of Norman as a sexual being. What the comparison with the remake highlights is the fluency with which Janet Leigh has navigated her way from impersonal customer to counter-maternal source of solace. Perhaps it is these full-bodied maternal qualities which aggravate Mother quite as much as any perception of sexual promiscuity; the ensuing subjective shot of Marion from Norman's point of view seems to suggest 'rival mother' as much as 'potential lover'. The reason for Norman's aversion to Marion's offer is hinted at by a detail which might seem an inevitable consequence of the camera's backward movement – until, that is, you compare it to the remake and find the detail absent. When Hitchcock's camera pulls back, it manages to grant a view past the two characters to the bed in Marion's cabin, where an open suitcase brimming with silk underwear rests on the corner of the mattress.

The character's conflict of feelings is captured by Perkins' physical movement in the seconds after Marion offers the room. From a frozen position in front of Marion, stuck behind the tray, he jolts forward for an instant, toward the open door, then stops and melts back. Perkins' execution somehow manages to bestow the impression that neither movement is fully willed by Norman: rather, his body seems taken by a momentary urge, then drawn back into place by an internalised sense of duty. The side-on view stresses the character's return to a fixed spot and picks out the tray of milk and sandwiches as an expressive object: the white jug's dip forward underscores the impulsiveness of Norman's step toward Marion, whilst the requirement for Norman to grip it tightly forms an image of immobility and burden. (This is ironic given the tray's status as an emblem of Norman's act of defiance – bringing food down for Marion, against Mother's wishes. Even his rebellion looks for all the world like an errand.) A beat after Norman has withdrawn we cut into a tighter view of his head and shoulders, fixing him in place and isolating him from Marion where previously they had shared a two-shot. Perkins' delivery of the following line – 'It might be nicer,

and warmer, in the office' – is a masterclass in screen acting. He starts by edging into the line, softly voicing it as an apology as much as a tentative proposal: breathing in an 'um', stuttering deferentially on 'it-it might be, ur-' without affecting it too strongly as a symbol of psychological blockage. On the contrary, it seems here an index of politeness, of all-too-social mindfulness. His eyes register quiet dissatisfaction at the word 'nicer' and he turns in the direction of the office as if it might supply inspiration, so that when he returns with 'and warmer' it is there as a fresh thought, a way of refining 'nicer', delivered with a considerate smile. You can see Norman working to find the words, to formulate the counter-invitation so as to cover the sense of embarrassing withdrawal. The sheer legibility of his thought process here, a negotiation between social and personal selves, will make the revelation of an entirely hidden self all the more uncanny.

By contrast, Van Sant's remake cuts into the head-and-shoulder view of Norman as he starts to *approach* Marion, missing the chance to convey immobility. Vaughn's acting in close up also modifies and blurs the meanings of the steps forward and backward. The stealth of his advance and his downcast look display outright reluctance to join Marion rather than the fighting of an impulse. Then, as he pauses, the close view of his face announces the arrival of a sinister idea. As he takes the step back he looks gravely up at Marion, making the move seem purposeful. What is this creep planning? Where in Hitchcock's film Norman begs a retreat from a space contaminated by the fantasy of sexual contact, Van Sant's Norman seems to have hatched a scheme to lure Marion to his private chamber. Two details of Vaughn's delivery of the following line – 'It might be nicer, and warmer, in the office' – spotlight an erotic interest in Marion that she would find impossible to miss. The first is the maintenance of ardent eye contact throughout the line, unswerving even as the actor gestures with his head (on 'warmer') back to the office, and lingering even as he turns to leave. The second is a smaller detail but more decisive: Vaughn's lips remain parted after he has finished talking and even as the rest of his face drops into a menacing gape.



The remake seems unsure whether to characterise Norman as a doleful man-child or a monstrous lecher. The latter comes through in Vaughn's journey through the office doorway, ostensibly imitating Perkins' 90-degree turn and the way he flashes a shy smile on exit, but achieving

civility. In Hitchcock's film, a privileged view of her smile invites the first-time audience to share her impression of Norman as harmlessly peculiar. Leigh's relaxed expression reveals Marion to be quietly amused and even charmed by the quaint manner of this troubled young man, so lonely and



something closer to a Nosferatu parody. That sense of sexual predation more than justifies Marion's wariness. Several commentators have remarked on the problems of casting Vince Vaughn as Norman Bates, noting his physical bulk as a particular obstacle to conviction. James Naremore finds the supposedly climactic appearance of Vince Vaughn donned in Mother's garb to resemble 'a fullback wearing a fright wig' (2000: 8); whilst William Rothman complains that, '[c]ombined with the fact that he is so hulking and physically imposing, his obvious weirdness makes it inconceivable that any woman worth caring about would willingly accept his invitation to dine with him' (1999: 30). The latter remark has particular bearing on the porch scene, of course, and it is worth expanding on Rothman's observation to show why Marion's swift acceptance of the counter-invitation into the office strains credulity in the Van Sant film. It is certainly true that the contrast between Vince Vaughn's muscular build and Anne Heche's reedy figure raises the troubling spectre that in this remote setting Norman could easily overpower and assault Marion. If that prospect is scarcely present in the Hitchcock film, given Anthony Perkins' lean figure and Janet Leigh's robust frame, it is diminished further by the contrast between Perkins' bashful demeanour and Leigh's confident self-possession. Leigh's Marion is quick to resolve that Norman is perfectly harmless (or rather, the matter is obvious enough not to need resolving). At some point during the production of the remake it was evidently decided (with good reason, given the casting and playing) that an equivalent judgement on the part of Heche's Marion would not be credible. The principle of emulation therefore had to be abandoned for the ensuing reaction shot of Marion, left alone for a moment on the porch. That reaction shot is crucial, ahead of the parlour scene, for defining her attitude toward Norman outside of the obligations of face-to-face

put-upon by his mother. The equivalent shot in the remake equally strives to align us with Marion's attitude toward Norman, except that here we are urged to share severe misgivings towards him. One likely consequence of this for first-time viewers, of course, will be to place him as prime suspect when Marion is murdered in a few scenes' time. Heche scrunches her forehead and looks up and down at where he stood, demonstrably worried. We may be poised for her to make an excuse, perhaps to reiterate her lack of appetite, and retire for the night. Yet the remake chooses to obey the tempo of the original film rather than monitor its own logic. Without hesitation, she unfolds her arms to close the cabin door and follows him into the office to make small talk.

Van Sant's aim to create a likeness of Hitchcock's film is nothing if not ambitious. The complexity of film as a medium is confirmed by the necessary limits of the endeavour, deriving from the ontological fact that whilst a film shot can be duplicated chemically or digitally, it cannot be reproduced by re-shooting. In that sense, a 'shot-by-shot' remake is a fallacious notion in the first place. Nonetheless, in as much as the remake attempts to *describe* Hitchcock's film, to trace it, it can be understood as a work of criticism. Unfortunately the work is as undiscerning as criticism as it is ineffective as screen drama. It seems Van Sant and his team chose several dozen features in each shot and set about recreating them, yet the selection of features deemed worth recreating – that is to say, which were deemed vital and which incidental to the effect of the scene – seems to have been guided by a trivial understanding of the supposed object of homage.

I hope my analysis of the porch scene has shown the special qualities of Hitchcock's *Psycho* derive in large part from what I am calling the 'texture of performance' – by

which I mean the fine detail of what is offered by actors to microphone and camera, and the manner in which that work is woven into the fabric of the film. The word 'texture' is convenient partly because it captures the need for close attention to surface details and also to their integration. I resist the word 'choices' here, not because I am wary of attributing intention, but rather because the word 'choice' implies a narrative of decision-making for each singular detail. As Stanley Cavell eloquently puts it:

To say that works of art are intentional objects is not to say that each bit of them, as it were, is separately intended; any more than to say a human action is intentional is to say that each physical concomitant of it is separately intended – the noise, that grass crushed where I have stood, that branch broken by the bullet, my sharp intake of breath before the shot, and the eye-blink after ... ([1969] 2002: 236).

I think it is unlikely that many of the details I found expressive in the Hitchcock sequence – for instance, Perkins' slight teetering as he rounds the corner, or the implication in Leigh's delivery of the word 'appetite' – are the result of defined premeditation in each case. Certainly the full *range* of possible meanings could not have been consciously foreseen. Rather, it seems more credible to suppose that their intuitive 'rightness', their lucidity and density of suggestion, their preservation of dramatic logic and inflection of dramatic mood, issue from a more general commitment and clarity of purpose on the part of the filmmaking team.

The comparative incoherence and banality of the equivalent sequence in the remake demonstrate that the qualities I have attributed to the Hitchcock scene are inherent neither in the script, nor in the storyboard. Yet the deficiencies of the Van Sant film do not stem from bad acting. Rather, they proceed from its filmmaking-by-numbers approach, a lack of clarity in conception, and an erroneous picture of the film medium. For this final reason its failures should offer wider lessons to students, critics and makers of movies. The project evidently went forward with the assumption that you could substitute the bodies and voices at the heart of a film without shifting other aspects of style to accommodate that substitution. Indeed, the very idea of a 'shot-by-shot remake' invites the impression that the figures who populate film shots are not essentially constitutive of them, except as hominid-shaped design elements. In this conception, a shot is primarily defined by those aspects which are available to diagrammatic notation, with reference to distance, angle, lens type, light source, graphic composition, and so on. In this respect, the remake seems influenced by a variety of formalist thought with significant purchase in practical film schools and currency in some regions of academic film studies. The picture offered by many textbooks shows cinematography and editing as the primary tools of a filmmaker, with performers at best adding flesh to the skeleton of 'cinematic technique'. *Psycho*'s remake puts the paradigm into practice and thereby reveals its shortcomings. It shows the severe underestimation of the contribution of performance to the effect of a film, and the pragmatic necessity for a film seeking to dramatise human interaction to be built around the potentials and givens of its cast.<sup>2</sup>

It might seem surprising, given Hitchcock's reputation for meticulous pre-planning and his famous disdain for actors, that finesse in the realm of performance should number amongst *Psycho*'s strongest suits. But that, as

Hitchcock scholar William Rothman has pointed out, is merely to observe that we should take aspects of the director's self-styled reputation 'with a grain of salt' (1999: 29). It's worth noting that, according to archivist Stephen Rebello, Hitchcock in fact worked closely with Janet Leigh on her character's 'inner life' prior to shooting (1990: 62), and whilst it seems he did not spend the same amount of pre-shoot time with Anthony Perkins, trusting the notoriously dutiful actor to prepare the gestural range of his character largely by himself (88), Hitchcock reportedly had Perkins in mind for the part of Norman even before he had read the script's first draft (47). Rebello also notes that production decisions continued well into shooting, a report which should qualify as exaggeration Hitchcock's claim that he made films strictly 'on paper' (47).

Rather, it is the Van Sant film which shows above all the hazard of sticking too closely to a blueprint without due regard for what the actors are likely and capable of bringing to the project. Van Sant has compared his remake to the contemporary production of a classic play.<sup>3</sup> At the risk of making too much of a director's offhand statement (especially when I have only just cautioned against taking such remarks at face value!), the analogy with theatre adaptation may help further explain why Vince Vaughn and Anne Heche faced such evident difficulties in their parts. As Erwin Panofsky once pointed out, whereas a role in a play has an existence beyond any particular manifestation, hence the possibility for interpretation, a film role is incarnated once and for all.<sup>4</sup> When Vince Vaughn undertook to play a psychopath, he was given the illusion of freedom to embody a new Norman, even as the tempo of interaction, the movements of figures, the timings of reaction shots, the moves into close-up, and so on, were already set in place to accommodate Anthony-Perkins-as-Norman, a role already embodied – and thus unavailable for anyone else to embody. A fresh adaptation of the source material, or a significantly different realisation of the script, may well have allowed for the emergence of Vaughn's own psychopath with the name of Norman Bates. But the remake's adherence to an existing pattern of shots stifled such a development.

Paul McDonald has suggested that Van Sant's remake offers the gift of a virtual 'commutation test', a chance to see what follows when a different actor is cast in the 'same' role (2004: 27). It seems fairer to say that the remake shows the fallacy of the 'commutation test' idea, demonstrating what would happen in practice if casting *were* a mere transposition process, with actors being slotted into roles in a prefabricated movie, unyielding to what they bring to the table. It seems certain that, had Hitchcock been obliged to work with alternative actors for *Psycho*, he would have made significant changes its scenario, script and design in order to accommodate them (or else, perhaps, abandoned the project as unworkable). Van Sant's project is thus grossly unfair to Anne Heche and Vince Vaughn, not because they act in the shadow of Janet Leigh and Anthony Perkins, but because they appear gated within frames and situations designed for different bodies with different talents and temperaments. Van Sant's greatest tribute to Hitchcock is thus his fulfilment of what a film would look like if its actors really were treated like cattle.<sup>5</sup>

Alex Clayton

I would like to thank students at the University of Bristol for motivating me to write the essay, and my partner Sarah Moore for many valuable and encouraging suggestions.



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<sup>1</sup> Besides a few marvellous passages in Durgnat (2002), an important exception is Deborah Thomas, 'On Being Norman: Performance and Inner Life in Hitchcock's *Psycho*'. Thomas is especially attentive to Norman's different types of smiles (whether 'ready and disarming', 'private [and] knowing', 'ingratiating', 'a shrewd, tight-lipped hint of a smile' [1997: 67-69]) and persuasive in her account of how patterns of posture evoke the character's psychological relation to the world: 'This is a body making as little space for itself in the world as possible, pulling back from contact with its troubling realities which present themselves to him as thin air ...' (69). Ultimately, the essay is a character study of Norman Bates, drawing out tendencies in Anthony Perkins' acting from across the film, rather than following a passage of performance moment-by-moment, which is my purpose here.

<sup>2</sup> V.F. Perkins has convincingly shown how narrative patterning, set design and even the musical score of Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* (1954) can be appreciated as an ingenious effort to accommodate the star and figure of Joan Crawford (1996: 221-228). This aspect of filmmaking, the need to adjust the design of a film to befit the physicalities and dispositions of its principal actors, has often been overlooked by critics and arguably too often neglected by directors.

<sup>3</sup> Gus Van Sant as cited on Universal Pictures' official website for the movie: "'I felt that, sure, there were film students, cinephiles and people in the business who were familiar with *Psycho* but that there was also a whole generation of movie-goers who probably hadn't seen it," he says. "I thought this was a way of popularizing a classic, a way I'd never seen before. It was like staging a contemporary production of a classic play while remaining true to the original.'" (Universal Pictures: 1998). It's not entirely clear whether by 'original' Van Sant means the premiere production of a play or the script, perhaps: the word lacks application to theatre and in that sense the analogy already seems strained.

<sup>4</sup> 'Othello or Nora are definite, substantial figures created by the playwright. They can be played well or badly, and they can be "interpreted" in one way or another; but they definitely exist, no matter who plays them or even whether they are played at all. The character in a film, however, lives and dies with the actor. It is not the entity "Othello" interpreted by Robeson or the entity "Nora" interpreted by Duse; it is the entity "Greta Garbo" incarnate in a figure called Anna Christie ...' (Panofsky: 118)

<sup>5</sup> And a final mystery: to my mind, Gus Van Sant has directed two of the finest American films of the past decade, *Elephant* (2004) and *Paranoid Park* (2007). Both contain exceptionally sensitive and nuanced performances by unknown actors. He also directed *Milk* (2008), containing a performance by Sean Penn which has been acclaimed, but which I personally found cloying and suffering from an adherence to mimicry not unlike Vince Vaughn in *Psycho*. How can a filmmaker be so variable in terms of his direction of performers?