Review Article

Hitchcock's Figurations: Some Reflections on Textuality in *Psycho*

Abstract

The article explores the implications of *Psycho* as a cinematic text a filmic array of iterable, signifying, verbal and visual, signifiers. It makes a distinction between prospective and retrospective movie viewing which allows examining how a film text reads itself, first in its treatment of proper names in the opening credits. The credits are analyzed as a narrative with its own shape, that introduces the figural modality of the film as a whole. Moving on to the diegetic narrative, the article analyzes how the movie represents the tensions and contradictions of signification as a problem of interpretation first of all for its characters, and specifically for Marion and Norman. It concludes by suggesting that the world of the movie posits the negotiation of signification not just in the twists and surprises of its melodramatic plot, but also in the conduct of mundane, domestic experience, whose trammels become central to the movie retrospectively in the light of the ultimate incoherence of the horror story.

Keywords: Hitchcock, Psycho, Textuality in cinema, rhetorical figure, film interpretation, retrospective reading

H. Marshall Leicester
University of California Santa Cruz (Retired), USA

Correspondence: H. Marshall Leicester, Department of Literature, University of California Santa Cruz (Retired), USA, Tel 831-566-0727, Email hm@ucsc.edu

Introduction

What's in a Name?

This is the final full title of the opening credit sequence of *Psycho* (Figure 1). The characters in large type form a proper name, which designates a particular person (now dead) who lived a life public and private, and in 1959-60 "made" this movie Alfred Hitchcock. The characters in smaller type lay claim to the film that follows as belonging to (made by) the person named. They make the name a signature. This can only happen because "Alfred Hitchcock" here is a piece of writing. It has been textualized as the traces of a pattern of light on sensitized film that are iterable well as legible, and their function is documentary. They are public, they circulate, and they can in principle be indefinitely re-viewed and re-read without themselves formally altering.[1]

Figure 1 Psycho: Opening credits final screen.

It is this iterability that facilitates the assimilation of other agencies and histories to the subject of biography the signature nominates. Textualization makes this writing part of a system that includes all

the instances in which "[Alfred] Hitchcock" has been or will be written, and their contexts. We know, for instance that he made many other films, that he put his own image into them including this one in cameos, acted in the trailer for this one, gave interviews and published texts about them, etc. These "signature effects" conduce to the image of Hitchcock as auteur, the central controlling agency that gets the credit and takes the blame for the movie. As "auteur-effects" they are unavoidably inscribed in the name, It does so not only because Hitchcock himself put a lot of time and effort into making sure of them, but also because he didn't do it all himself. Studio heads and marketing departments, critics and scholars, and the general public, have all made sure of knowing what "a Hitchcock movie" is. The word/image here is part of a discourse, a patterned collection that is shared by a community, of ways of talking about and conceiving something. The textual signifier "Alfred Hitchcock" inevitably also disseminates. The signature jumps around, metaphorically and metonymically, to refer to a set of films considered thematically and affectively ("Hitchcock suspense") to a historical and sociological congeries of factors that facilitated the production of movies like this or directed by this man ("the moment of *Psycho*"), subjected to further adjectival extension ("Hitchcockian") to designate visual rhetorics and the offering of affective intensities that occur in other situations and movies.[2] The insistence of author effects that links the movies to the man and his various efforts to enforce them suggests that the auteurist "Hitchcock" everyone agrees won't do any more as a definitive critical approach also won't go away.[3]

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[1]The signature is a concept, though one with real-world effects. Films generally exist in multiple copies, like the editions of printed books. There need not be as with a legal document like the Declaration of Independence an original. Each copy retrospectively creates a virtual original, the memorial of a complex performative, whether there still is or ever was a physical original or not.

[2]Such occurrences can be reassimilated to the first usage under headings like "influence," "citation," "homage," but it must be evident that these terms diffuse and extend the notion of a *person* as origin and author. Depending as they do on what others make of Hitchcock *in absentia*, they become signature effects.

[3](Kapsis, 1992). This persistence is weirdly truest of the most thoroughgoing deconstructive and purely textual reading of the films we have so far, Tom Cohen's *Hitchcock's Cryptonomies* (Cohen, 2005), ibid.) As Restivo points out, Cohen's practice of confining himself to the greater Hitchcockian text has something of the effect of reinstating the "contradiction over authorship that comes up in Cohen's work insofar as he has to posit a Hitchcock who 'knows too much,' and yet can't possibly know that much." (Restivo, 2005). Even Žižek, whose real target is the discourse-Lacan, binds himself to this. (Žižek, 2010))

Figuration and textuality

Textual reading is always re-reading. You cannot understand a film as text seeing it once, in order, for the first time and preferably in a theater— what I call "prospectively." That experience was generally understood as what "going to the movies" meant before the digital age and the availability of platforms (tape to whatever's next) giving widely available and fully controllable multiple retrospective access. One can now view or freeze any part of a film in any order and at any speed, as one might leaf back and forth in a book to dig out with precision the image patterns, the echoes, and the allusions to other texts. It's worth pointing out that, however they were viewed, Hitchcock's movies were always made in this latter retrospective mode, it was where the craft of filmmaking lived. In the *Motion Picture Herald* in 1960, Hitchcock described his work on *Psycho* as a crafting that, retrospectively (when he was done), would produce a text aimed at prospective viewing: "I suddenly startled my fellow-workers with a noisy vow that my frontwards-backwards-sidewards-and-inside-out labors on 'Psycho' would not be in vain that everyone else in the world would have to enjoy the fruits of my labor to the full by seeing the picture from beginning to end."[1] "Prospect" and "retrospect" are not properties of a text but ways of reading it. It is perfectly possible to reread a film prospectively, as one "watches the movie again" without deranging the order, timing, or the weight given to its parts. Hitchcock's hyphens sketch the freer and more disruptive methodological opportunities of what I am calling textual reading for his cinematic writing.[2–5]

The assumption that his films would be seen prospectively is surely one reason why Hitchcock himself is so often on record as celebrating and taking pleasure in the exercise of planning, the detail of shooting, and the expert deployment of editing, with the ambition to control the immediate affective responses (suspense, horror) of his audiences. He liked to present himself, to Truffaut and others, as a master of making movies with great care in one mode in order to have them seen most effectively in the other. He valued himself, never more than with *Psycho*, as a builder of affect-machines. Hitchcock's historically conditioned assumptions about what "the movies'" agency is best capable of has contributed powerfully to the dominant audience-and-affect-centered strands of *Psycho*-analysis in criticism of the movie. Like Hitchcock, critics psychoanalysts, historians, students of culture have continued to care centrally about how audiences feel the movie.

I, on the other hand, want to focus on the way the film reads itself. Whatever you think the movie is "about" desire, identity, death, gender, looking, the decay of modern life (all convincing preoccupations, all important and variously timely issues to which it responds when they are brought to it) I am fascinated by the representations the text of the movie makes about its own subjects. I credit the movie with having attitudes about what it represents, of advancing interpretations of its own content, rather than simply embodying a set of images and themes to have feelings about.

The credits

Opening credits are conventionally negligible for a general audience.[4] They occupy a liminal space between the real world in which such things are put together and the offered Imaginary or second-world experience these people made. The understanding is that the first world is now to be left behind for the duration of the

second.[6] As sources of information—documents—credits have the status of printed lists that happen to have been photographed and attached to the film. What remains unaddressed in such a general account is the difference the cinematic presentation of the opening credits of Psycho makes. This is not a series of still photos that cuts from one screen of names and functions to the next pages or a rolling list unscrolled across an unchanging frame-space. It is already a movie, and as such requires some account of what the kinetics and continuity of the sequence do to the elements on screen, and to the space in which they occur. As a cinematic text, the movie does things to and with the words that convey basic credit-information. Though this feature of the sequence is often noticed, not much has been made of its noticeability. Even the most careful and detailed description, that of Durgnat, passes at once to the end of the sequence, when the credits dissolve into the opening of the diegesis proper, the survey of the skyline of Phoenix, Arizona. Let's start with the first, signature-claiming, title of the film, the one that announces the author, "Alfred Hitchcock's." Here is Durgnat:

[From the black screen that appears in a cut from the Paramount logo, the frame "turns light grey," and] "From the right-hand edge, black stripes stretch across the screen; more *appear*, at unpredictable heights, till they block the screen like a window-blind. Against the last bands, *streaking* across at middle height, white angular flecks *appear*, like enigmatic signs, and turn out to be the tips and tails of letters, slashed laterally and vertically disaligned. The 'window-blind' breaks up as more black bands *thrust* in, pushing the last grey strips off left. The bits of letters click together, to read,[7] bold white on the all-black field: 'Alfred Hitchcock's.[5]

Here's what a central slice of the process looks like (Figure 2).[6] Here's a clip from just before its completion. These clips are freeze-frames of an ongoing process in constant rapid motion (Figure 3). And here's what happens to it after the completed "Alfred Hitchcock's" (not shown) has occupied its allotted two seconds of integrated appearance (Figure 4). In short, this authorship-naming image of an array of letters is visibly assembled from fragments moving in real time, stabilized long enough to be read, then disassembled and pushed off screen, to be followed by the similarly (temporally and visually) constructed title of the film, "*Psycho*," which completes the suspended syntax of the previous title, tying them together in a different grammatical way, even as the first disintegrates. The horizontality of movement and fragmentation that distinguishes this sequence is replaced by complex figurations of verticality in the case of the leading players (Figure 5). Sometimes groups of names slide on screen and then move off, with or without the agency of stripes. Horizontal motion from both sides of the screen resumes, and in at least one case a designation, "Titles designed by Saul Bass" scoots off screen left before the group of names associated with it exits right as a body (Figure 6).

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[4]The study of credits has in recent times formed a distinctive subset of cinema studies. For a general introduction to the topic with extensive bibliography, see Stanitzek, 2009.

[5]I mean the italicized words to suggest a tension in Durgnat's language between the quasi-magical *manifestation* of images on a screen in cinema they just "appear,"— perhaps from a cut or a fade—as over against action and agency that are seen to *act upon* something that's part of the diegetic world, "pushing" it into the frame from an off screen, say, in which it already existed.

[6]Notice that it is difficult to tell whether the letter fragments are inscribed on a black stripe on top of the grey field, or if the black stripe is cutting through the grey screen to reveal the white fragments on a black field beneath the grey. The final assembly of the caption (not shown) appears to favor the former. Ambiguities about an implied third dimension (overs and unders) and of depth of field are pervasive throughout the credits. That is, the visual progress of the credits evokes a set of explicitly cinematic issues, beyond their informational/ documentary function.

Figure 2 Psycho, opening credits, horizontal movement.

Figure 3 Psycho, opening credits, horizontal movement.

Figure 4 Psycho opening credits, horizontal movement.[7]

Figure 5 Psycho opening credits, vertical movement.

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[7]The three layers that make up the name move off screen left at varying rates.

Figure 6 Psycho credits: exit Saul bass left.

The filming of the credits as a continuous action gives the content of the frame images (the Paramount logo) letters and names a double status. On the one hand, they retain their original and continuing function as referrals (designating persons and functions). At the same time, however, they become cinematic images. The letters are inscribed pieces of writing coming together to form words; simultaneously they are independent agents in an ongoing narrative. Here, you get to read and retain the name of the man who claims the movie at the same time you watch that name assembled out of fragments, then fragmented again, and pushed off screen to make space for the title (also assembled out of fragments) that completes the phrase. The credit sequence is an unfolding cinematic narrative, with characters and a theme. Its proper narrative beginning is not Durgnat's dark screen, but the familiar Paramount logo that is the first image on the screen. "That's a mountain, those letters spell out a company name." What follows immediately, the credits, breaks down and continually rearranges the formal elements (gradations of black and white, the persistence and stability of the image) that make that referential familiarity possible. In effect, the credits destabilize ("deconstruct") the conventions of familiarity. The themes of this narrative identity and agency emerge more clearly when we register that what is being acted upon are names, the graphic traces (and the signature effects) of persons, agents, subjects. The names, after all, are those of real people, who have existed outside the movie as Marion and the other characters do not, and that reference persists. But those names, as figures, are also engaged in an independent drama that mostly pushes them around at the whim or purpose of external forces, though they also occasionally appear to exercise, like Saul Bass, something that could be self-assertion, even wit.[8]

Durgnat's commentary on the sequence, typical in this of a common audience-centered critical discourse, stresses its effect on the viewer. Declaring that "Narrative-wise the credits of *Psycho* are entirely meaningless" (which seems unduly dismissive of a lot of human labor), he turns at once to what he takes to be the affectivity of the sequence: The bands and columns imply some cold, geometrical order; its thrusts, shifts and vectors are unpredictable. Brutally rapid changes disorganize us. The images, without the music, would be softly unstable, slithery; but the pistoning music gives them its impact. The 'lettrist' scraps and flecks add another, wayward chaos, like the fitfully fluttering 'angel' in Borowczyk's *Les Jeux des anges* (1964). Both films are exercises in 'structuralist' grid-forms as madness. Here, everything resembles hypnagogia (the 'break-up' of gestalts and forms, well-known in the states between sleeping and

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[8]I neglect a number of other potentially signifying elements that are open to reading and rereading here, most notably differences in the size of lettering, the ordering of functions and other elements in sequence (e.g. the small traps for later set by "And JANET LEIGH as Marion Crane") and the juxtaposition of words/images to music.

waking). Its driving energy, its streams of cognitive dissonance, don't just metaphor, they inflict perceptual disintegration. Some unseen activity keeps imposing rigid pattern and then disintegrating them, like obsession and hysteria.[7]

This account misplaces the locus of the affects described. It sounds a bit worked-up adjectivally as an account of an unsituated "us" who may not share Durgnat's feelings.[8] What about the actors, composers, writers, and technicians who would have witnessed the usual straightforward list of their contributions to the film turned into something else much more striking and brilliant.[9] The "story" enacted by the credits is one about the fragmentation of reference.[10] There is an instability of the distinction between image and signifier that the term "figure" captures, through its several varieties of play within the signifying field. *Psycho* draws its own external genealogy from the gradations of greyscale that make the appearance of discrete images possible at all in the Hollywood cinema from which it comes. The common term for a movie that looks like this is "in black and white."[11] The first image projected in the film is precisely such a blended, coherent image, the Paramount logo.

The graphic abstraction of the credits separates out the components of the black-and-white regime: a black field in ambiguous spatial relation to a grey one, and the letters of the names and functions in pure white. The credit sequence is an abstraction and separation of the basic color components of the initial screens, as it is of a certain Hollywood tradition of what "the movies" are. The generally agential grey is variously an interrupter, a concealer, and an overall complication of pure white letters on a black ground. The sequence is a cinematic deconstruction of conventional notions and functions of credits at the same time that it continues to perform them. By the time they are over, we do know the name of the picture and who all made it, but the movie has foregrounded its own antics over the information itself. The destabilization here targets the relations of the film to the referential field of a world mostly external to the diegetic one that will follow. The final shape of the story the credits tell is both a return to that documentary impulse and a transition to the more evidently fictional field of the text. The transition to conventional narrative at the end of the title sequence represents a settling down and focusing of the energies let loose by the credits. An image of the skyline of a city appears behind a partial window blind of vertical grey stripes. The camera holds on the skyline as the remaining stripes shrink together

and disappear in such a way as to suggest that they are somehow in or behind the rectilinear buildings (Figure 7).

Figure 7 Psycho end of credits.

The oddly fussy captions that now situate the image of the skyline as the camera pans across it are the last manifestation here of the moving letters technique of the credits. In the first of them, "Phoenix," comes scooting in from off screen left, to join its counterpart, "Arizona," from off screen right, in the center of the frame, as the camera continues to travel rightward over the city. There's something a little parodic or teasing about the hesitations between items of factual information "Phoenix, Arizona" (pause) "Friday, December the Eleventh" (pause), "Two Forty-Three P.M." that might as easily have been given together. The last of these occurs at the moment when the cruising camera begins to zero in on the window it is about to pierce to discover Marion and Sam's late lunch-hour diversion. It thus supplies a kind of narrativized climax and specificity not only to the shot but to the whole opening sequence. But that focusing only emerges at its end. It is as if, when the grid disappears into normal greyscale, the labels are pressed into service one last time to clarify and normalize what is solely now a "proper" and stable image. It comes across as a slightly strained invocation of a more familiar and less unruly narrative relation between word and image.

What I've tried to suggest so far is the shapeliness of the deconstructive narrative of the credit sequence. It moves from the routine familiarity of the Paramount logo through a defamiliarizing enactment of the elements and processes that construct the familiar by using them otherwise. It concludes by re-merging into the more usual decipherability of "the movies," but in such a way as to leave the shadow or remainder of its own difference in a hovering relation to what follows. The whole process stresses, however, features of the following text to keep in mind. The first is that a distinction between writing and image that it is often important to sustain, is here only provisional. We have seen in the credits that textualization can produce written names as figures. They are both signifiers that refer and images that act. The graphic disseminates too. The movie that follows will make active a perennial possibility or way of reading films, in which images (pictures of things and people and their situations) have the same double quality. They may become figural.

As a signifier, a figure is the bearer of an indefinite array of aspects that may be subordinate in any particular context, but always remain available for rereading in another: frontwards-backwards-sidewards-and-inside-out.[12] This figure presents itself most consistently in the activity of the camera, construed as choices of what to show,[9] but also what to stress, the narratively complex louds and softs of attention the camera imposes on a given image, scene, or sequence This

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[9]It is recorded that the crew that first witnessed the credits accompanied by Herrmann's score spontaneously applauded. For an account of this screening, see (Rebello, 2012), pp. 185-188. On the other hand, we might take the drama of the credits as an anticipation of what is to come, and as something less immediate and momentary. In that case, the passage fits very well indeed with the reactions of the characters to the plot. There's plenty of obsession and quite a bit of hysteria in this movie. It doesn't seem hard to use a word like "hypnagogia" to describe important aspects of Marion's experience in her drives from Phoenix to the Bates Motel. If we choose to read the voice overs that way, she even has aural hallucinations. The same might be maintained about Norman at the end. What differences does it make to move from "the audience feels" to "the movie shows?"

[10]Though not necessarily its ephemerality. After all, who ordinarily *remembers* credits? Who would think to attend to them again on rewatching the film? The temptation to reread films prospectively ("what's next?") is pretty firmly culturally embedded.

[11]Historically, this mode of filmmaking is on its way out as the ground zero of "the movies" in favor of the polychromatism we call "full color." Hitchcock had not made a movie in black and white since *The Wrong Man* (1956) whose color scheme also *signifies* its quasi-documentary claims and he would not do so again after *Psycho*. The choice to adopt a retrograde form for a film which otherwise is transgressive of the conventional expectations of classical practices says something about how aggressively *Psycho* positions itself against the system it is outmoding by rereading it.

[12]The most thoroughgoing examination of figurality in Hitchcock, both theoretically and interpretively is (Morris, 2002), pp. 53-5953-55 *et seq.*. His discussions persuaded me of the term as the right one for features and functions of the image in cinema that I had been looking to name compactly for a long time.

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figure presents itself most consistently in the activity of the camera, construed as choices of what to show, but also what to stress, the narratively complex louds and softs of attention the camera imposes on a given image, scene, or sequence[13] This figure presents itself most consistently in the activity of the camera, construed as choices of what to show, but also what to stress, the narratively complex louds and softs of attention the camera imposes on a given image, scene, or sequence.[14] Given the kind of thing a figure is,[10,11] it will always be the case that its areas of reference can be read as pointing to a regime of causes and contexts in the world outside the movie. This feature of signification is the foundation of interpretive methods that want to see how a given film fits into a larger prior discourse e.g. feminist, Marxist, deconstructive,[13] historicist where the interpreter construes the movie as an example.[15] Such readings dispose the figurations of their target films in line with the issues and formulations of their own discursive practices. They are often persuasive that the movies are "about"[14] what the particular lenses employed allow emerging.[16]

Internal figuration

A compact example of the alternate, textually-inflected figural vector of *Psycho*'s practice is supplied by another figure. When we first see Marion in the opening scene of the story, she is in her underwear (Figure 8) a circumstance that is already full of implications that allude to cultural and waning studio practices from the time the movie was made. The prominent presence of her breasts in a white bra evokes a socially and period-transgressive (but not very) context of mainstream cinema. It is post-coital, marks the scene that follows as between intimates, and so forth. After Marion has left the following scene in her office, ostensibly to deposit $40,000 in the bank, we next see her in her home, in a scene which leads to her absconding with the money. She is again partially undressed (Figure 9). Given what we have learned about Marion and her situation by now, the signifying possibilities of the change in bra-color here seem immediately richer in the diegesis. Marion is apparently well-advanced in the process of deciding to take the money. It takes a bit more of the story to establish that she intends to take it to Sam, but the issues surrounding her relationship to him are evidently in play. In line with the clichés of exploitation-discourse *Psycho* continually plays with, female black underwear, here readily signifies a sexually oriented "bad-girlness" that begins to inflict and complicate our sense of Marion's motives for both the deed and the accompanying underwear, especially if we ignore any temptation to judge her.[17] But to say that she is both dressing the part she is resolving to play and is also going to cover it up with the good-girl outerwear she will put on next opens a further set of relevant issues. In this context, the bra figures an emblematic representation of an initial and ongoing inner tension. It operates retrospectively to read out of the opening scene in the hotel an ambivalence Marion didn't want to register at the time. She was and remains tensed between her desire for Sam and her resistance to her own impropriety ("Oh Sam, let's get married!"). She would appear to be re-evoking for herself the impropriety and the desire in a way she had resisted in the hotel room. But she also wants to keep all that hidden.

Figure 8 Marion [Janet Leigh] in white bra.

Figure 9 Marion in black bra.

The interesting further questions that arise here have to do with Marion's attitudes toward the signification on display. She may be presumed to have chosen this bra, why? She will be traveling while wearing it covered up so she can assume that no one else will know, at least until she gets to Fairvale and Sam. Marion is the only person in the movie who looks at herself in a mirror on purpose, and here she does so only after she has finished dressing. Marion is adopting, perhaps trying out, a change in her identity, and her project is conveyed and abetted via the manipulation of signifying images. The alteration

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[13]The credits have already established this figure as a multiple one composed of all the agencies that contributed to the movie's making. To call it "Hitchcock," though common parlance, can be misleading, insofar as it offers a temptation to causal auteurism for what is actually a complex metonymy for multiple agents and processes. "Maker" is emptier. It names a gap in the question of origins, causes, and agencies that has to be filled situationally and by interpretation. It has nothing necessarily to do with a person, it's a textual phenomenon. In *Psycho* and elsewhere, "Maker" is most evident in the sudden surprises of the plot and their drastic changes in what the movie had appeared to be.

[14]This account follows an Eisensteinian line that takes what's generally called the enunciation in a film the choices about what to look at, and the variations of stress of attention within the diegesis that the camera and editing make as *rhetorical* voicings. A clear example is Eisenstein's analysis of the closeup, in "Dickens, Griffith and the Film Today," (Eisenstein and Leyda, 2014), pp. 195-255) not as a closer look at something with its independent and neutral existence in the world of the movie, but as a persuasion to the significance, the importance, the *size* of what's being looked at, in an *argument* the movie is making about its narrative content. Hitchcock understood his own process in this way, as he twice remarked to Truffaut: "The mobility of the camera [in *Rope*] and the movement of the players closely followed my usual cutting practice. In other words, I maintained the rule of varying the size of the image in relation to its emotional importance within a given episode." (Truffaut, Hitchcock and Scott, 1985), p. 180. On *Rear Window* and *The Paradine Case*: "[T]he size of the image is used for dramatic purposes, and not merely to establish the background." [*ibid*, p. 218]. I'm indebted to David Miller for these references.

[15]I draw the list here mostly from George E. Toles' elegant "Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* as Critical Allegory," (Toles, 1989), pp. 225-245) His examination of a central, constitutive gap in the film text that such readings variously fill is close to my own. His own essay in both filling and preserving the gap, unlike mine, is an examination of his own responses, in effect his skeptical and multiple reading practices. From a more programmatically formalist/textualizing perspective, a more thoroughgoing, bracing, polemical, and somewhat unfair critique of allegorical reading is the first chapter, "A Tear that Does Not Drop but Folds," (Brinkema, 2014) The author's central example of textual resistance to interpretation is drawn from *Psycho*.

[16]See especially (Isaacson, 2022).

[17]See (Rebello, 2012), p. 99.

of a visual image also affects its signification in a way typical of the opening credits. Crucially, that manipulation of signification here is conspicuously the work of a character in the fiction. If it is however complexly true to say that Norman has a secret identity in this movie, it's also the case that Marion constructs one for herself here.[18]

The structure of internal figuration: diffuse and fixated screens

The rhythm of the credits gives an underlying and preliminary version of the two major modalities of the film's visual style: the diffuse image, and the fixated image. The diffuse image is characterized by an exploitation of deep focus and the detail clarity of fast film. These combine with a tendency to compose shots that are full of rectangles, some pierced, some flat (e.g. doors, windows, hallways, mirror images, signs and pictures) to produce a very fully textured screen which is graphically complex (Figures 10 & 11).

Figure 10 Diffuse screen: Norman [Anthony Perkins] shows Marion the motel room.[19]

Figure 11 Diffuse screen, Sam's hardware store.[20]

There is a lot of writing on the screen at various times letters, newspaper headlines, traffic signs, graph paper. Because the plot is what it is (and because the script also has a lot of double entendre, ("a boy's best friend is his mother,"), visual punning, arch reference and in-jokes), such framing gives a strong sense of other stories than the one the film is following stories that might make the film hang together differently. Clarified instances of the fixated image are rarer. There are however, two of particular importance in the movie, Marion's final drive to the Bates motel, and the final image of Norman/Mother in their chamber off the courtroom. In both cases there is very little to look at except the figures in the center of the frame. Cinematically, what fixates the imaging of Marion's drive is not that the camera remains focused on her, but the relentless sequence of forty-some reverse shots.[21] which, remaining inside the vehicle, alternate between a view of Marion driving against the backdrop of her out-of-focus rear window, and what she sees out her front window. In both cases, besides Marion, there is less and less to see but the window itself as it grows darker and the weather worsens, The front view is if anything worse than the reverse, and it is altogether obliterated by pouring rain just before the Bates Motel comes into view Figures 12 & 13.

Figure 12 Fixated screen: Marion, rear window.

letter to Marion. It then cuts to him writing it at his desk, and tracks steadily back, to reveal that he is sitting in an office—continuously visible through a window behind him into the commercial space—to reveal the full interior of the hardware store. At the beginning of this track, a customer is heard in voice over (until the tracking brings her into view) complaining to the clerk that the packaging of the insect poison she is buying doesn't reveal whether it is painless. The camera cuts briefly, through windows in the front door of the store, to Lila getting out of her car outside, and stays on her long enough as she comes inside to show another car pulling up behind her. In brief retrospect, we can suspect that this or one like it will shortly prove to belong to Arbogast, though the cut to Figure 11 leaves the suspicion slightly suspect. My commentary here is intended to highlight some of the multiplicity of stories the cinematic and referential material that arrives at this selected still puts in play. Some of them will prove to be narratively connected (Lila's "Is Marion here?" that redirects Sam's involvement in the plot). Others are at best opaque, like the gossip world of the clerk who gets a hasty early lunch hour, or like that of the departing customer. Her inquiry about poison joins the main story, if at all, only at a much more distant level of verbal connection, in the contested question of how (or whether) Norman's mother died. Finally, the various and variously labeled stock on the shelves of the hardware store can be taken as a congeries of recessive signifiers of the uses and attendant narratives other shoppers and passers-by might bring to such a place. Sam's is a real mess of narrative possibilities.

[18]None of these interpretive possibilities determines a specific relation to Marion's *consciousness*. The bra could be the first thing that came to hand when she opened the underwear drawer. Intention and signification, here and elsewhere, are never necessarily connected. This is never truer than in this movie, which turns on strategic refusals of intention and expectation.

[19]Norman is showing her room to Marion, who is standing in the open door, roughly where the camera is. He has just glanced through the open curtained window to his left, which has a view of the house. Now he turns on the light in "the...uh..." bathroom," revealing a further, previously illegible (and for him still improperly articulable) space within the room.

[20]At the beginning of this sequence, the camera sees only Sam's capitulatory

[21]I have been losing precise count for years.

Figure 13 Front window, Marion's POV.[22]

With Marion's drive, the camera fixates visually and interminably on Marion, traffic and weather, and the minor variations in her expression. But narrative continuity (the significance of what we see) is pushed into the series of voice-overs that punctuate the sequence. These are moments in a version of the discovery of Marion's theft in the voices of Lowery, Caroline, and Cassidy as they make phone calls and put the sequence of events together. I take it these are Marion's imaginary constructions of what must have happened by now in Phoenix. She is talking to herself in the voices of others, constructing for herself what they must think about her and of her. This is particularly clear in the case of Cassidy's audible outrage at having been bamboozled by what he construes as a deceiving flirt and her "fine soft flesh," on which he vows vengeance. Figure 12 shows the one moment in this sequence in which Marion allows herself a visible response to these voices. Her slight but evident grin gives away the game. The pleasure she takes here shows her imagining a Cassidy to whom she can give her own response and on whom she can take her own revenge for the way he hit on her in the office when she had no power to respond. She is using Cassidy's voice to register what *she* thinks of *him*.

Though there is a flurry of explanation going on in the court outside this room, there is here and now literally nothing to look at but Norman seated against a blank wall as the camera nears the end of its track toward his figure. Again, the significance of the scene for the narrative moves from the poverty of the image to "Mother's" voice over explaining what we see, as "she" decides on the best strategy for survival in straitened circumstances. A brief examination of the context of these two sequences helps to clarify the more general relation between the diffuse and the fixated image in *Psycho*. In Marion's case, she has been subjected to the complex voices and presences of others from the beginning of the movie and has generally resisted what they threatened to make of her when she could. Leaving aside Sam, California Charlie, and the highway patrolman, the voice-overs here most clearly recall the scene in Lowery's office with its scatter of voices and lives that did with her a version of what she is doing to them now in the car. They were and are appropriating her, about whose real-life concerns they know nothing, as a covert way of talking about themselves. Even Hitchcock in his cameo is laying a

buried claim to Marion and her story, but Lowery was asking her to abet his complicity in money laundering.[23] Caroline's teeth-gritting eagerness to talk about the insecurities of her own marriage and sexual experience, using Marion's apparent celibacy as a pretext is evident enough. She is unable to refrain from making what is happening in the room from being about herself: "He was flirting with you. I guess he must have noticed my wedding ring." Little more needs to be said about Cassidy, whose casual harassment of the only evident target in the room is sufficiently nailed by Marion's brief impersonation and grin. All these indirect self-enactments imply experiences and whole lives (like the iceberg whose tip seems to be Caroline's wedding night), that might be followed in a movie of their own. What's stressed here is Marion's counter-agency against the original office sequence, and retrospectively it opens up what Marion felt at the time but could not express.

In Norman's case at the end of the film, I've already mentioned the fuss of explanation going on outside his room, but I think the best counter-diffusion to the fixation of Figure 13 is Lila's investigation/tour of the Bates house that leads to the movie's final revelation (Figure 14). The sequence is diffusely imaged. It is full of details that are relatively explicable in retrospect once the "secret" is out, like the imprint of Mrs. Bates' corpse on her empty bed, and many (though not all) of the features of her room. The image-core of the tour, however, is Norman's room, as layered in its own way as Sam's store: Unlike that store, however, the details of the room are individually surveyed in a series of eyeline match cuts as objects of Lila's gaze and interest. They include a toy car, a doll house, a stuffed bunny doll at the foot of a couch with a disheveled quilt on it (there is no bed in the room), a portable record player with an LP of Beethoven's third, "Eroica" symphony, and finally, a stack of books on a shelf. Lila selects one book whose spine has no title and begins to open it (Figure 15): Just as she does, the camera cuts to her intent face, and then immediately to Sam confronting Norman back at the motel. It cuts, that is, on the unfulfilled promise of written text that might contribute even more information about the room and its inhabitant. Prospectively, the camera seems, like Lila, to be seeking the living Mrs. Bates somewhere in the house. Retrospectively, however, looking back from Figure 16, Lila's tour is reconfigured by the film text as evidence in what is now also the characters' ongoing attempt to decipher Norman's "real" identity and how he got that way. The cinematic deliberation with which this evidential function is suppressed, fragmented, and generally rendered visually and verbally diffuse, gives "Norman's" final appearance in an uncluttered frame and a single voice, which is the apparent authority of a last word. It is, however one over which many unanswered questions about his formation and identity remain.[24]

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[22]It wasn't until I made this still that I realized how hard to read it is in this form. The diagonal that splits the screen is a windshield wiper moving from right to left. Screen left are the traces of approaching headlights obscured by rain. Screen right is the darkness of the side of the road where the wiper has briefly cleared the windshield. The progress of the sequence continues to eliminate things to look at, first of all for Marion.

[23]Marion's version of Lowery "I'm not taking the responsibility. Girl works for you for ten years, you trust her," catches the situation with economy.

[24]Just scratching the surface: The truth behind the circumstances of Mrs. Bates' and her lover's deaths is complexly muddied by the number of versions of it in the film. Norman/'s account of it to Marion that only the lover died, and his loss broke Norman's mother's spirit and health is fairly convincingly disproven eventually by the circumstances of the film, though one sees why Norman would tell it that way, since it functions both as a cover story and a wish. But how and by whom it was conveyed to the psychiatrist that Norman poisoned them both remains unclear. Deputy Sheriff Chambers' version that Mrs. Bates poisoned the lover when she discovered he was married (is this true? How does Chambers know? Was it investigated?) and then killed herself introduces another layer of unexplored motivations and complicities. The multiplication of stories and their mediations makes them all seem obscurely possible and obscurely interested. The common critical dissatisfaction with the psychiatrist's courtroom performance testifies similarly to the failure of the end of the movie to add up.

Figure 14 Fixated screen: Norman/mother.

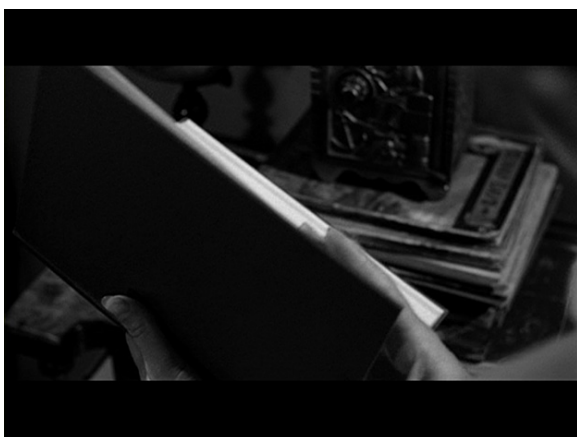**Figure 15** Diffuse screen: Lila [Vera Miles] searches Norman's room.

Figure 16 Lila starts to open book.

There is a parallel between the narrative rhythms of the sequences I've been looking at. They move from diffuse, graphic images that leave the connections between their elements as to-be-read, to fixated ones that a voice over purports to explain. The suggestion is that the latter, visually simplified framings, are responses to the earlier, more complexly inconclusive ones. In fact, they offer escapes from multiplicities of possibility into a deliberately inadequate idea of "pure cinema," where the image immediately tells you all you need to know, by catching up and embodying the complexities that have led to it: The most dramatically powerful of these apparently explanatory moments is undoubtedly the discovery of Mother's corpse and Norman's murderous agency. It is a sequence played out in quick cuts

around a barely furnished and undecorated fruit cellar, in which the mere positioning of characters' bodies conveys a "truth" no one was expecting. The last nine minutes of the movie will be taken up with attempts to explain this scene, all of which fail to do so adequately. The nearly universal critical dissatisfaction with the mansplaining performance of the psychiatrist testifies to the general effect.

I argue that this is a fundamental patterning of *Psycho* as a whole. All the film's famous surprise revelations Marion's death, the murder of Arbogast,[25] the truth about Mother's body, Norman's agency—four of the most famous—are committed to a focused concentration of imagery in the wake of, and abstracted from, a more diffuse and less decisively readable field and framing. In Psycho, these apparently clarifying and compressing shots always leave a remainder. In the unfolding of a plot based on the hidden further significance of each of its most shocking surprises, the trick that will transfigure their apparent meaning (most evidently that what appeared to be a real Mother was always Norman) remains reserved for subsequent figuration, for seeing plot and circumstance again. Again, however, what's proper to *Psycho* is the ascription of this dynamic to the characters, their motives, and their agencies.[26] Perhaps the clearest example is the ten minutes the film devotes to Norman's extended process of cleaning up all traces of the crime, including the disposal of Marion's body, her car, and unbeknownst to him the $40,000, in the swamp. It's easy to see that the character is working purposively and intentionally to render the appearances of the motel room, as the French say, *propre*, clean, but also, in English, "ordinary," just a motel room. He is laboring to erase the impropriety of the scene as he finds it, to transform the diffuse image of its disarray to the conceptually fixed image that has no other stories than its familiar anonymity to tell.

Similar is Marion's struggle following her dinner conversation with Norman, to alter and contain the meaning of what she has done, in the light of what looks like a resolve to break off her flight to Sam with the money. Her calculation of what she has spent of the $40,000, which she will have to repay if she returns it, is a calculation of what it will take to make the theft as if it did not happen.[27] As it has been from the beginning, her ambivalence about the actions she takes is first of all a difficulty for her. Stable decision-making about herself has always been Marion's problem, especially because any decision she makes is not solely dependent on her. Up to the point at which she is forcibly removed from the film it has been unclear to everyone who Marion will have been.[28]

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[25]I'm thinking of the movement from the complex architecture of staircase, landing, railings, and the opening door, whose exposition requires cutting and the famous rising-crane shot that shows their complex interrelation while concealing the identity of the assailant, as over against the closeup of Arbogast's face against the simple vertical rear projection of the stairs behind him as he falls. It's interesting how much overt cinematic manipulation these simplifications demand: cross cutting, camera movement, voice over, rear projection and in Norman's case at the end, superimposition of images. The complexities of the situation before or behind the diffuse image cannot be entirely eliminated, they are conspicuously shoved aside.

[26]I use the term "motive" to designate whatever *moves* one, to include both conscious and unconscious internal causes, as well as external pressures and necessities imposed by the world.

[27]Marion is not the only one to hanker for this. Arbogast's remit implies a similar motive back home in Phoenix: "They don't want to press charges; they just want the money back." That is, one strand of who Marion might turn out to have been is that she will never really have stolen it in the first place. It's an instance of characters attempting to control in retrospect the interpretation of the plot.

[28]Since no one in the movie imagines the true facts of her disappearance, this question gets passed on to the other characters. Their attempts to locate her are all fixated on the $40,000, which must appear in retrospect to function as the *characters'* Macguffin. This is Hitchcock's term for whatever causes the

What the text of Psycho shows, then, is the agency of the characters in bringing about the action of the film. Marion's and Norman's attempts to rework the meaning (the sound and the look, respectively), of prior events, are intentional. In both cases, the agents operate with more information about what's happened to them than either the other characters or the prospective audience, and to that degree are making clearly motivated choices. Note, however, in both cases, the domestic nature—the mundane laboriousness—of the process of attempted revision. However monstrous and extreme the circumstances whose interpretation these characters are attempting to control, they require plain old work. Ascribing interpretation to a character also applies to Norman/Mother at the end of the film. It can never be fully clear here who is speaking for themselves through the voice of another, since Mother's voice is concerned with how to manipulate appearances so as to control their seeming. The psychiatrist's interpretation of coherent dual personalities that obliterate one another may only really be a strategy of Norman's to escape[15] responsibility for his actions by pinning them on Mother.[29]

The film's inflection of its own itineraries from diffuse to fixated image and back articulates what the credits also display: a textualized, figural world of signifiers visual, inscriptive, and verbal that continually highlights the difficulties of interpretation in a manifold of rhizomatic possibilities, as well as the reactive impulses to simplification that try to establish clear causalities in such a causally overdetermined world. While critical attention has primarily focused on the movie's challenge to an audience by changing its plot without warning, the film's unfolding progressively clarifies the extent to which it has from the beginning offered and inflicted on the characters the opportunities and confusions of a world where plots have to be created, and then normalized as something deciphered. The "audience's" problem belongs first of all to the people in the movie.

It is in such moments that the real stories *Psycho* tells are located, in the wake of the faux solution of its apparent closure. The persistent registration of such moments depicts a world in which relatively minor affective excesses constantly push or leak into the various experiences of the characters. They do so often, as is the way of affects, at unexpected times and in unexpected ways, and only obliquely. They are registered more clearly in the film's enunciation than in the fully conscious awareness of those who experience them.

This is a depiction of human experience and the flow of attention consonant with the multiple possibilities of the diffuse image. It is also consonant with the defensive simplifications of the determinate image, in which interpretive possibilities too complex or too threatening are displaced into clarifying fictional narratives in voice over, and, like Norman cleaning the motel, into efforts to establish the propriety of appearances. They are a depiction, not so much of an affair of monsters a distractingly melodramatic[16] crime that hardly ever happens[30] but of

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fuss in his films: the plans, the assassination, etc. whose only real function in his movies is to cause the fuss, to tell you who the characters are in the light of their understandings of what's at stake. In this film, they are wrong, and the inflections of their wrongness retrospectively differentiate and complicate who they are individually.

[29]See Deborah Thomas, "On Being Norman: Performance and Inner Life in Hitchcock's *Psycho*," (Deutelbaum and Poague, 2009) 368-376. Ibid.

[30]For the discourse of monsters in recent theory see (Cohen, 1996).

cleaning up messes. *Psycho* is a depiction of the ways people have to live such a world of signifying instability mundanely, in the ordinary conduct of their lives and times.[17]

Conclusion

This interpretation rests on a deployment of textual figurality whose features have been described in detail. It demonstrates the value of retrospective reading and strict attention to the unfolding of a text that continually rereads itself. The article provides detailed evidence-based confirmation of the efficacy of its methods in producing a new account of the deep structure of *Psycho.*

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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