A review by David Walsh

Psycho, Vertigo and Gus Van Sant's passive resistance

Psycho, directed by Gus Van Sant, screenplay by Joseph Stefano, based on the novel by Robert Bloch

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In *Psycho* a young woman steals a large sum of money from her firm with the intention of starting a new life with her boyfriend. While en route by car to his hometown she stops at an out-of-the-way motel for the night. During a conversation with the pleasant, but nervous, young motel proprietor she has second thoughts about the theft and decides to return the money. The owner, however, is a lunatic. Excited and disturbed by her presence, he dresses up like his mother, whom he murdered years before, and stabs and kills the woman while she is taking a shower. A detective hired by her employer to find the missing woman is also murdered by the 'mother'. The murderer sinks both victims inside their cars in a swamp. Finally, the woman's sister and the boyfriend uncover the motel owner's secrets--in the process barely escaping death themselves--and he is locked away.

Alfred Hitchcock directed a version of *Psycho* in 1960 and now Gus Van Sant has made another.

Joseph Stefano wrote the original script based on a pulp novel by Robert Bloch, which was, in turn, inspired in part by the gruesome Ed Gein murder case. Gein was a farmer in central Wisconsin who, from the time his domineering mother died in 1945 until his arrest in 1957, dismembered female corpses (some he had dug up from graves, some he had murdered) and made use of their body parts.

Van Sant has done something unusual in making his film. He has attempted to reproduce Hitchcock's work, more or less, shot for shot. He says that '95 percent of everything was shot according to the original.'

Why has he done it? '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 moviegoers 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.'

The filmmaker continues: 'There is an attitude that cinema is a relatively new art and therefore there's no reason to 'restage' a film. But as cinema gets older there is also an audience that is increasingly unpracticed at watching old films, silent films, black and white films. *Psycho* is perfect to refashion as a modern piece. Reflections are a major theme in the original, with mirrors everywhere, characters who reflect each other. This version holds up a mirror to the original film: it's sort of its schizophrenic twin.'

Taken at face value these arguments don't hold much water. If Van Sant is concerned that black and white films are no longer watched, why not organize the re-release and distribution of the original *Psycho*, as well as other older films? His response seems less a solution than an adaptation to the problem. I would suggest this is the key to a more general understanding of Van Sant. He seems too much of a chameleon.

His *Psycho* is pleasurable. I prefer the first third of the film to the rest. It is an extraordinary evocation of a certain type of American existence: flat, drab, businesslike, suburban (although set in downtown Phoenix), glass-and-chrome. Critic Manny Farber called this section of the original 'bare, stringent, minimal.... The most striking material is the humdrum day-in-the-life of a real estate receptionist: Godardlike, anonymous rooms, bare, uncomfortable.' Arizona, a real desert. Much of this feeling is retained in the remake. At the center of this dry and bright and somewhat corrupt world, a young woman, churning with emotions--except I prefer Janet Leigh's churning to Anne Heche's. She takes off, as anyone with any sense would. Confrontations with a motorcycle cop and a used car salesman mark the road to purgatory or worse. She leaves the sunny arid plains for the wet, dark slopes where madness apparently lies in wait.

Anthony Perkins and now Vince Vaughn are fun as the nutty Norman Bates, but I think both films go downhill once they start to go uphill, toward the place where 'Mother' lives. After the shower scene, which is chilling, and Norman's cleanup, the new film gets pretty silly, as did the old, with its 'California Gothic' haunted house and dime store Freudianism.

The claim is made for the original *Psycho* that by making the average-looking Bates into a homicidal maniac, Hitchcock transformed movie audiences' notion of the abnormal and psychotic in American life, bringing it far closer to home. Unfortunately, I think the opposite is largely the case. The script and film wasted the opportunity, in my view, to say something substantial about 'normal' America and merely created a new category of the alien Other, in this case the isolated, sexually repressed madman, against whom filmgoers can fairly easily erect a psychological barrier and keep at a distance: 'After all, looks are deceiving, he's nothing like us!'

Psycho, it seems to me, revealed Hitchcock's artistic and intellectual limitations and marked the beginning of his decline. The source of difficulty becomes even more 'external' and alien in *The Birds*, and the filmmaker then drifted off into Cold War films and other lesser projects.

I would contrast *Psycho* unfavorably with *Vertigo*, made two years earlier. In that film James Stewart plays John 'Scottie' Ferguson, a retired police detective, afraid of heights, who is ostensibly hired to shadow a rich man's wife, Madeleine Elster. In fact, he follows the husband's mistress (Kim Novak) posing as the wife, and falls madly in love with her.

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The wealthy man, Gavin Elster, has hired Scottie because the latter's vertigo will prevent him climbing a tower from which the husband plans to push his real wife. After Madeleine Elster's death, a coroner accuses Scottie of negligence, although not legal culpability, and the former detective retreats into catatonic silence. When he emerges he runs into a woman on the street who reminds him strikingly of the woman he believes dead (it is the double, Judy Barton). In the end, Scottie discovers the deception and forces the woman up the stairs at the scene of the original crime. Accidentally, she falls from the tower and Scottie is left there, devastated, helpless, alone, 'on the edge of the tower, whose dome is like a grave' (Raymond Durgnat, in *The Strange Case of Alfred Hitchcock*).

I place *Vertigo* (1958) in a group along with a number of other American-made films of the time, including Douglas Sirk's *Written on the Wind* (1957) and *Imitation of Life* (1959), Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958), Vincente Minnelli's *Some Came Running* (1959) and Otto Preminger's *Bonjour Tristesse* (1958), as works of deep sadness or disillusionment. In their quite different ways they attempt to come to terms with the disturbing material and psychic reality of postwar America and its contradictions. They hint as well at a change in atmosphere, a more critical appraisal of the materialism and conformism at the end of the Eisenhower years.

I take *Vertigo* to be a study of the conflict between a certain type of personality, the upright Protestant policeman, 'Scottie,' with his 'legalistic detective morality' (Durgnat), and the world of suppressed desires, as well as the changing (and perhaps threatening) social world. And more generally, between elementary human needs and the prevailing conditions of life. Durgnat, whose conclusions have nothing in common with mine, points to 'Scottie's apparent innocence of the world,' 'his gangling, middle-American style,' to the 'amicable conformism' of the detective's universe, 'a complacent world which denies all which lies beneath it,' 'its mediocre excess of moderation, with its accident-prone policemen, its malicious Coroner, its superficial psychiatrist.'

As for Scottie's vertigo, numerous commentators have pointed out that sexual desire is a kind of swooning, the fear and simultaneous wish to surrender to one's own body. At the same time, I think Scottie finds the changes in San Francisco and American life dizzying, alluring, terrifying, in particular the invasion of a non-white, non-Protestant population--ethnic, Latin, black. (It should be remembered, incidentally, that Kim Novak was one of the first Hollywood actors, along with Marlon Brando, to keep a non-WASP, 'ethnic'--in her case Czech--name.)

Contrasted with this is the Old San Francisco epitomized apparently by the shipping magnate Gavin Elster, whom we first see in his elegant wood-paneled office, decorated with models or paintings of nineteenth century clipper ships. Of course, the patrician Elster proves to be a liar and a murderer, further disorienting Scottie and pulling the rug out from underneath him.

Hitchcock as a social commentator? No more nor no less than any other artist who explores the world in search of some basis for intellectual, emotional and sexual satisfaction. Are there any grounds for contentment? If not, he or she traces out the unhappiness, the lack of satisfaction, and works against it. The film or painting is in part an act of resistance. One can only look for that satisfaction within one's surroundings, not History or Society or Human Psychology as abstractions.

There are other sides to *Vertigo*, but these brief comments should indicate how relatively complex the film is in comparison with the contrived and somewhat simplistic *Psycho*. (Could anyone conceive of recreating *Vertigo* as Van Sant has done with *Psycho*, even if one leaves aside Stewart's enormously expressive performance?) After the bleak conclusion of the former film Hitchcock either had to penetrate more deeply into the nature and source of the discontent he had begun to tap into and represent, or to retreat. *Psycho*, in my mind, represents a shying away from the more difficult issues.

Hitchcock always claimed that the film was something of a dark joke. He said, 'You see it's rather like taking them through the haunted house at the fairground.' I think one should take him at his word.

How did Van Sant end up taking on Hitchcock's famous work? Born in Louisville, Kentucky in 1952, the future director attended the Rhode Island School of Design. He made his first feature film, *Mala Noche*, in 1987, followed by *Drugstore Cowboy*, in my opinion his best work, in 1989 and *My Own Private Idaho* two years later. *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1993), *To Die For* (1995) and *Good Will Hunting* (1997) marked his entry into commercial filmmaking.

The element of imitation or perhaps more accurately *appropriation* has seemed to play a recurring role in Van Sant's work. *Drugstore Cowboy* captures the mood of the 1950s Beat Generation drug culture and literary legends. *My Own Private Idaho* includes lengthy passages from Shakespeare's *Henry IV*. *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* is an awful film, but I've always assumed that it was Van Sant's intent to reproduce the muddleheadedness of Tom Robbins's hippie novel. *To Die For*, about a small-town woman who seduces a couple of high school students and manipulates them into killing her husband, is borrowed from the newspaper headlines and recounts a story of people mesmerized by television images. *Good Will Hunting* was the director's earnest attempt to make a commercially successful film, almost by the numbers. *Psycho* is a shot-for-shot remake of an earlier work.

This is entirely speculative, but it is tempting to consider the significance of Van Sant's years as an art student when Andy Warhol ruled the roost in New York City. I see something of Warhol's Campbell's soup cans in this *Psycho*, and in Van Sant's understated comment that 'I want art to be like food--when you see a tomato in a store, it's a thing, you understand it, you know what it is. It's part of life. And art should be like that, it should be organic, something that isn't rarefied.'

There is a tendency in art, perhaps particularly among gay artists, that considers the appropriation of images taken from popular culture a kind of sly, subversive commentary, a form of passive resistance. Here, they say, we'll take this and in our hands it becomes something quite different. I think this is very limited. To pretend to be something long enough, as Trotsky once pointed out, is the most effective means of becoming it. For Warhol, no matter what any of his defenders claim, his borrowing was primarily, in the end, a means of disgusting accommodation and an entryway into the establishment. If there is mocking, it is impotent and empty mocking, by someone clamoring for acceptance.

In the final analysis, whether Van Sant was only half in earnest in directing the 'heart-warming' and ultimately conformist *Good Will Hunting* hardly makes a difference. The gap between the appropriated object and the 'real thing' narrows dangerously, perhaps disappears altogether. Absolute originality may be a trivial conceit, but even old ideas need reworking and reconsideration. Restatement, even under new conditions and in new surroundings, provides no commentary in and of itself. With each new generation, as in sound recording, there is a loss of feeling and authenticity.

There is no reason to write Van Sant off. He is talented and smart, and one still recalls achingly beautiful moments in *Drugstore Cowboy*, and certain remarkable ones in *My Own Private Idaho* and even in *To Die For*. And *Psycho*, I repeat, is pleasurable and intelligently made. But the director must find something of his own to say or he will end up saying nothing at all.

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