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Title

"I am Norman Bates": Manifestations of the Maternal Acousmatic in Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho

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Bio

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Introduction

In his chapter on *Psycho* in the recent *Hitchcock's Music*, Jack Sullivan discusses “The Knife,” the cue occurring during the famous shower scene, which he refers to as “[t]he most famous cue in movie history...cinema’s primal scream...the sound of primordial dread.”¹ People who have never seen *Psycho* recognize it instantly, especially since it has been forever fused with the violent gestures it accompanied onscreen.

In this talk, I present a reading of *Psycho* that relates Bernard Herrmann’s iconic score to the elusive Mother in an attempt to illustrate how film music can communicate gendered meaning. As music is often thought of as nonrepresentational it can be difficult to articulate the connection between an emotional response (fear) and specific musical figures. However, *Psycho* is a film that investigates gender through the lens of a pathological mother-son dyad, and music and sound, especially voice, are crucial to how this relationship is understood. Ultimately, I argue that not only does Mother direct the trajectory of the film score, she occupies the same space as it does.

Mother's story, unlike Marion's or Norman's, is articulated on the level of sound, both concretely through her voice, and more abstractly through Herrmann's music. This articulation not only adds horror to the disjunctive plot, but embodies the horror and monstrosity of the film as a whole, a horror that hinges on maternal powers of containment and ubiquity that film most often seeks to disavow. Despite her murder,

¹ Sullivan, op. cit., 243.

Mother lives on. She continues to exercise almost total control over her son from beyond the grave, the most striking mode of which is her voice. The maternal voice is generally presented as some kind of containment; containment which can be maintained long after the mother has given birth, and in the case of *Psycho*, long after her death.

Chion characterizes the maternal voice as “an umbilical net...woven around the child...originating from all points in space.” For Chion the maternal voice serves as an acoustic reminder of a time marked by subjective chaos and helplessness. Norman is attempting to disentangle himself from this “umbilical net,” a project at which he ultimately fails. Since exteriority can only be defined in relation to interiority, this anxiety must be soothed by displacing infantile characteristics onto the Mother, effectively positioning her on the inside of the net.

While Marion, who screams as she is assaulted, killed, and literally shifted back to a small, claustrophobic space submerged in primordial ooze, has been repositioned, the case for Mrs. Bates is slightly more complicated. It is true that Norman has killed and internalized her, but he fails to hold any power over her. Though Mother exists inside Norman (as he once existed inside her), we never see her alive, nor do we see Norman speaking in her voice. She remains unattached.

This unattachment is what audio theorist Michel Chion terms, the acousmatic, the sound without a visible source. The acousmatic, Chion argues, plays with off-screen space, and as a result possesses a number of powers imparted by this liminal status: ubiquity, panopticism, omniscience, and omnipotence.² While these qualities are quite

² Chion, 24.

similar, each relates to a slightly different power: ubiquity to presence, panopticism to surveillance, omniscience to knowledge, and omnipotence to agency.

Not only is Mother's voice acousmatic, it also remains constant regardless of location. For example, Marion can hear Mrs. Bates harshly upbraiding Norman for wanting to bring a stranger into the house, even though Marion is in her motel room, and Norman and Mother are in the house at the top of the hill, and it is raining. Every subsequent rendering of Mother's voice is somewhat unrealistic, bathed in reverb, denying the viewer the ability to locate the source. This gives her voice the impression of, as Chion would say, "originating from all points in space."

In this context, the power of Mother's voice lies in its anchorlessness; it can be heard no matter what the obstacle, and is never attached to a moving mouth that would produce the words the audience hears being spoken. This anchorlessness is a form of the exteriority Silverman argues is, by and large, the province of men in dominant cinema.

I'd like to show a clip illustrating the incompatibility of the physical diegesis and Mother's voice.

Play "I am Norman Bates!" Clip 1:40:33 - 1:41:17

3. Music

It is at this moment that we can clearly see how Mother's voice tends to merge with Herrmann's musical score rather than with the onscreen characters. Norman's mouth is open, but he is not forming words. Having no body to tie her down, Mrs. Bates enters a space closer to that occupied by the musical score. As such, I read the majority of the recurring music in the film as an articulation of her dispersed, acousmatic powers.

The music that I relate to *Mother* can be seen as falling into four corresponding categories: 1) the “Psycho theme” introduced during the credits to her ubiquity, 2) the music that introduces Marion and Sam to her panopticism, 3) the slower-paced music associated with Norman’s psychosis to her omniscience and, of course, 4) the music accompanying all acts of violence to her omnipotence.

I. The “Psycho” theme

The Prelude of *Psycho* opens with what is labeled on the cue sheet as the “psycho theme.” This 12-bar phrase contains one of the only melodic lines in the film. It is a simple line, consisting of nothing more than an unstable, slurred scale, but when paired with visuals of Marion driving her car or Arbogast conducting his search, it asserts a kind continuity and pull. This umbilical line occurs whenever a character, whether aware of it or not, is closing in on the Bates Motel and the omnipresent Mother.

II. “The City”

As the Prelude comes to an uneasy end, it segues into “The City,” a cue which serves to carry the audience into the seedy hotel room where Marion and Sam are lounging. The level, even legato floats over the cityscape of Phoenix, as the camera sweeps smoothly through the window of the hotel. This collection of dissonant, falling and rising ninth chords speaks to Mother’s eyes and her function as, essentially, a panopticon. Interestingly enough, this music occurs most often in relation to Marion, when she is being observed without her knowledge: first by the audience in the hotel room, then by the police officer in the used car lot, and finally by Norman in the parlor.

Marion is a woman who longs to be a wife, to possess a sexuality of which her mother would approve. But despite her good intentions, Marion’s indiscretions are being

monitored from the start of the film. This is introduced when Sam chides Marion about “turning mother’s picture to the wall” after dinner, suggesting that even a photograph can judge their behavior. We can see here how *Psycho* presents all maternity as a moral, enculturating function, even from beyond the grave. Mother will forever haunt her offspring with the possibility that someone, somewhere, is watching and evaluating.

III. “The Madhouse”

Of all the music related to Mother, “The Madhouse,” which first occurs as Norman and Marion are talking in the parlor, is the most amorphous, the least melodic. It can be read as the cruel evaluation of knowledge gained through surveillance, starting with low, menacing ostinati and eerie muted harmonics, and eventually moving on to a purposeful pizzicato.

Barbara Creed comments on the strangeness of Norman’s labeling his stuffed birds as “passive,” when he has frozen them at the very moment they appear the most aggressive. She ultimately argues that Norman has killed Mother in an attempt to “still her prying eye.”³ But Mother is still there, poised and ready to strike. This is exactly what I hear in the music related to “The Madhouse” cue. It is low and persistent, devoid of loud, aggressive musical gestures, just as the stuffed birds (and Mother) are a terrifying, ever-vigilant presence in Norman’s life.

IV. “The Murder/The Knife”

And finally, where would a discussion of *Psycho*’s music be without mention of “The Knife.” It is easy to extend Creed’s argument about the castrating mother to Herrmann’s violent use of high, screeching strings during the murder (and near-murder) sequences. The aggressive attacks – played without the use of vibrato which would

³ Creed, op. cit., 143.

normally soften such an attack – begin at the same time Mother yanks open the shower curtain. So “The Knife” does not really begin at the same time as the stabbing action it is most often associated with; it begins with the aggression of Mother. The same is true for the murder of Arbogast, and the scene in which we finally see Norman, wielding a knife, dressed as Mother.

The bird-like nature of these sounds must be linked with the numerous visual and narrative allusions to birds that occur throughout the film. This is one of Creed’s main justifications for reading *Psycho* as a text about a castrating mother, for she sees the beak as not only penetrating, but as devouring as well. Creed reads this “devouring” as the power to castrate, dispelling the notion that woman only terrifies in the horror film because she is castrated.

5. Conclusion

In his discussion of the acousmatic Chion points out the similarity, both morphologically and semantically, in the French terms for embodiment (*mise-en-corps*) and interment (*mise-en-terre*). Both are modes of designating a symbolic space: for the voice in the former, and the soul and body in the latter. Mother has eluded both forms of enclosure, to the point where her voice contains not only her son’s mind, but his image and body as well. This is accomplished in part by the presentation of her voice as subjective and all-encompassing, but also by her influence which seems to organize the musical score. Ultimately, *Psycho* presents a powerful maternal figure in the disembodied Mrs. Bates who, unlike her counterparts in classical Hollywood cinema, refuses to relinquish her vocal exteriority while simultaneously exercising power from the most intimate of interior positions.