

REMAKING PSYCHO

by JAMES NAREMORE

Critical discussions of movie remakes have a good deal in common with discussions of literary adaptations. Both deal with the somewhat questionable idea of the original versus the copy, both value the unique work of art, and both treat the "precursor text" with a kind of deference. The typical essay on adaptation can be summed up by a *New Yorker* cartoon that Alfred Hitchcock once described to Francois Truffaut: two goats are eating a pile of film cans, and one goat says to the other, "Personally, I liked the book better."¹ A roughly similar argument can be found in most writing about remakes, if only because classic Hollywood is now universally regarded as a respectable art form that created a large number of culturally treasured works, many of which are subject to recycling, updating, and retelling by contemporary producers.

Certainly there is nothing new about the phenomenon of remakes, which sometimes result in good films. (Consider Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much*.) Popular art and commercial entertainment have always depended upon the repetition of successful formulas. But audiences today have an unusual historical self-consciousness (many of them enjoy watching old movies on TV), and certain remade movies are more likely than others to be regarded with suspicion by cognoscenti. Some Hollywood films (*King Kong*, for instance) are especially suited to remaking because they are inherently spectacular and have an elemental, mythopoetic quality. Others resist the process, either because they require unique stars (The Marx Brothers, Astaire and Rogers), or because they belong to a particular period of entertainment that is difficult to "translate" into the present (the Freed-unit musicals at MGM). Still others (*Citizen Kane* is the preeminent example) have such artistic prestige and historical significance that remaking them, as opposed to quoting them or borrowing their ideas, seems crass and pointless. Among the esteemed

pictures in this last category is Hitchcock's *Psycho*, and it comes as no surprise that director Gus Van Sant's 1998 attempt to reshoot that film in color with contemporary actors was treated by most critics as a travesty.

Van Sant is a respectable filmmaker with several fine pictures to his credit, including *Drugstore Cowboy*, *My Own Private Idaho*, and *To Die For*. In this case, however, he chose a project that was simply asking for bad reviews. Perhaps he didn't care, but even if his aims were purely commercial, he failed miserably. Hitchcock's *Psycho* is one of the most profitable pictures ever made, whereas Van Sant's *Psycho* (backed by a heavy Universal Studios promotion campaign and a mail-order contest offering a grand prize of dinner for two at the Bates Motel on the studio lot) did only lukewarm business, at best helping to stimulate video rentals of the earlier film. And the reason for its box-office failure is fairly obvious: despite the fact that Van Sant reproduces many of Hitchcock's key sequences shot for shot, he seems unwilling or unable to generate even a modicum of the fear Hitchcock induced in his original audience.

Here I speak from direct knowledge, because my first viewing of Hitchcock's *Psycho* was during its initial theatrical release, at the Lowe's Theater in New Orleans, Louisiana, and it was one of the most carnivalistic events I've experienced at the movies. You could barely hear the film because of the hysterical shrieks and nervous laughter of the crowd, who had bought their tickets not for the sake of art but for the sake of a roller-coaster ride of primal emotion. The loudest screams came when Lila Crane started down into the cellar, and they continued straight through the unmasking of Norman, only to be followed by a barrage of jittery conversations that entirely covered up the psychiatrist's "explanation" at the end. For me at least, that viewing was unpleasantly raucous, and the film was galvanically terrifying—almost as disturbing as when my mother took me as a small child to see a re-release of Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (perhaps significantly, the witch in *Snow White* bears a certain resemblance to the corpse of Mrs. Bates in *Psycho*). In

1960 I was already a confirmed admirer of Hitchcock, and yet almost a decade went by before I could detach myself enough from my initial fright to recognize that this particular picture was not simply a brilliant piece of exploitation, but also an artistic masterpiece. When I was invited in 1973 to write a critical monograph on *Psycho*, I actually worried because I thought that repeated exposure to certain scenes would give me nightmares.²

By contrast, Van Sant's film strikes me as academic and not at all scary. On my personal fright meter, it registers far lower than any number of the movies that were clearly influenced by *Psycho*, including Polanski's *Repulsion*, Friedkin's *The Exorcist*, Spielberg's *Jaws*, and even DePalma's *Carrie* and *Dressed to Kill*. But this does not mean that it entirely lacks interest. On the contrary, it deserves at least a brief footnote to film history, if only because it is almost unique among movie remakes.

We should recall that Hitchcock himself was not averse to remaking *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, and that he wanted to make a sound version of *The Lodger*. Several of his films have been remade as average or downright bad pictures by other directors, including *The 39 Steps*, *The Lady Vanishes*, *Shadow of a Doubt*, *Dial M for Murder*, *Notorious*, and *Rear Window* (some of these were released under different titles, and the last two were produced as TV movies), and *Psycho* and *The Birds* have spawned sequels and a prequel. One could even argue that Hitchcock's very authorship, like that of a few other major directors in the classic period (Howard Hawks comes immediately to mind), lies in his ability to continually remake or recombine a basic repertory of narrative situations and cinematic techniques, thus creating a characteristic "world." None of these examples, however, is quite the same as Van Sant's *Psycho*, which appropriates most of the original film's script, decoupage, music, and design, sometimes duplicating the tiniest details of the mise-en-scène (such as the word "okay" printed at the top of a newspaper sticking out of Marion Crane's purse). It does all this, moreover, not with just any film, but with the picture that,

more than any other, established Hitchcock as the major figure in the auteurist movement and the most influential director in Hollywood history.

In interviews at the time of the film's release, Van Sant claimed that movies were rather like theater pieces, and that there was no good reason why classic films shouldn't be restaged in the same way as classic plays. This argument is of course disingenuous, because movies have as much in common with novels as with theater, and because Van Sant's *Psycho* is not simply a re-filming of Joseph Stefano's script. More like a colorization or an elaborate quotation of things that were literally printed on another film, its closest analogue can be seen in a few sequences from Van Sant's earlier picture, *My Own Private Idaho*, which offer a replay of key episodes in Orson Welles's *Chimes at Midnight*, with all the actors dressed in contemporary costume. As far as I know, such a technique is peculiar to Van Sant, although in a general sense it seems fully symptomatic of our *fin-de-siècle* culture, which often succeeds less as straightforward entertainment or as thoughtful representation than as pastiche, quotation, and conceptual art. Surprisingly, given its large budget and wide commercial release, Van Sant's remake of *Psycho* resembles nothing so much as a museum installation. Its chief value is on the pedagogical or theoretical level, where it functions, intentionally or not, as a metafilm and reveals a good deal about Hitchcock's specific achievement.

The remake demonstrates that even the small differences have enormous consequences. The credit sequence, for example, reproduces Saul Bass's original design (adapted by Pablo Ferro), but the lime green background spoils the stark graphic effect and seems inconsistent with what Bernard Herrmann himself once described as "black and white" title music. The opening view of Phoenix, Arizona is a Panavision, color image of today's skyline photographed from a helicopter; and when the camera moves toward an open window, a computer enhancement allows it to execute a showy trick effect, floating straight past the casement and into the room without an apparent cut. Inside the hotel

room, the conversation between Sam and Marion not only involves new actors and a glimpse of male nudity, but also a different pattern of blocking, cuts, and camera movements (including a close-up insert of a house fly that foreshadows the one on Norman's hand at the end of the film). Even in the later scenes, which often adhere quite closely to Hitchcock's original, Van Sant introduces significant variations. For me at least, his film becomes less a horror movie than an purely intellectual exercise. I know what's going to happen next, and the only suspense is in watching to see what sorts of glitzy alterations will be made to some of Hitchcock's best scenes. As an indication of these alterations, here are a few notes on the formal systems of both pictures:

Script. In keeping with contemporary Hollywood, the 1998 film is more explicit: Norman masturbates as he watches Marion disrobe for a shower, and when Lila explores Norman's room, she discovers a pornographic magazine. The dialogue is subjected to a certain updating (bits of profanity and contemporary slang), and the psychiatrist's speech at the end is greatly modified. Van Sant probably thought he was being more sophisticated by omitting the pompous explanation of Norman's behavior (especially the line about transvestites, which usually draws unwanted laughter at screenings of the original film); but in my view, this change gives the psychiatrist more authority than he deserves, and it places the blame too much on Mrs. Bates. In Hitchcock's version, the ending is more ambiguous, and the contrast between the rational world and the mad world is more vivid. Who is really speaking to us in the closing interior monologue of Hitchcock's picture? Has Mrs. Bates "taken over," or is Norman simply regressing into his psychotic fantasy of the dead woman and using her as a perverse rationale? Does it make any sense to assign a coherent self or personality to the voice we hear and the body we see? Some of this vertiginous mystery is lost in the new version.

Casting and Acting. On the whole, Van Sant's cast is highly talented, and in most cases they behave more naturalistically than the original players. But only occasionally, in

the minor roles, is there any improvement over Hitchcock. Julianne Moore is a far more gifted actor than Vera Miles, and Chad Everett is more effective than Frank Albertson as the smarmy, vaguely threatening businessman in a cowboy hat who makes a pass at Marion Crane. The major problem is with the leading players. Anne Heche conveys almost nothing of Janet Leigh's hard-boiled intelligence and mounting neurosis, and the best thing one can say about Vince Vaughn is that he makes us appreciate the greatness of Anthony Perkins. Vaughn's chief difficulty may be that, in keeping with the overall approach of the film, he is required to copy Perkins's performance almost gesture for gesture; the result is a stale imitation, with nothing of the boyish humor, pathos, and sinister grace that derived from Perkins himself. To make matters worse, Vaughn is a different body type from Perkins, and he cannot evoke the subtle "doubling" one senses everywhere in Hitchcock. In the original version, Norman sometimes looks feminine and avian (the double of Marion Crane), sometimes like a dark-haired leading man (the double of Sam Loomis), and sometimes like an angular stick figure (the double of Mrs. Bates's skeleton). These visual rhymes are completely missing in Van Sant's picture, which almost entirely lacks the creepy wit of the original. In the climactic scenes, when Sam and Norman battle in the cellar, Norman looks like a fullback wearing a fright wig.

Sound. The 1998 film makes far greater use of ambient sound to comment on the images. In the opening scene, for example, we hear not only street noises but also a strange muffled cry coming from elsewhere in the hotel. During Norman's interior monologue at the end, we hear a muted chorus of babbling voices and echoes, representing the mind of a schizophrenic—a type of aural expressionism that seems to me far less effective than the "mad" lucidity of Hitchcock's version. I would also note that even though Van Sant has the benefit of Bernard Herrmann's original score (adapted by Danny Elfman and Steve Bartek), the music in his film seems less forceful, less fully present, than in Hitchcock. The reason why may have something to do with the orchestration and

the distracting effect of the color photography; but it probably owes more to Van Sant's slight modification of the original relation between image and music—especially in the shower scene, which delays the start of the music, and in the film's closing shot, which overly prolongs the scene of the car emerging from the swamp and then segues into a long credit sequence overlaid with a modernized, electric-guitar rendition of Herrmann's theme music.

Photography. If Hitchcock had made *Psycho* in 1998, he would probably have used color, because black and white seems a bit too arty in contemporary films. His decision to avoid color in 1960 seems to have been motivated less by aesthetic than by economic concerns. He actually feared that *Psycho* might not be a success, and the completed film, photographed in noirish style by low-budget cameraman John Russell, is as close as Hitchcock came during his American career to making a B picture. No doubt Hitchcock was also worried about the censors, and he used black and white because he knew that it would make the scenes of bloody murder less explicit. By contrast, Van Sant has no reason to think his viewers will be repulsed by the sight of red blood running down a shower drain (countless Hitchcock imitators have already shown this), and he even shows the open red knife wounds in Marion Crane's back. He also employs photographer Christopher Doyle, who is one of the most talented exponents of color in the business. Doyle evokes some of the atmosphere of the original by using rich, deep blacks and cast shadows, but the overall effect of the new film at its best is rather like an eerie, surrealistic retouching of some of Hitchcock's most memorable images. Vivid notes of color—an orange dress and parasol, a blue sky, a flash of red neon—are introduced into the original compositions, as if the older film were being "dreamed." Unfortunately, the color slightly attenuates the force of Hitchcock's brilliant montage sequences, which were designed for black and white. Notice also that Doyle cannot achieve deep focus in the low-key scenes. During the crucial interview between Marion and Norman in the motel sitting room,

we have very little sense of how characters are related to objects in the background.

Editing and Camera Movement. When Van Sant makes a fundamental change in any one of the film's formal elements, he affects all the others. He reproduces Hitchcock's editing of the famous murder scenes almost exactly, but the Panavision framing and color photography in the new film creates a kind of "noise" or extra layer of information that somewhat obscures the bold graphic conflicts and relatively abstract, geometric quality of Hitchcock's work. As if to compensate, Van Sant plays minor but obvious variations on these sequences, inserting a metaphoric images that briefly disorient viewers. (In the shower scene we glimpse a bank of storm clouds; when detective Arbogast is stabbed, we glimpse a woman wearing nothing but a G-string and a black mask, and a lonely cow on a wet road.) He also tries to "improve" on Hitchcock by using the latest camera technology; for example, he greatly exaggerates the spiral out from Marion's dead eye, rotating the image so dizzily that he spoils the mood of one of the most famous dissolves in movie history.

Mise-en-scène and Production Design. The clothing and set decorations in the new *Psycho* have been updated for the 1990s. Marion Crane wears a Wonder Bra, and her sister carries a back pack. Even the haunted house on the hill looks oddly and inexplicably modernized, rather like a mansion in the suburbs. But what does this updating actually involve? Americans today wear many of the styles they wore in the Eisenhower era, so that the differences between then and now are relatively trivial. Women's brassieres and the censorship codes may have changed, but in general we no longer create new fashions; we simply recycle and modify the old ones, just as we make movies that nostalgically return us to the pop culture of the 40s, 50s, or 60s. Van Sant can therefore remake *Psycho* with very little alteration of its basic settings. Even so, he makes bad choices. In his version, the shower spigot in cabin one of the Bates motel is octagonal in shape, and we therefore lose one of the important graphic

motifs of the murder scene. Also in his version, the painting Norman removes from the wall when he spies on Marion is a reproduction of Titian's "Venus With a Mirror," which seems to suggest both feminine narcissism and rape. In Hitchcock, the painting is more appropriate: a biblical scene depicting Susanna and the Elders. (Susanna is disrobing for her bath while a group of old men spy on her.)

I could go on, but further details of this sort seem unnecessary. Van Sant's film is ultimately an intriguing lesson in what not to do with a remake. It makes me think of a parable by Walter Benjamin, which I shall attempt to paraphrase:

An old and fabulously wealthy king who was about to die summoned his master chef to the throne room. "When I was a child," the king said to the chef, "our nation was invaded by my father's enemies, and he and I fled briefly into the northern provinces, where we took refuge in the snow-covered cabin of a peasant woman. While we were there, the woman cooked us the most delicious mulberry omelette I've ever eaten. The memory has stayed with me all my life. I want you to recreate that omelette now, so that I can taste it again before I die. But I warn you, it must be the exactly same omelette. If you succeed, you will be rewarded with half my wealth; if you fail, you will be executed." The chef thought this problem over for a moment and then replied, "Sire, I know exactly how to prepare the omelette of which you speak. I know the bushes from which the mulberries must be gathered. I know the exact seasonings the peasant woman used. I even know that the eggs must be stirred with a wooden spoon in a counter-clockwise direction. But unfortunately I cannot recreate your omelette. Your boyhood fear, your journey to the north woods, and your warmth and comfort in the peasant cabin—none of these things are in my power to reproduce. My omelette will never taste the same as the one from your youth, and I have no choice but to go to the executioner."³

One implication of this parable is that works of art depend on their context, and that our experience of any

given work of art changes over time. Thus, even if Van Sant had been completely faithful to Hitchcock (assuming such a thing was possible), he could never have recreated *Psycho*. A better solution would have been to simply remaster the original 35mm print and exhibit it around the world. A new print of *Psycho* will in fact be shown this year in New York, as part of the Hitchcock centennial celebration at NYU. But will that film be the same one I experienced in my youth? I think not. For all its continuing interest, *Psycho* is no longer a cutting-edge horror film. Hitchcock's dark satire of American sex and money has entered into popular folklore and become part of the cinema's imaginary museum, but it is also of its time and place. Like all powerful works of art, it can be reinterpreted and reevaluated. It can produce new meanings and inspire new films, but it can never be remade, and it shouldn't be slavishly imitated.

Notes

1. For additional comments on adaptation in film, see my forthcoming anthology, *Film Adaptation* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000). On remakes, see Andrew Horton and Stuart Y. McDougal, eds., *Play It Again, Sam: Retakes on Remakes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). See also Thomas Leitch, "Twice-Told Tales: the Rhetoric of the Remake," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 18, No. 3 (1997): 138-49.
2. James Naremore, *The Filmguide to Psycho* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973).
3. My retelling of this story, like Van Sant's retelling of Hitchcock, is inferior to the original. For Benjamin's version, see "Food," in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Volume 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 363-64.