



PSYCHO: FROM TEXT TO SCREEN – COMPARING THE NOVEL AND THE FILM

SOTIRIS PETRIDIS
HELLENIC OPEN UNIVERSITY

FILM AND NOVEL – AN INTRODUCTION

From the beginning of cinema until our days, film adaptation is something quite common. A big percentage of these adaptations are coming from literary works, and more especially, novels. Great examples of film adaptations are *Gone with the Wind* (Fleming, 1939), *Casablanca* (Curtiz, 1942), and *The Silence of the Lambs* (Demme, 1991), while a lot of blockbusters too are based on literary works, such as the *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* franchises. Because of the extensive production of film adaptations, a public discourse has started regarding the accuracy of every adaptation. In other words, the question of whether the film remains faithful to the novel is always present. Of course, there are a lot of differences between the two arts. Films are produced through a complex process that involves a lot of authors, and on the other hand, novels are usually created by a sole author. But their basic difference is the specificities of the medium their narratives are based on – literature relies primarily on language, and cinema relies on “audiovisual” narratives.

One of the most important American directors, Alfred Hitchcock, made a lot of films that were adaptations of literary works, with *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960) being one of them. This film is based on Robert Bloch’s novel published in 1959. The story is about Marion’s attempt to run away after stealing her boss’s money. Then, Marion is brutally murdered in a motel where she was spending the night by, the audience is meant to believe, the owner’s mother. At the end, we see that the real killer is Norman Bates, the owner of the motel.

As François Truffaut argues, the novel is misleading, and it cheats and even Hitchcock agrees that the only thing that appealed to him and made him decide to do the picture was the suddenness of the murder in the shower (Truffaut 1985, 268). But



Hitchcock used to say that he reads the novels only once and if the story is suitable for him, he entirely forgets the book and makes cinema (Truffaut 1985, 54).

Based on Geoffrey Wagner's categorization (1975, 222), this adaptation of Bloch's novel could be characterized as a transposition. This means that there is no significant alteration between the novel and film's plot. Some alterations are based on the characters, such as the name of the female protagonist (Mary in the novel and Marion in the film) something that is not a noteworthy part of the plot. Mary is also a brunette, while Marion is blonde. Norman also has some differences. In the novel he is 40 years old, with extra weight and glasses. This is the exact opposite of Anthony Perkins, the actor who plays Norman in the film. This selection has been made for the audience to identify more easily with the character, since the actor is a boy-next-door persona.

When *Psycho* was made, Hitchcock was already an established director with films like *Vertigo* (Hitchcock, 1958) and *North by Northwest* (Hitchcock, 1959). The film came only one year after the novel, so both were produced under the same sociopolitical circumstances in the United States. Of course, to produce a film, you need a crew and a big budget, while a novel can be produced only by one author and no budget. This distinction can cause real issues of outsider influence during the creative process. Let us also keep in mind that in the period *Psycho* was produced, Motion Picture Production Code (or Hays Code) was still in force.

COMPARATIVE ISSUES ON THE NOVEL AND THE FILM

If we analyze the structural differences of the two narratives, we will find a lot of similarities, but also some differences with crucial role. First, the film belongs to the cinematic genre of horror. This can be explained by the director's name because Hitchcock was already known as the "Master of Suspense" and the audience did not expect anything else but a thriller/horror film. As Hitchcock said: "I'm a typed director. If I made Cinderella, the audience would immediately be looking for a body in the coach" (Hitchcock 1956). Regarding the film, Kendall R. Phillips (2005, 64) argues that "the horror of *Psycho* is found in the psychological rather than physiological," while Linda Williams (2004, 172) says that "it does mark the important beginning of an era in which viewers began going to the movies to be thrilled and moved in quite visceral ways, and without much concern for coherent characters or motives."

Regarding the narrative style, in the novel there is a third-person narrative, while there is an outside observation of events from an unknown person that is not a part of the story. This person is referred to characters' thoughts and feelings that no one would be able to know. So, regarding narration's focus, there is an omniscient narrator, who knows it all and does not betray any detail that could spoil the ending. Cinema has a third-person narrative, but some elements can provide a first-person narrative, such as the voice over of a character, point-of-view shots, close-up shots, and dream



sequences. Therefore, depending on the techniques that are used, a film (and a literary work) can change between narration's types and focuses.

Psycho starts with an extremely long shot of a town, while the place and the time is given to the audience by subtitles. Here, we have an outside observation of events, while the camera has the role of the omniscient narrator. After the first forty minutes of the film in which we see the actions of Marion, the narration changes its focus, and we follow Norman until the end. An example which proves that Norman is the narrator of the second part of the film is when he cleans the room after Marion's murder and the camera follows him thoroughly. Even a couple of scenes later, when he tries to hide the dead body into the swamp, the use of a POV shot forces the audience to see through his eyes.

If we compare the two narratives, we see that there is a difference in their focus. In the novel we focus from the beginning to Norman, while in the film he appears almost half an hour after the beginning of the narrative. Until then, Marion is the only leading character. Finally, the film does not mislead the audience by showing Norman and his mother at the same time, because they are basically the same character.

Cinema has some techniques that help the progress of the narrative. Two examples of these techniques are the editing, which gives a sense of continuity and rhythm, and the *mise-en-scène*. As George Bluestone (1957, 61) argues, the formative principle of literature is time, while of cinema is space.

Considering this main difference of their specificities of the medium, I am going to analyze some sequences of the film *Psycho* and compare them with the relevant chapters of the novel. The novel starts with Norman being alone in his house, while it is raining outside. The protagonist reads a book and with the help of the third-person, omniscient narrator the readers learn about his appearance and his past. The narrator describes Norman as "a big, fat, overgrown Mamma's Boy." He appears to be pathologically dependent on his mother, a fact that contrasts with his age (40 years old). Nevertheless, Bloch presents him as a well-educated man, who reads about the civilization of Incas and has a lot of other books. Also, in the first chapter of the novel, there is a conversation between Norman and his mother, something that, as it has been already noted, misleads the reader about the dead mother. Novel's Norman has a lot of differences regarding his film representation.

Regarding the start of the film, the opening titles set the tone for the whole movie. From the music of Bernard Herrmann and the horizontal and vertical lines to director's name, we can understand that we will see a horror/thriller film, exactly like the first chapter of the novel introduces us to a world of mystery. After the opening titles, we see Marion and Sam – a couple who just made love in the middle of the day. From their conversation, we learn that Sam has some debts, and this is the reason why they are not marrying.



The two narratives start completely different, because their authors want to give different perspectives of the story. Bloch decides to start the novel with Norman because he is the main character of the novel. On the other hand, Hitchcock introduces Norman after the first thirty minutes of the film, because he chooses Marion to be the leading character. The first scene of the film is not part of the novel. As a matter of fact, in the novel Mary never meets Sam. So, Bloch does not justify the theft, while Hitchcock chooses to create the couple's storyline, in order the audience to emphasize with Marion. Hitchcock said that the first part of the story was to detract the viewer's attention to heighten the murder by getting the audience absorbed with the question of whether she would or would not be caught (Truffaut 1985, 269).

The most famous scene of this film is the shower scene, which took seven days to shoot, and there were seventy camera setups for forty-five seconds of footage. Robert Kolker (2004, 242) comments on this scene that "its construction has roots in the work and writing of the Russian filmmaker, Sergei Eisenstein, who wrote about and practiced a dynamic editing in which the juxtaposition of each shot created an emotional and intellectual response from the viewer." There are a lot of differences of the murder between the novel and the film. The chapter of the novel starts exactly as it happens in the film; Mary arrives, and Norman gives her a room. The first difference is regarding the place the two characters eat. In the novel, they eat inside the house, while in the film they dine at the motel. The audience of the film does not see the inside of the house until Detective Arbogast is murdered, something that creates a mystery around the house, which is very useful regarding the atmosphere of a horror film.

The murder scene can be described as scary and horrifying, while in the novel this passage is filled with irony and comedic elements. An example is when Mary goes to the mirror and sends kisses to herself, while giggles with her thoughts. Even though the story is exactly the same, the way the two narratives are presented differs. Even the end of the murder is presented with a humorous way, stating that "a moment later, cut off her scream. And her head." Finally, the novel misleads the reader once again, because it indicates that "It was the face of a crazy old woman." Of course, in the film we only see a silhouette and the end is not in contrast to this murder scene.

As I have stated before, filmic Marion and Mary from the novel have some differences. Apart from the name, they have different characteristics. The character of the film is blonde, while the character of the novel is brunette. Of course, this change was made upon Hitchcock's theory about casting. He believed that blonde, Caucasian women are preferred than any other women, because they are more interesting sexually (Truffaut 1985, 224). So, Janet Leigh had all the characteristics Hitchcock wanted. As Hitchcock himself once told about Leigh's selection, "In the average production, Janet Leigh would have been given the other role. She would have played the sister who's investigating. It's rather unusual to kill the star in the first third of the film. I purposely killed the star so as to make the killing even more unexpected"



(Truffaut 1985, 269). Hitchcock wanted to make the surprise of the audience even bigger, so he chose a big star for the role of Marion.

When the film was released, theaters were instructed not to permit viewers to enter the theater once the film had started. Hitchcock said that he insisted that the audiences be kept out of the theaters once the picture had started, because the late comers would have been waiting to see Janet Leigh after she has disappeared from the screen action (Truffaut 1985, 269).

After the first murder, Norman is the main protagonist, and the audience is by his side. There is a quick shift regarding the identification of the audience. Jean Douchet (2004, 69) comments that: “we are entirely with him. We are involved in his sordid household chores; we accept that Janet Leigh, wrapped in a translucent shower curtain, really becomes what she was for us—a form. We are simply in a hurry for this business to be over.”

The second murder is also a well-known scene from the film. In this scene, Arbogast enters the house and the “mother” kills him. In the novel, this chapter starts with Arbogast’s arrival and his conversation with Norman. Even though Norman says to him that he dined with Mary, he tries to hide the whole truth. Arbogast asks to see the mother. At first, Norman rejects his demand, but later he decides to let him talk to her. Arbogast enters the house and the mother kills him in front of Norman. This is another passage that misleads the reader, because Norman talks with his mother and tries to prevent the murder. The novel states that Norman “didn’t want to look”, something that does not make sense if someone knows the ending. Also, even this murder has characteristics that provide a black sense of humor. In the previous chapter, the narrator indicates that Norman put his razor away in order to hide it from his mother. When the mother approaches Arbogast, there is the following sentence: “... something bright and glittering flashed back and forth, back and forth... Mother had found his razor.” The only two murders of the story are presented in such a manner that the novel moves a bit away from the main tropes of the horror/thriller leaning more toward a mystery with elements of black humor.

Now, in the film the second murder is like the first. Arbogast enters the house, while Norman does not know it, to find the mother and ask her some questions. This is the first time that the audience sees the inside of the house. Knowing that someone is in the house, suspense is automatically created. As Hitchcock says, “all the elements that would convey suspense to the detective’s journey upstairs had gone before and we therefore needed a simple statement. We needed to show a staircase and a man going up that staircase in a very simple way” (Truffaut 1985, 273). Truffaut comments on this scene that “we would say that ‘he arrived like a flower,’ which implies, of course, that he was ready to be plucked.” The shot of the murder is from a high angle to see the action, but not see the face of the killer. Of course, this is happening to protect the identity of the killer without ‘lying’ to the audience.



Apart from the beginning and the two murder scenes, we must examine also the ending. Both narratives are ending with the help of a new character; the psychiatrist, who talks about Norman's mental condition. In the novel, he talks about Norman's early years, saying that "this all started way back in Bate's childhood... you know what a transvestite is, don't you?" In the film there is no indication of the aforementioned, and the psychiatrist only states Freud's Oedipus complex and his pathological love to his mother. So, the film choses a more scientific approach.

After the scene with the psychiatrist, both in the film and the novel, there is a scene in which Norman sits in a room while he is completely possessed by the mother. In the novel, the narrator says that the protagonist (now the mother) feels that everything is Norman's fault. In the film, there is a voice over with a close-up shot of Norman – elements that create a basis of viewers' empathy towards the character. Robert Samuels (2004, 151) comments:

If Norman Bates becomes his mother at the end of the film, it is, in part, because he has so identified with her law and desires after her death that he cannot separate his self from her conscience. Likewise, in the scenes where we believe that we hear his mother yelling at Norman, what is actually going on is that he has projected his own conscience outside of himself and he is now yelling at himself from the position of the (m)Other.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the fact that the only phrase that is identical to both narratives is the following: "She wouldn't even harm a fly..."

CONCLUSION

From beginning to end, the novel mainly focuses on Norman Bates. In the film, we have both Marion and Norman. Of course, Hitchcock uses their point of view and manages to force the audience to identify with Norman after Marion's murder. As David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (2008, 201) argue, "the camera's movement inward, the penetration of an interior, is repeated throughout the film, often motivated as a subjective point of view as when various characters move deeper and deeper in to Norman Bates's mansion."

Having in mind the thorough analysis of both narratives, we could understand that even if the story stays the same with no substantial changes, a film adaptation can be much different from the original literary work. *Psycho* is one of these examples, which proves that adapting the same story to different media can give another meaning to the core of the story.



BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

- Bloch, Robert. *Psycho*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 1999.
- Bluestone, George. *Novels into Film*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1957.
- Bordwell, David and Thompson Kristin. *Film Art: An Introduction*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008.
- Douchet, Jean. "Hitch and his Audience." In *Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho: A Casebook*, edited by Robert Kolker. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Hitchcock, Alfred. *Newsweek*, 11 June 1956.
- Kolker, Robert. "The Form, Structure and Influence of Psycho." In *Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho: A Casebook*, edited by Robert Kolker. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Phillips, Kendall R. *Projected Fears, Horror Films and American Culture*. Westport: Praeger, 2005.
- Samuels, Robert. "Epilogue: Psycho and the Horror of the Bi-Textual Unconscious." In *Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho: A Casebook*, edited by Robert Kolker. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Truffaut, François. *Hitchcock*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985.
- Wagner, Geoffrey. *The Novel and the Cinema*. Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1975.
- Williams, Linda. "Discipline and Fun: Psycho and Postmodern Cinema." In *Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho: A Casebook*, edited by Robert Kolker. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

SUGGESTED CITATION: Petridis, Sotiris. 2024. "Psycho: From Text to Screen – Comparing the Novel and the Film." *PopMeC Research Blog*. Published October 15.