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The Banal Sources of Fear: Alfred Hitchcock and the Horror Genre

BANALNE ŹRÓDŁA STRACHU: ALFRED HITCHCOCK I HORROR

Summary

Though Alfred Hitchcock (1899–1980) is usually referred to as the Master of Suspense due to his famous thrillers, he also made two ground-breaking horror films, *Psycho* (1960) and *The Birds* (1963). His approach to fear and building tension revolutionized the previously stagnant genre and has been copied by innumerable imitators. He also avoided overtly supernatural motifs or exploitation of gore, relying instead on skillful montage and soundtrack to build tension. Furthermore, in various interviews or short articles Hitchcock explained his theories on thriller and horror genres, as well as his distinction between suspense and shock. These views are mirrored in his work. This article examines the novel aspects Hitchcock introduced to American horror films, such as a contemporary setting, ordinary characters, and location of fear in the everyday, mundane aspects of life, especially family relations.

Keywords: Alfred Hitchcock; fear; horror; *Psycho*; *The Birds*

Streszczenie

Chociaż Alfred Hitchcock znany jest przede wszystkim jako twórca thrillerów, wyreżyserował również dwa nowatorskie horrory: *Psychozę* (1960) i *Ptaki* (1962). Jego podejście do rozumienia strachu i budowania napięcia zrewolucjonizowało stosunkowo skostniały gatunek, jakim był horror, i zainspirowało wielu twórców. Hitchcock unikał elementów fantastycznych i epatowania okrucieństwem, budując grozę umiejętnym montażem i ścieżką dźwiękową. Ponadto w wywiadach i artykułach prasowych tłumaczył wielokrotnie swoje rozumienie thrillerów i horroru oraz suspensu i szoku. Poglądy te są odzwierciedlone w jego dziełach. Celem tego tekstu jest analiza nowatorskich elementów, które Hitchcock wprowadził do amerykańskiego horroru, takich jak: współczesne miejsce akcji, zwykli bohaterowie oraz ułożenie źródeł strachu w codzienności, zwłaszcza w życiu rodzinnym.

Słowa kluczowe: Alfred Hitchcock; horror; *Ptaki*; *Psychoza*; strach

Alfred Hitchcock (1899–1980), the famous British-American film director associated with *auteur* cinema, is predominantly known for the thriller genre. Most of his films, though hybrid in character, display features of such genres as the detective story, thriller, *film noir*, romance, and black comedy. Many of these categories overlap, and both thriller and horror, due to their multiple manifestations, are not easy to define or distinguish from one another.

The aim of this paper is to argue for Hitchcock's affinity with the broadly conceived horror genre and examine the way he conceptualizes fear, which is central to the understanding of horror. It also explores what the anxieties expressed by the director say about the social tension of his times. As Stephen King explains in *Danse Macabre* (1982), the horror genre is bound to "phobic pressure points."¹ They can be individual, yet the most successful horror works reflect "political, economic, and psychological rather than supernatural" concerns.² Indeed, Hitchcock addresses such issues, especially the unease with traditional family life. These general anxieties combine with his own "control-freak" personality and contribute to his novel understanding of the sources of fear. Apart from discussing the well-known horror titles, such as *Psycho* (1960) and *The Birds* (1963), which are the prototypes of the slasher/serial killer subgenre and natural horror respectively, this article also focuses on other films which share common motifs with these aforementioned titles.

1. Problems with definition

As Bernice M. Murphy observes, horror is a genre whose name originates from the emotional response it produces.³ The word is derived from the Latin verb for 'to shudder'. Noël Carroll adopts the same approach in his classic *The Philosophy of Horror, or the Paradoxes of the Heart* (1990), claiming the genre can be defined by the "emotional effects it is designed to cause in audiences."⁴ Similarly, Rick Altman notes the definition of horror focuses on "describing the spectator's reaction rather than filmic content."⁵ Yet, since things that scare some people may not affect others, horror is elusive and difficult to define. Murphy uses words like "disgust" and "dread," which

1 S. King, *Danse Macabre*, London 1991, p. 18.

2 S. King, *Danse Macabre*, p. 19.

3 B.M. Murphy, *Key Concepts in Contemporary Popular Fiction*, Edinburgh 2017, p. 117.

4 N. Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or the Paradoxes of the Heart*, New York 1990, p. 8. The scholar also discusses the paradoxes of the genre – the reasons why audiences are attracted to ideas that normally repulse them.

5 R. Altman, *Film/Genre*, London 1999, p. 153.

again can be idiosyncratic reactions.⁶ Nevertheless, horror, though heterogeneous, nearly always seems to involve a primal emotion of anguish and/or revulsion at the prospect of losing one's life, physical and emotional integrity, as well as one's sense of agency. Whether this security is threatened by an external or internal force, natural or supernatural one, is of secondary importance.

Furthermore, horror seems to be, on the surface level if not in "deep narrative structure [...],"⁷ the least formulaic among popular culture genres. Unlike detective stories or romances that seldom deviate from the established plotline, horror stories are "marked by a sheer diversity of conventions, plots and styles."⁸ Thus, the semantic/systemic theory of genre, as proposed by R. Altman (1984) does not apply well to horror, as its building blocks (themes/characters) and their arrangement are much more varied than, for example, in a Western, a biopic, or a musical.⁹ In order to scare the audience successfully, as Brigid Cherry reminds her readers, the horror genre must constantly evolve.¹⁰ Thus, the transactional definition of a genre, proposed by Barry Keith Grant (1986), seems to fit the horror genre perfectly – if it meets our expectations of a "scary movie," then it is a horror film.¹¹

The best illustration of this generic confusion is the expression used by Joel W. Finler, who calls *Psycho* a "horror thriller."¹² It perfectly encapsulates the impossibility of neat classifications and the general consternation which most viewers experience watching the unexpected twists of the movie. Brigid Cherry notes a similar confusion with Hitchcock's *Blackmail* (1929). Though technically a thriller, the film uses non-realistic sound to "create subjective states and emotional affect."¹³ The distortion of sound and vision makes the audience experience the main character's hallucinations firsthand. Likewise, in other productions Hitchcock masters new cinematic methods, "framing shots to maximize anxiety and fear and using innovative film editing techniques to create shock and surprise."¹⁴ His editing to emphasize violence, skillful use

6 R. Altman, *Film/Genre*, p. 153.

7 N. Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, p. 97.

8 B. Cherry, *Horror*, Abingdon 2009 (Routledge Film Guidebooks), p. 2.

9 R. Altman, *A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre*, "Cinema Journal," 23 (1984), no. 3, p. 10. Altman sees the presence of a monster as a key feature of horror, yet monsters may appear in fairy tales, adventure films, and fantasy. There are also horror films with no obvious monster – in *Men* (2022) the oppressiveness of patriarchal culture becomes a symbolic antagonist.

10 R. Altman, *A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre*, p. 4.

11 B.K. Grant, *Film Genre Reader*, Austin, TX 1986, p. 115.

12 J.W. Finler, *Hitchcock in Hollywood*, New York 1992, p. 129.

13 B. Cherry, *Horror*, p. 69.

14 T. L. Moral, *Alfred Hitchcock: Moviemaking Master Class*, Studio City, CA 2013, p. xiv.

of cross-cuts (or their lack), and fast cuts, for instance, in *Sabotage* (1936) and *Frenzy* (1972), has been imitated by horror directors.¹⁵ As Tony Lee Moral notes, in *Rebecca* (1940), the audience never sees or hears the sinister housekeeper entering a room, yet she often appears behind the main character, as if out of nowhere.¹⁶ Thus, she resembles a supernatural, malignant power, not a real person. Though technically a realist Gothic romance, Daphne du Maurier's novel features one of the most common horror motifs – that of a haunted house. Many slashers, for instance, *Halloween* (1978) or *Friday the 13th* (1980), make use of exactly the same method since the killer is never seen or heard before the attack. Thus, many films directed by the Master of Suspense exhibit features of the horror genre.

2. Origins of horror and Hitchcock

Hitchcock repeatedly stressed his regard for the father of the American horror story, Edgar Allan Poe, admitting that reading his stories might have influenced his choice of cinematic career.¹⁷ Many aspects of Poe's style can be observed in his films: the meticulous design of the story, foreshadowing of events, macabre humor, seemingly well-adjusted psychopathic protagonists, motifs of insanity, and dread found in mundane circumstances. He emulated a Poesque atmosphere in his first artistic production, a short story entitled *Gas* (1919). The text explores how an ordinary situation, such as a tooth extraction, can turn into a terrifying ordeal, anticipating the core elements of the director's future style.

British by birth, Hitchcock was familiar with English literature. For instance, as Stephen D. Arata observes, many British Gothic classics exhibit unexpected switches of the genre. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) opens by mimicking a Victorian travel narrative.¹⁸ Hitchcock also deceived his audiences – watching *The Wrong Man* (1956), one may think it will be a film about the visitors of the nightclub, not a musician who happens to work there. Likewise, *Psycho* seems to follow a pattern of a detective story about stolen cash, yet after half an hour, it literally drowns the motor of the action in

15 Hitchcock admired early Russian filmmakers who mastered montage for violent scenes. See: A. Hitchcock, *On Music in Films (1933–1934)*, in: *Hitchcock on Hitchcock: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. S. Gottlieb, Berkely, CA 1997, pp. 241–245. He tried to emulate this technique – the famous shower scene in *Psycho* and the attic attack in *The Birds* are the most frequently cited examples.

16 T.L. Moral, *Alfred Hitchcock*, p. 182.

17 A. Hitchcock, *Why I Am Afraid of the Dark (1960)*, in: *Hitchcock on Hitchcock: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. S. Gottlieb, Berkely, CA 1997, pp. 142–145.

18 S.D. Arata, *The Occidental Tourist: Dracula and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization (Extract)*, in: *The Horror Reader*, ed. K. Gelder, London 2000, p. 165.

a swamp. The opening of *The Birds* mirrors a screwball comedy. Hitchcock films often involve themes of travel, escape, and pursuit, echoing “restless roaming found in many Gothic fictions.”¹⁹

3. Personality

Though Hitchcock died relatively recently and there are several biographies describing his life, little is known about him as a person. The director created a coherent public persona of an eccentric, pompous, and old-fashioned Englishman, fond of black humor and practical pranks. Yet, he remained a private person, reserved and formal. To his American collaborators, his manner might have seemed too contained, shy, “expressionless,” or even secretive, strangely at odds with a more flamboyant Hollywood style.²⁰ His black undertaker suits were “suffocatingly inappropriate for the California sunshine.”²¹ Despite his wealth, he bought a modest house and enjoyed simple pleasures such as cooking with his wife or playing with his dogs.²² He behaved more like “a good burgher” than a Hollywood millionaire.²³ Additionally, most sources confirm he liked to follow a strict routine, planning the smallest details of his films in advance and preferring to work with the same set of collaborators.²⁴ Any change over which he had little control seemed to upset him. To many he seemed to be a strict perfectionist.

Yet, the meticulous love of order does not necessarily signify a psychopathic trait but rather a coping strategy. To give oneself an illusion of stability and control of over one’s life, many people follow a daily routine, forming regular habits which act as coping mechanisms to fend off worries. Hitchcock was remembered for telling identical anecdotes over and over, which he apparently found soothing.²⁵ His hobby was memorizing train timetables, which probably reflects his desperate need for predictability, regularity, and stability.²⁶ It seems his biggest fear was experiencing something unexpected. It is very likely for this reason that the conventional existence of the unassuming characters of his films is shattered by a false accusation. Their sense of security is suddenly gone.

19 S.D. Arata, *The Occidental Tourist*, p. 167.

20 L.J. Leff, *Hitchcock and Selznick: The Rich and Strange Collaboration of Alfred Hitchcock and David O. Selznick in Hollywood*, New York 1987, p. xii.

21 L.J. Leff, *Hitchcock and Selznick*, p. 95.

22 L.J. Leff, *Hitchcock and Selznick*, pp. 102, 189.

23 D. Freeman, *The Last Days of Alfred Hitchcock*, London 1985, p. 14.

24 J.W. Finler, *Hitchcock in Hollywood*, p. 98.

25 D. Freeman, *The Last Days of Alfred Hitchcock*, pp. 46–47.

26 L.J. Leff, *Hitchcock and Selznick*, p. 175.

This motif appears, among others, in *Murder!* (1930), *Young and Innocent* (1937), *I Confess* (1953), *Dial M for Murder* (1954), *North by Northwest* (1959), and *Frenzy*. The most classic example is *The Wrong Man*, based on a real incident.

4. Hitchcock's views on horror

Hitchcock preferred making movies to creating theoretical frameworks about the art of the cinema. There are, however, a few articles and interviews in which he explained his understanding of the appeal of thrillers as well as, ironically, his dislike of conventional horror movies. He was against the explicit use of violence, finding it not only vulgar but also ineffective.²⁷ He preferred to suggest it so that the viewers could imagine it themselves. In his opinion, the majority of movie-goers are "healthy-minded," so they react with "extreme aversion" to the exploitations of "sadism, perversion, bestiality, and deformity."²⁸ He objected to the use of shock for its own sake.

The director often mentioned his understanding of shock and suspense.²⁹ The former is a reaction to something unexpected and unprecedented, the latter is the tension experienced when an unsettling event is about to happen, yet the timing of its occurrence and its exact impact are unknown. Suspense is "the stretching out of anticipation."³⁰ The duration and distribution of the two reactions are also crucial. While suspense is evenly spread throughout the picture, surprise or shock is much shorter and appears occasionally. Suspense is also more intellectual in character, while shock relies on "mere physiological reflexes."³¹ This distinction can be applied to the understanding of horror and thriller, respectively.³² Yet, in the horror genre, we often deal with both

27 A. Hitchcock, F. Wertham, *A Redbook Dialogue: Alfred Hitchcock and Dr. Fredric Wertham* (1963), in: *Hitchcock on Hitchcock: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. S. Gottlieb, Berkely, CA 1997, p. 146.

28 A. Hitchcock, *Why 'Thrillers' Thrive* (1936), in: *Hitchcock on Hitchcock: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. S. Gottlieb, Berkely, CA 1997, p. 111.

29 D. Freeman, *The Last Days of Alfred Hitchcock*, p. 50.

30 T.L. Moral, *Alfred Hitchcock*, p. 22.

31 M. Jancovitch, *The English Master of Movie Melodrama: Hitchcock, Horror and the Woman's Film*, "Film International," 9 (2011), no. 3, p. 52, https://doi.org/10.1386/fint.9.3.51_1. Moreover, the distinction between intellectual and physiological reactions is not biologically founded. Emotions are based on bodily responses. Depending on the culture, various clusters of physiological reactions are labeled by the conscious mind, as joy, fear, shame, or anger. See: B.H. Rosenwein, *Anger: The Conflicted History of An Emotion*, New Haven, CT 2020.

32 For proof that the term suspense can also be applied to horror, thereby putting the theory of the horror/thriller distinction into question see N. Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, pp. 128–144.

of these, intertwined. The first act of violence might come as a shock, but the audience expects more, since we know new atrocities will come.

With very few exceptions (such as the gored eyes of the farmer in *The Birds* or the rape of Brenda in *Frenzy*), Hitchcock's films are visually tasteful. Nevertheless, frequently what is not explicitly shown is even more gruesome. We never see Babs raped and strangled in *Frenzy*; yet, since we have just witnessed the fate of Brenda, we know what awaits her, when she walks into the murderer's flat. He welcomes her in with exactly the same words he used before his previous attack. The amplified traffic in the street outside the building will block any screams or noise of the fight. A second, conspicuously realistic murder would have made the audience sick, yet being physically appalled is not synonymous with dread. The viewers are horrified without the film becoming vulgar or repetitive. It seems that Hitchcock did not dislike the idea of a horror as such but preferred to place it in the realm of psychological, not physiological, reactions.

Despite its gruesome subject, *Psycho* is surprisingly free of conspicuous depictions of gore. We never actually "see the knife in Janet Leigh."³³ We do not even see any blood on her immaculate body. This stands in direct contrast to the much cruder slashers it inspired, not to mention the graphic torture porn horror variety of later decades. Likewise, probably the most terrifying scene of the film, the one in which the audience sees Mrs. Bates' mummified corpse, is relatively mellow. As Barbara Creed notes, it is the substances ejected by the body such as "shit, blood, urine and pus" as well as decomposing corpses that are the most loathsome.³⁴ She later adds "vomit, saliva, sweat, tears and putrefying flesh" to the list.³⁵ Mrs. Bates's fleshless dryness is not sickening *per se* – we are shocked to learn she is dead, not disgusted by her appearance.

5. Hitchcock's cult horror films

Two films by the director became the turning points in the history of the horror genre: *Psycho* and *The Birds*. Apart from being studied by scholars and inspiring numerous filmmakers, they still genuinely scare audience despite the passing of time. Ironically, though they obviously indicate a novel direction in Hitchcock's work, they are simultaneously products of logical development in the director's career as Mark Jancovich (2011) notes. The scholar draws attention to Hitchcock's respect for the

33 S. King, *Danse Macabre*, p. 253, emphasis mine. This fact is disputed, but the scene requires a slow-motion viewing to see the tip of the knife entering the torso.

34 B. Creed, *Kristeva, Femininity, Abjection*, in: *The Horror Reader*, ed. K. Gelder, London 2000, p. 65.

35 B. Creed, *Kristeva, Femininity, Abjection*, p. 66.

horror elements inherent in German Expressionism as well as the similarities between *Psycho* and “stories featured on the show” *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1955–1962).³⁶ Mark Jancovitch also marks the blurred distinction between horror and thriller in 1940s cinematography, pointing to the multiple Gothic elements of *Rebecca* and other “paranoid woman’s films,” such as *Suspicion*, *Spellbound* and *Shadow of a Doubt*. As I indicated earlier, many motifs and filming techniques the director had employed since the 1920s find a powerfully echo in his two “pure” horrors. Furthermore, as Rober E. Kapsis (1992) argues, the growth of Hitchcock’s reputation as an artistic director, not a mere entertainer, in the 1960s coincided with the release of *Psycho* and *The Birds*, which helped to wrap the horror genre in the veil of respectability. “The reputation of an artist is frequently tied to the genre or medium in which he or she works,” as R.E. Kapsis observes.³⁷ In this, case, we deal with a reverse process.³⁸ Since the 1960s, Hitchcock’s classic horror films have become a yardstick critics, scholars, and audiences used to evaluate new cinematic releases.³⁹

The following subsections will present their groundbreaking properties and focus on how the sources of fear are presented in them.

5.1. *Psycho*

Psycho has reached what Kendal R. Phillips calls “cultural immortality,” as its soundtrack, scenes, and plot are recognized even by those who have never watched it.⁴⁰ It is also Hitchcock’s first work which can be clearly classified as a horror movie. It simultaneously departs drastically from his previous work, yet, ironically, explores many of the themes characteristic of the director.

5.1.1. Natural or supernatural?

In a few films by Hitchcock, apart from *Psycho*, the distinction between the natural and the supernatural is blurred.⁴¹ *Rebecca*, *Vertigo* (1958), and, obviously, *Psycho* can be seen as ghost stories, as their main characters are indirectly haunted or possessed. In the 1940

36 M. Jancovitch, *The English Master of Movie Melodrama*, p. 51.

37 R.E. Kapsis, *Hitchcock: The Making of a Reputation*, Chicago 1992, p. 1.

38 R.E. Kapsis, *Hitchcock*, p. 176.

39 R.E. Kapsis, *Hitchcock*, pp. 158–176.

40 K.R. Phillips, *Projected Fears: Horror Films and American Culture*, Westport 2005, p. 4.

41 An interesting effect, achieved through montage, appears in *Sabotage*. A desperate woman kills her husband, who was responsible for a terrorist attack in which his nephew was killed. The audience sympathizes with the woman, as her husband was an obnoxious individual. Thus, the murder scene is presented in such a way to minimize her culpability. Hitchcock focuses on the carving knife as if it had a will of its own. It overpowers the woman – it looks as if she is the mere murder weapon and the

adaptation of D. du Maurier's Gothic romance, it is the oppressive presence of Maxim de Winter's first wife, the titular Rebecca, who "seems to permeate the estate and to preoccupy and torment its owner."⁴² In *Vertigo*, we deal with several ghostly presences: Judy (impersonating Madeline) pretends to be possessed by the spirit of her ancestor, Carlotta. Then she is forced to impersonate Madeline once again by her lover Scottie, who is unaware of the trick and believes his first beloved to be dead. Though in *Psycho* the audience is given a realistic, medical explanation of Norman's condition, Hitchcock "cheats" his viewers as far as realism is concerned. First of all, Marion hears Mrs. Bates scolding Norman. It is an eerie elderly woman's voice that Norman would not be able to imitate. In fact, nobody would, as it was a blended voice of two women and one man, while the voice of the mother we hear in the last scene of the film lacks the male component.⁴³ Furthermore, considering the distance between the house and the motel, she should not be able to hear any conversation clearly. Hitchcock also misleads the audience in the scenes in which the silhouette of the mother is shown – it is never played by Perkins.⁴⁴ Thus, the final effect is more like a spiritual possession or the supernatural presence of the mother's ghost.

5.1.2. Unconventionality of *Psycho*

Echoing Bates' multiple stabbings of Marion, Hitchcock repeatedly assaults his audience's expectations, shaped by what Raymond Durnat calls "Hollywood conditioning."⁴⁵ First, he kills his lead character even before the middle of the film, baffling viewers. Furthermore, Marion is murdered when she has decided to return the stolen cash, so her shower may signify purification. Arguably, it is unfair that she is killed after that resolution. Having lost their point of identification, the viewers transfer their feelings onto Norman, who seems to be an amiable, thoughtful man, bullied by an insane mother. He comes across as a "engagingly naïve country youth, very honest, unconcerned with making money, almost a symbol of rustic virtue and country contentment. The whole film hinges on his sensitivity and charm."⁴⁶ Furthermore, he talks to Marion in a kind, friendly manner that her lover, Sam Loomis, lacks. In fact, Norman is the only male in the film who does not humiliate, threaten, or ignore her. He also

knife is the murderer. The scene can be seen as an example of possession. See: A. Hitchcock, *Director's Problems* (1938), in: *Hitchcock on Hitchcock: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. S. Gottlieb, Berkely, CA 1997, pp. 186–187.

42 L.J. Leff, *Hitchcock and Selznick*, p. 36.

43 S. Rebello, *Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of Psycho*, Berkely, CA 2012, pp. 91, 171, 173, and 174.

44 R. Durnat, *A Long Hard Look at 'Psycho'*, London 2018, p. 16.

45 R. Durnat, *The Strange Case of Alfred Hitchcock*, London 1974, p. 37.

46 R. Durnat, *The Strange Case of Alfred Hitchcock*, p. 324.

feeds her while Sam leaves Marion starving – for affection but also for food, since she spends her lunch break having sex. Obviously, the audience will regret their choice of identification, yet Hitchcock hardly gives them an option, casting the boyish Anthony Perkins as a deranged killer.

Second, with Marion's murder, the genre switches from a detective story about star-crossed lovers to a murder mystery, soon to become a pure, yet highly original, horror film. Most importantly, however, Hitchcock sets his story in ordinary, if not plainly boring, circumstances – a roadside motel near a nondescript town, ironically called Fairvale. It is not the first time he places murders in a mundane setting. He has already done it in *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) and *The Trouble with Harry* (1955). Yet these films are indebted to British “cozy” crime mysteries, with their idyllic, quaint towns. *Psycho* is a paradox – a contemporary horror story. Previously, horror films made by the British Hammer Film Productions and American International Pictures were “colorful period pieces (usually set in the nineteenth century) peopled by inspired, grandly theatrical, often middle-aged villains; well-meaning, innocuous, young male heroes; and buxom young women waiting to be ravished or rescued.”⁴⁷ The British Gothic novel also featured the characteristic medieval time shift and foreign locations.

Hitchcock draws inspiration from a different source, presenting the familiar as truly terrifying. Both Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864) and H. P. Lovecraft (1890–1937) set their horror stories in sleepy New England towns and remote villages. The sinister painting *American Gothic* (1930) by Grant Wood uses the same convention. The apparent respectability of the presented couple clashes with the title and the ambiguity of the pitchfork the old man is brandishing. One does not need to look for dread in distant times, since it is right next door. Hitchcock's contemporary, all-American setting can be later found, as Gregory A. Waller argues, in George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and Roman Polański's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968).⁴⁸ Later slasher classics, such as the *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* or *Scream*, follow that pattern.

Even as a young director, Hitchcock disliked costume dramas and aristocratic protagonists. His attitude is best captured in the catchy phrase “More Cabbages, Fewer Kings.”⁴⁹ Though the suave characters played by Cary Grant or the stylishly dressed cool blondes for which Hitchcock's films are famous can hardly be counted among

47 G.A. Waller, *Introduction to American Horrors*, in: *The Horror Reader*, ed. K. Gelder, London 2000, p. 257.

48 G.A. Waller, *Introduction to American Horrors*, pp. 257–258.

49 A. Hitchcock, *More Cabbages, Fewer Kings: A Believer in the Little Man* (1937), in: *Hitchcock on Hitchcock: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. S. Gottlieb, Berkely, CA 1997, pp. 176–178.

the metaphorical cabbages, the black-and-white *Psycho* does not depict any glamour. During the pre-production stage, the director researched the life of office workers in Phoenix, the domestic arrangements of small town California sheriffs, and the dressing habits of used car dealers in order to make the film as realistic as possible.⁵⁰

5.1.3. *Psycho's spin-offs*

Psycho is also one of the most frequently analyzed films in Hitchcock's rich *oeuvre* and, probably, in the entire history of film studies.⁵¹ Its critical acclaim also had an impact on the perceived "respectability" of the horror genre itself. As Robin Wood notes, before *Psycho*, it had been popular with viewers yet overlooked by critics.⁵² Hitchcock's masterpiece turned it into a worthy subject of academic inquiry. It turned out to be Hitchcock's most recognizable film, "his biggest and most profitable hit."⁵³ Hardly any other film has made such a tremendous impact on cinema. Apart from a few sequels and a TV-series prequel, *Psycho* has inspired a feature film about its production (*Hitchcock*, 2012) and a documentary (*78/52*, 2017). In 1998, Gus Van Sant directed the cult movie's remake, basing it on the same screenplay and meticulously copying the original's shots. He filmed in color and introduced a few minor updated changes to make it more convincing to contemporary audiences. The slasher genre, a subcategory of horror, traces its roots to Hitchcock's classic.

5.2. *The Birds*

Stuffed birds appear in *Psycho*, decorating Norman's office. He explains to Marion that taxidermy is his hobby, which also foreshadows the fate of his mother. According to R. Durnat, murderous birds have appeared in Arthur Machen's novella *The Terror* (1917) as well as Philip MacDonald's story *Our Feathered Friends* (1931).⁵⁴ It is not certain whether D. du Maurier, whose story provided the idea for the script, was familiar with them. The director certainly knew the latter, as it was featured in *Alfred Hitchcock Presents Stories for Late at Night* (1961), edited by Alfred Hitchcock and Robert Arthur. These literary sources feature a theme of nature turning against mankind with great ferocity for no apparent reason. In Hitchcock's masterpiece there are a few

50 S. Robello, *Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of Psycho*, pp. 78–79.

51 K.R. Phillips, *Projected Fears*, p. 61 and J.W. Smith III, *The Psycho File: A Comprehensive Guide to Hitchcock's Classic Shocker*, Jefferson, NC 2009, pp. 70–71.

52 R. Wood, *An Introduction to the American Horror Film*, in: *Robin Wood on the Horror Film: Collected Essays and Reviews*, ed. B.K. Grant, Detroit, MI 2018, p. 82.

53 J. W. Finler, *Hitchcock in Hollywood*, p. 130.

54 R. Durnat, *The Strange Case of Alfred Hitchcock*, p. 333.

suggestions that the attacks might be a delayed revenge for the abuses humans have inflicted on the natural world. After all, the main characters meet in a pet shop, filled with trapped birds. During the diner scene, we hear a lunch order for roast chicken and the first victim, found with pecked-out eyes, is a poultry farmer. Yet, such an interpretation is too obvious, and it is rather unlikely to suspect Hitchcock, a known lover of steak, of nursing wishes for a vegan universe. Some point to the Cuban Missile Crisis and the general Cold War paranoia, which might have influenced the film's atmosphere of impending doom. Yet, it would be unwise to see the film as a simple allegory. According to Durnat, the birds are agents of mere chaos.⁵⁵ They stand for the cruelty of the universe that may strike unexpectedly at any moment, directing its violence at random victims. In fact, it is far less important why the birds attack – what matters is how people react to the assaults. The extreme situation is an ultimate test of their humanity.

Just like in *Psycho*, the setting of the film is a small California town. It is not only entirely contemporary but also peaceful. The leading character of the film, Melanie, is the embodiment of a fashionable society girl. The worst thing that can happen to her is a laddered stocking or chipped nail varnish. Her “smug complacency” will be shattered very soon,⁵⁶ reminding the audience that their sense of control over life is an illusion.

The Birds can also be seen as a forerunner of multiple animal-attack and nature's-revenge eco-horror films. It is not only the prototype of the natural horror genre, but also one of its most successful representatives, next to Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) and Irwin Allen's *The Swarm* (1978). Many other films that are classified as natural horrors are far from natural – the creatures in them are mutated, artificially engineered, or enhanced. Simultaneously, most animal attack films feature monstrous animals, man-eating sharks, alligators, or felines. They are predators, so their attacks are not against the laws of nature. In fact, they are entirely predictable. Yet, “because birds are everywhere, we take them for granted” and do not perceive them as sinister.⁵⁷ They fit the Hitchcockian tendency to place the source of fear in something mundane. The birds impersonate “the unknowable terror” – the audience never learns why they attack.⁵⁸ Hitchcock shows science, embodied by the matter-of-fact ornithologist, as incapable of explaining, not to mention preventing, the horrid attacks. In *The Swarm*, for instance, science triumphs over crude military solutions. In *The Birds*, the characters manage

55 R. Durnat, *The Strange Case of Alfred Hitchcock*, p. 341.

56 A. Hitchcock, *On Style* (1963), in: *Hitchcock on Hitchcock: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. S. Gottlieb, Berkely, CA 1997, p. 300.

57 R. Durnat, *The Strange Case of Alfred Hitchcock*, p. 337.

58 D. Freeman, *The Last Days of Alfred Hitchcock*, p. 37.

to escape from the attacked Bodega Bay, yet the place where they are heading may be as dangerous as the one they are leaving. The director even decided to omit the conventional “The End” card from the film’s finale.⁵⁹ Many viewers were dissatisfied with this “lack of resolution,” as it left them uncertain and, consequently, vulnerable.⁶⁰

6. Sources of fear

Bernice M. Murphy observes that the growing popularity of non-supernatural horror is a post-World War II phenomenon.⁶¹ The atrocities of concentration camps and weapons of mass destruction proved that one does not need fantastic agents to annihilate humanity, as people are capable of destroying life on the planet on their own. Thus, serial killers as well as environmental disasters became common motifs within the genre. Hitchcock is a pioneer of both.

As David Freeman puts it, nearly all Hitchcock’s films can be summarized by one line “an innocent man caught up in circumstances he doesn’t fully comprehend.”⁶² In fact, all human existence boils down to exactly the same description. Interestingly, though, these new circumstances are not new on the surface. Quite the opposite, being known and familiar, they often provide the characters with a false sense of security. Human beings tend to dread the unknown and feel confident in the presence of ordinary surroundings.

Ordinary, humdrum settings are, in fact, filled with potential horror. Hitchcock’s sources of terror are found in commonplace objects and situations. Poison seems to be hidden in a glass of milk in *Suspicion* (1941), anarchists use chocolate factories and religious establishments as hideouts in the British version of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934) as well as pet shops and cinemas in the case of *Sabotage* (1936). A psychopathic transvestite runs a motel (*Psycho*), while a conversation with a fellow passenger on the train might result in murder and stalking in *Strangers on the Train* (1951). A childhood cycling accident can damage one’s brain, turning a sweet boy into a serial killer, as *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) suggests. “The monster comes not from beyond the grave or the stars, but from right next door.”⁶³ In fact, the monster might be in your very home as is the case in *Shadow of a Doubt*.

59 R.E. Kapsis, *Hitchcock*, p. 79.

60 R.E. Kapsis, *Hitchcock*, pp. 65, 93–94.

61 B.M. Murphy, *Key Concepts in Contemporary Popular Fiction*, p. 117.

62 D. Freeman, *The Last Days of Alfred Hitchcock*, p. 229.

63 K.R. Phillips, *Projected Fears*, p. 64.

The transformation of the known into the uncanny is aptly described by Andrew Sarris:

You cannot commit a murder in a haunted house or dark alley, and make a meaningful statement to the audience. The spectators simply withdraw from these bizarre settings. . . . However, when murder is committed in a gleamingly sanitary motel bathroom during a cleansing shower, the incursion of evil into our well-laundered existence becomes intolerable. We may laugh nervously or snort disgustedly, but we shall never be quite so complacent again.⁶⁴

The likelihood of ever finding oneself in a haunted house or being attacked by zombies is non-existent; yet, we go to the bathroom several times a day.⁶⁵ The murder scene is followed by the most mundane activity imaginable for a horror film – mopping the floor! Noël Carroll claimed horror is connected with repulsion caused by impurity (hence hideous monsters, body deformations, plague, etc., are frequent themes within the genre).⁶⁶ Yet, in this particular case, it is the competent indifference of Norman's efficient removal of "impurity" that is terrifying, not his figure as such.⁶⁷ The contemporary settings of Hitchcock's horrors and fear-infused commonplace objects and activities irrevocably tear the "thin veil of optimistic normalcy."⁶⁸

6.1. Family life as a source of anxiety

Hitchcock not only placed his classic horror films in a contemporary setting, but he also made apparently ordinary family life the embodiment of fear. Many critics observe that the manner in which the director showed domesticity underwent a shift between his British and American films.⁶⁹ His films before 1940 often feature eccentric families or unconventional couples. Nevertheless, this does not undermine the affection between them. His later films, however, often portray oppressive or even severely dysfunctional

64 A. Sarris, quoted in J.W. Smith III, *The Psycho File*, p. 87.

65 Many scholars, most notably N. Carroll (1990), analyze why works of fiction we know are untrue are able to stir powerful emotions in the audiences. I would nevertheless argue that plausible horrors evoke more dread.

66 N. Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, p. 28.

67 Noël Carroll would disagree here, as for him, Norman is transgressive in his hybridity, being a male/female, a victim/abuser, alive and dead, sane/insane simultaneously. Still, the audience does not know any of it at that stage of the film and is nonetheless taken aback.

68 K.R. Phillips, *Projected Fears*, p. 65.

69 Paula Marantz Cohen, for instance, offers a comparison of the two versions of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, focusing on family dynamics. The British couple seems relaxed while their American counterpart is more oppressive in terms of gender roles. See: P.M. Cohen, *Alfred Hitchcock: The Legacy of Victorianism*, Lexington, KY 1995, pp. 112–122.

families. Whether it is overprotective and possessive mothers or controlling or untrustworthy partners, the family hearth becomes a seat of distress.

Several reasons might be responsible for this transformation of image of the family in Hitchcock's films. The main one is the widespread popularity of psychoanalysis and the "newly emerging cultural ethos" of blaming faulty mothering for the deterioration of children's mental health and social maladjustment.⁷⁰ Tony Williams studies the shift in the representation of this basic social unit in American cinema in *Hearths of Darkness. The Family in the American Horror Film* (1996), tracing how the source of comfort and security, previously idealized on the screen, has become a menacing force. He claims family horror has turned into a fundamental structure of Hollywood cinema.⁷¹ Though revolutionary in its approach to the horror genre in the US, *Psycho*'s

portrayal of a psychologically damaged, sexually and morally confused young man connected with a much larger discussion, in the early Cold War, of political and sexual deviance, a discussion that centred on the image of the psychopath as the dominant threat to American security. In so doing, the film played upon normative assumptions concerning adolescent development, family structures, mother-son relations, and sexual practices, conservative assumptions that reflected not merely Hitchcock's own personal anxieties but also larger cultural ones.⁷²

All the above-mentioned themes have since dominated American horror cinema.

In nearly every American film by Hitchcock, the family appears as far from nourishing. In *Psycho*, Sam inherits his father's debts, which prevents him from marrying. Marion is forced to hide her boyfriend from her sister, Lila, as she cannot invite him home, at least not for sex. The rich Texan, from whom Marion absconds with money, is attached to his daughter in an incestuous manner. It is never explained what went wrong between Norman and his mother, but he recreated her as a controlling, manipulative, and unstable woman. Norman, Sam, and Marion cannot live an independent adult life, as the expectations and demands of their parents, real or imaginary, haunt them exercising a "repressive power beyond the grave."⁷³

The family ties are also problematic in *The Birds*. Mitch Brenner is a man in his thirties who still comes back home to his mother and younger sister. Mrs. Brenner suffocates all his attempts at having a life of his own, with a woman his age – she

70 P.M. Cohen, *Alfred Hitchcock*, p. 144.

71 T. Williams, *Hearths of Darkness: The Family in the American Horror Film*, London 1996, p. 13.

72 R. Genter, "We All Go a Little Mad Sometimes": *Alfred Hitchcock, American Psychoanalysis, and the Construction of the Cold War Psychopath*, "Canadian Review of American Studies," 40 (2010), no. 2, pp. 134–135, <https://doi.org/10.3138/cras.40.2.133>.

73 R. Genter, "We All Go a Little Mad Sometimes", p. 82.

sabotaged his romance with his previous girlfriend, Annie.⁷⁴ Mitch's relationship with his mother exhibits traces of incest – they are more like partners than a mother and a son. The “couple” even has a child, since Mitch's sister is nineteen years younger than him and treats him like a father. Melanie also bears an uncanny physical resemblance to Mitch's mother as if Mitch had finally found an acceptable replacement for his mother of whom she is likely to approve.

The potential morbidity of family life and patriarchal structures has become a permanent feature of the American horror genre. The 1960s counterculture rejected the Cold War ideologies and enforced conformity. The younger generation refused to mimic the mores of their parents. Novelists and filmmakers mirrored these anxieties in a myriad of demonic children, questioning the myth of the child's innocence, still inherent in Western culture, though slightly tarnished by Sigmund Freud. These pictures simultaneously present how internalized social pressures towards motherhood influence women. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and Wes Craven's productions are populated by macabre parodies of nuclear family life. Stephen King's *oeuvre* features a whole range of family dysfunctions: abuse, neglect, incest, repression, and abandonment. Hitchcock anticipates most of these themes in *Psycho* and *The Birds* as he “sees economic oppression, mental pathology, and excessive violence within civilization's nurturing unit – the family.”⁷⁵ As one member of the audience noted, in a letter to Hitchcock, he has “made respectability, responsibility, and alimony, dirty words.”⁷⁶

6.2. Failures of authority and the futility of science

Families often fail to perform their basic functions, especially those of care and protection. So do various authorities, such as public institutions or science. As Stephen Rebello remarks, “Hitchcock, throughout his career, maintained a healthy irreverence towards the guardians of law and order.”⁷⁷ Some of them are simply not particularly bright, which makes them ineffective – the Fairvale sheriff, in his provincial credulity, assumes that phoning Norman is sufficient to prove his innocence. In fact, if it had not been for the persistence of Marion's sister, Norman would have not been apprehended.

74 A similar motif can be found in *Notorious* (1947), where Madame Sebastian is hostile to her son's marriage. The matron lives with the newlywed couple and is the head of the household. The actor playing Alexander Sebastian is only three years his film mother's junior, which heightens the incest theme.

75 T. Williams, *Hearths of Darkness*, p. 83.

76 Quoted in R.E. Kapsis, *Hitchcock*, p. 61.

77 S. Rebello, *Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of Psycho*, p. 155.

Still, public figures are mere humans so the audience may pardon them their imperfections. In the two discussed movies, the entire authority of science is questioned.⁷⁸ *Psycho* ends with a medical explanation of Norman's horrendous crimes, yet many people find it insufficient, "glib and unconvincing."⁷⁹ The psychiatrist is pompous and certain of his infallibility. He scornfully sniggers in the middle of his speech and casually lights a cigarette when he finishes. Furthermore, he reaches his smug diagnosis having had hardly any time to interview Norman, not to mention the lack of crucial evidence from the late Mrs. Bates's testimony. The audience will never know what, when, or why things went wrong with Norman nor what Mrs. Bates was like.⁸⁰ In *The Birds* people discuss the inexplicable attacks in a diner. An elderly ornithologist, Mrs. Bundy, joins the conversation. After providing from memory a list of facts and Latin names, she claims it is impossible for birds of different species to flock together and exhibit aggressive behavior – nor, in fact, any intelligent activity. She dismisses the firsthand accounts as ridiculous in a matter-of-fact tone. Ironically, everything she says cannot possibly take place, does happen. Science is helpless in the face of the apocalypse.

Conclusions

Though Hitchcock is mainly cherished for his political thrillers, his contribution to the horror genre remains enormous, both in terms of tension-building filming techniques, plot, and setting. His horror films echo the anxieties of American society, the growing violence of public life, distrust towards figures of authority, and the collapse of traditional family life. In many ways, some of these tensions have escalated, making his pictures prophetic. For him, evil is not peripheral to human life, it is its very core. It does not come from outer space, primordial beasts awakened by accident, or the genetic manipulations of unscrupulous scientists. As Ken Gelder notes, the "link [between the word monster and demonstrate – K.S.] reminds us that monsters signify, that they function as meaningful signs."⁸¹ They reflect what communities fear – "if monsters signify something about culture, then culture can (at least to a degree) be read through

78 Interestingly, Hitchcock, who received a Catholic upbringing, never presents religion as insufficient in times of peril. Quite the opposite, in *I Confess* (1953) and *The Wrong Man* he glorifies the power of belief and prayer. Still, religious themes are absent in most of his films.

79 T. Williams, *Hearths of Darkness*, p. 76.

80 The TV show *Bates Motel* (2013–2017) offers a sympathetic portrayal of Mrs. Bates, who tries to protect her mentally vulnerable son.

81 K. Gelder, *Introduction to Part Three*, in: *The Horror Reader*, ed. K. Gelder, London 2000, p. 81.

the monster.”⁸² Yet, social anxieties change quite rapidly. “Horror is thus a genre that is always ready to address the fears of the audience, these being fuelled by events and concerns on an international and national level.”⁸³ This makes the genre immensely fluid, malleable, and surprisingly resilient.⁸⁴ Paul O’Flinn argues that since “there are no immutable fears in human nature to which horror stories always speak in the same terms,”⁸⁵ individual horror narratives age quickly. Yet, Hitchcock’s dominant source of fear is the sheer lack of stability in the universe, unrelated to the socio-political concerns of the moment. His attitude curiously defies Carroll’s prerequisite of horror, as the philosopher assumes the horror genre relies on monstrous entities that are perceived “as disturbances of the natural order”⁸⁶ and that “breach the norms of ontological propriety.”⁸⁷ For Hitchcock, there is no such thing as an ordered universe.

Hitchcock’s films leave us with the assumption that human existence is dangerous due to the sheer randomness of the universe – including the deeds of the people we trust, and even ourselves. Order and stability are illusory, and danger lurks where we least expect it. Nevertheless, his vision of life is far from bleak. Though fear is omnipresent, so are the tools to battle it. What makes life not only bearable but even worth living is the love that binds us to others. It is the affection we feel for each other that counterbalances the horrors around us. As S. King observes, these emotions can offer us a “comforting illusion that makes the burden of mortality a little easier to bear.”⁸⁸ For the famous director, it is the only tangible certainty of life – Lesley Brill interprets nearly all of the director’s work in terms of the romance genre in *The Hitchcock Romance: Love and Irony in Hitchcock’s Films* (1988). Be it a spy thriller or a costume drama, a serial killer movie or a detective story – the intrigue is an excuse to tell the story of loyalty, trust, kindness, and devotion.⁸⁹ The viewers care more about whether the film couple will realize they are made for each other or if torn families will be reunited than about political intrigues. Hitchcock diagnoses universal anxieties caused by life’s unpredictability but also suggests a cure.

82 K. Gelder, *Introduction to Part Three*, p. 81.

83 B. Cherry, *Horror*, p. 12.

84 N. Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, p. 3.

85 P. O’Flinn, *Production and Reproduction: The Case of Frankenstein*, in: *The Horror Reader*, ed. K. Gelder, London 2000, p. 121.

86 N. Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, p. 16.

87 N. Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, p. 16.

88 S. King, *Danse Macabre*, p. 26.

89 D. Freeman, *The Last Days of Alfred Hitchcock*, p. 51.

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