

Chapter 16

Extraordinary Renditions

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DeLillo's Point Omega and Hitchcock's Psycho

In Don DeLillo's novella *Point Omega*, narrator Jim Finley summarizes an article by wordsmith Richard Elster exploring the meanings of "rendition." In it Elster extrapolates from the word's etymology and definitions to mount a critique of the post-9/11 practice of "extraordinary renditions": shifting suspected "unlawful combatants" from American custody to that of other nations so that the prisoners can be interrogated and, in all likelihood, tortured. Yet Elster's essay concentrates "on the word itself, . . . changes in form and meaning, . . . reduplicated forms, suffixed forms" (33–34). Elster, that is, performs a rendering of "rendition" in which its meanings are broken down and recombined, with the aim of showing how the United States government created a word "redesigned to be synthetic" (35).

The words "render" and "rendition" in fact bear multiple meanings that expose a dizzying web of intertextual relations that stretches from *Point Omega* back to Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* and encompasses Robert Bloch's source novel and sequels, the film and television remakes of *Psycho*, Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* video installation, and even Finley's first film—an experimental work about Jerry Lewis (27). In this essay I explore the myriad changes that *Point Omega* rings on "rendition" and elucidate this skein of relations by demonstrating how the novella and film "render"—that is, break down, distill, reconstitute and re-create—an array of personae and texts. Juxtaposed, the novella and film exemplify one of Thomas Leitch's adaptation categories—that of "metacommentary or deconstruction" (111)—and provide one instance of Kamilla Elliott's "looking-glass" analogies, in which "the film . . . metamorphoses the novel and is, in turn, metamorphosed by it," resulting in a "mutual and reciprocal inverse transformation" (229). Fittingly enough, both texts are, in many senses, all about looking.

But first let's examine those definitions. "Rendition" derives from "render," from the Middle French *rendre*: to give back, yield. A rendition is the act or result of rendering, as in a) surrender; b) translation; c) performance, interpretation. "Render" also bears multiple denotations:

1. a) To melt down or extract by melting; or b) to treat so as to convert to industrial fats . . . or fertilizer.
2. a) To transmit to another: deliver; or b) to give up, yield; c) to furnish for consideration, approval, or information, such as when handing down a legal judgment.
3. a) To give in return or retribution; b) to give back or restore; or reflect, echo; c) to give back, or pay back; d) to do a service for someone else.
4. a) To cause to become: make; b) to impart.
5. a) To depict or give a performance of; b) to produce a copy or version of; c) to execute the motions of (e.g., "render a salute"); d) to translate.
6. To direct the execution of (e.g., "to render justice").
7. To apply a coat of paint or plaster to a masonry surface.

The initial meaning Elster presents in his essay is number 7: to apply a coat of plaster. That meaning metaphorically points to the more disturbing connotation of a cover-up or camouflage that applies to the government's "extraordinary renditions." On behalf of the Bush administration, Elster "rendered" (that is, disguised) those renditions and helped to justify the war with misleading language—phrases like "bulk and swagger" (19: read "shock and awe")—"careful sets of words that resemble advertising slogans in memorability and repeatability" (28–29), and, he could have added, in mendacity. Perhaps out of remorse, Elster has made a "spiritual retreat" (23) to his desert home, a "private island," in the words of Hitchcock's Marion Crane, to pursue a personal "dream of extinction" (36)—an apocalypse that may unveil the cover-up implicit in "rendition," if Finley gets his way. For Finley has invaded Elster's retreat to persuade him to be the subject of a documentary in which Elster will simply stand before a wall and relate how he helped to create a "war in three lines" (29). Finley, it seems, wants Elster to confess his complicity with those extraordinary renditions, themselves designed to extract confessions by, in effect, melting down the prisoners and thus metaphorically enacting definition 1. Those renditions (see 33)—like Finley's attempt at persuading Elster to speak—were conducted to "induce a surrender" (the first definition of "rendition," and definition 2b of "render"). By means of these interrogations, these renditions, other nations performed a service for the United States (definition 3d) by forcing suspects to talk about *their* (alleged) complicity.

In his essay, Elster writes that within the walls of the prison a "drama is being enacted," a drama of intimidation in which "the renderers, nameless and masked, dressed in black," perform "a revenge play that reflects the mass will and interprets the shadowy need of an entire nation, ours" (34). The process of interrogation, in other words, is itself a "rendition" (as in definition 5a) of Americans' blinding need for "rendition" (3a and c): that is, a dramatization or ritual of revenge. These performances were also, allegedly, a way to render justice (definition 6).

These meanings of "rendition" lurk in the shadows of the text, supplying political weight to the other performances, the other renditions—those exemplifying definitions 5a and b—that occur explicitly and implicitly in DeLillo's novella. One important set of renditions takes place in the novella's opening and closing set pieces, dubbed "Anonymity," and "Anonymity 2," as a man whose name may be Dennis obsessively watches and re-watches Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho*, which plays Hitchcock's *Psycho* at two frames per second, so that the film takes one full day to run. Obviously, *24 Hour Psycho* is a rendition of Hitchcock's 1960 thriller in the b and c meanings of "rendition" and in the fifth sense of "render." The installation, we might say, is not only a performance or version of *Psycho*, but also an extraction of the film's essence. Unfolding at this glacial pace, *Psycho* is "melted down" and re-created (definition 1a) to generate a "radically altered plane of time" (*Point Omega* 12), which, according to the unnamed watcher, demolishes viewers' "shallow habit of seeing" (13).

DeLillo's watcher comprehends that Gordon's installation has "the same relationship to the original movie that the original movie had to real lived experience. This was the departure from the departure" (13). Yet *24 Hour Psycho* is merely one thread in *Point Omega's* tangle of renditions. In fact, the "original" *Psycho* is far from original, as DeLillo points out in a recent interview with Mark Danner. The film's "curious lineage," DeLillo notes, began as a series of horrific real-life murders in Plainfield, Wisconsin, by a man named Ed Gein; the murders became a news story read by Bloch, who used this material for his 1959 novel, *Psycho*. That novel was then adapted into a screenplay by Joseph Stefano (with lots of help from Hitchcock) that formed the basis for the legendary 1960 film.^[1] More than twenty years later, three movie sequels appeared (in 1983, '86, and '90: DeLillo mentions two of them) with Anthony Perkins reprising his performance as Norman Bates (he also directed *Psycho III*). Then, in 1998, Gus Van Sant created his nearly shot-for-shot remake—a museum-piece *Psycho* that perhaps embodies definition 1b: "to convert to . . . fertilizer."^[2] Gordon's installation, first screened in 1993, was installed in 2006 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where DeLillo saw it and was inspired to write *Point Omega*, which is still not the omega point of these renditions. DeLillo omits to mention Bloch's own two *Psycho* sequels, *Psycho II* (1982) and *Psycho House* (1990), both of which assume and exploit the notoriety of Norman Bates. The chain has still not ended: in 2012 Sacha Gervasi directed *Hitchcock*, a film about the making of *Psycho*

(based on Rebello's book) that features actors playing the director (Anthony Hopkins), Alma Reville (Helen Mirren), and *Psycho*'s performers. These actors deliver renditions of earlier actors rendering Bloch's characters. Further, in 2013 A&E initiated a new series, *Bates Motel*, a fictional prequel to Bloch's novel and Hitchcock's film that tells the story of the earlier life of Norman (Freddie Highmore) and his mother (Vera Farmiga).

In the interview DeLillo jokes that "what we now need is the novel to lead to a crime, which leads to a news story" ("Don DeLillo with Mark Danner").^[3] It is unclear whether a crime is committed in *Point Omega*, but nevertheless its renderings may yield a kind of justice, as in definition 6, or (as in 3) a paying back, a retaliation, and a service performed—for the original victims of those long-ago Wisconsin murders, maybe for Alfred Hitchcock and even for Norman Bates and his undead mother.^[4]

Hitchcock's film offers its own striking renditions. For example, Marion Crane is Janet Leigh's rendition of Bloch's Mary, a desperate office worker and frustrated lover who absconds with her employer's forty thousand dollars. Upon arriving at the Bates Motel she halfheartedly pretends to be Marie Samuels, thereby enacting definitions 5a and b of "rendition" and metaphorically dramatizing definition 7. As we all know, that evening she is rendered in a different way—converted to blood and viscera (1a), paid back, or subjected to rough justice (definition 6)—by Norman's knife.^[5] But is it Norman's knife or his mother's? We can't be sure because Norman is himself performing as his mother, a rendition in which both have been melted down, their parts extracted and blended together (as graphically illustrated in the film's final dissolve, which superimposes Mother's cadaverous visage over Norman's grinning face). We often forget, however, that before the murder, Norman renders a different kind of service to Marion: as a consequence of their conversation about "private traps," she decides to return to Phoenix and give back the stolen money. Later in the film, Marion's sister, Lila (Vera Miles), and Marion's boyfriend, Sam (John Gavin), pretend to be a married couple as they investigate Marion's disappearance: Lila "gives a performance" or "produces a copy of" Marion by acting as the wife of her sister's boyfriend. Further, as James Naremore notes, Norman himself is doubled throughout the film: he 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)" (391).

Yet despite Hitchcock's much-quoted claim that he paid no attention to his source material during the making of his films, many of these devices are present in Bloch's novel.^[6] A crude affair containing much simplistic psychoanalytic speculation about Norman's illness, as well as misleading hints that Mother is alive, Bloch's book nonetheless achieves some resonance. For example, the novel lends Mary stronger motives for stealing her employer's money: class resentment and rage at her boss and at Cassidy, the man with the cash who had earlier propositioned her. Driving toward her rendezvous with death, Mary angrily fumes, "Forty thousand to a daughter for a wedding gift; a hundred dollars tossed carelessly on a desk for three days' rental privileges of the body of Mary Crane" (14). Her self-rendition as "Jane Wilson" is no more convincing than Marion's masquerade as Marie Samuels, but Bloch makes even more explicit than do Hitchcock and Stefano Lila's embodiment as Mary's double: both Sam and, later, Norman briefly mistake the two sisters for each other (Bloch 46, 98). This disguise motif exposes one of *Psycho*'s (and *Point Omega*'s) themes: that nobody really knows anyone else (see Bloch 57, 64–65). In that respect, Norman's rendition of Mother merely exaggerates our ongoing labor to execute the most difficult performance of all: being ourselves.

This motif also reveals another theme shared by all of the *Psycho* renditions: that "we all go a little mad sometimes." Critics usually read Norman's words as Hitchcock/Stefano's original contribution, but it is lifted (with a slight alteration) from Norman's initial conversation with Mary in the novel, where he comments, "I think perhaps all of us go a little crazy at times" (23). This belief is indeed the keynote of Bloch's sequel, *Psycho II*, in which Norman escapes from the asylum and seeks revenge (definitions 3a and c) on Lila and Sam, but dies before he can carry out his plan. His place is taken by his psychiatrist, Adam Claiborne, who "becomes" Norman, as Norman became his mother, killing several people and ending up hospitalized (318). Claiborne, then, gives a rendition of Norman, surrendering his identity and profession by going "a little mad." Bloch's *Psycho II* is also metafictional and metacinematic. In it a crazed director (who later attempts to rape the actress cast as Mary) and a money-hungry producer plan a movie, called *Crazy Lady*, about the Bates murders, which have acquired an infamy that would be highly unlikely without the existence of the (unmentioned) Hitchcock film.^[7] *Psycho II* may be Bloch's rendition—as in repayment or revenge—on Hitchcock and Stefano for stealing his credit: he creates a deranged director and a mercenary screenwriter and kills both of them off. Nor are writers, viewers, or readers exempt from the brutality: it is they (and we) who yield to the enticements of violent entertainments that, according to Claiborne, invite us to "unleash [our] wildest fantasies of lust, murder, revenge" and to "identify with sadists, sociopaths" (255). The ex-doctor's last words are "Norman Bates will never die" (320). His words seem prophetic: Bloch's work illustrates what the U.S. government's "extraordinary renditions" enact—that there is a little Norman in all of us.^[8]

Gordon's rendering of *Psycho* seems to have emerged from a similar feeling—that *Psycho* breaks down its viewers. After first viewing Hitchcock's film, Gordon became obsessed with it, sometimes replaying long sections in slow motion (Stone). As DeLillo observes, Gordon's installation removes the suspense and most of the horror from Hitchcock's film ("Don DeLillo with Mark Danner"). Philip Monk notes that it also sentences Hitchcock's characters to a "celluloid prison where they are condemned to attend their fate" (60), thereby dramatizing Norman's contention that we are all "clamped" in our "private traps." Monk asks whether Gordon's appropriation—dressing in the work of another—isn't "fundamentally an act of transvestism" (73). To employ another trope pilfered from Norman's drawer, we may also interpret Gordon's work as a brand of taxidermy. In any case, the viewer watching the installation—in which the film's story and characters have been stuffed, their entrails extracted—feels "isolated from every expectation" (*Point Omega* 8).^[9] At once a film and a "sculpture" (Stone), *24 Hour Psycho* presents Hitchcock's work as both a perpetual rerun and a new work; while changing nothing, it allows "an absolute difference to emerge" (Verevis 28).

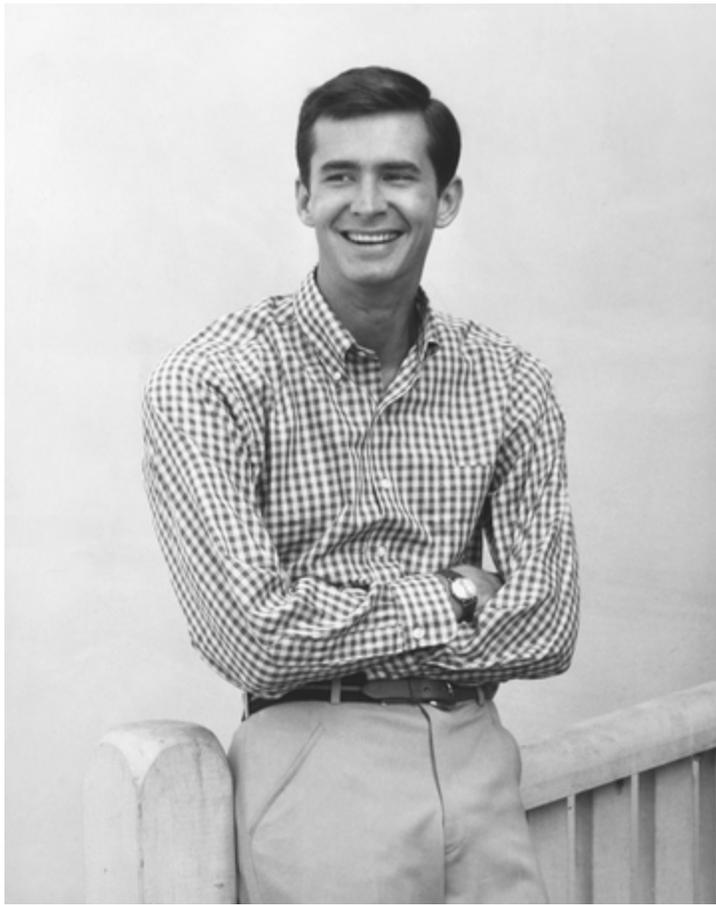
Gordon's work also renders—and reveals—Hitchcock's signature themes and visual motifs. Mirrors, for example, abound in *Psycho*: Marion gazes at herself in her apartment mirror as she decides to steal the money; she is reflected in the wall mirror of the Bates Motel's lobby; Sam and Lila, investigating her disappearance, are filmed in precisely the same setups and reflected in the same mirror.^[10] As the anonymous viewer in *Point Omega* comprehends, *Psycho* is a film about watching. To capture this theme, Gordon placed his translucent video screen in the center of the room to allow viewers to see the images either in their original form or as reversed mirror images; at some showings a large mirror was also set on the wall.^[11] These tactics encourage the kind of self-reflexivity that DeLillo describes in "Anonymity," where the watcher watches more than just the film. In the scene that opens *Point Omega*, he is joined in the viewing room by an older man with a braided ponytail, who he decides is a "professor emeritus perhaps, film scholar," along with his younger companion, whom the watcher dubs the "assistant professor" (7–8). The unnamed observer perceives that one of *Psycho*'s themes—the consequences of unobserved observation, of "cruel eyes studying you," as Norman puts it—has expanded to encompass the room in which he is standing, engendering a near *mise en abîme* in which "everybody was watching something. He was watching the two men, they were watching the screen, Anthony Perkins at his peephole was watching Janet Leigh undress. Nobody was watching him"—nobody, that is, except us (8). And like him, we are eager to watch more. But DeLillo (like Hitchcock) frustrates this desire by arresting the scene and switching to the apparently unrelated story of Finley's visit to Elster's desert keep.^[12] We eventually realize that Finley and Elster are (or were, since it happened months earlier) the two other visitors to *24 Hour Psycho*.

Throughout the middle section of the novella, set in Elster's "private island" in the desert, he and Finley are rendered in various ways by

DeLillo and by his other characters. The first rendition comes in the scene just cited, as the watcher speculates about their identities. The second is the evisceration of Elster that Finley would execute in his unmade film. Though Finley denies the accusation, Elster believes that he plans to stage “a public confession” about “the vanity of the intellectual,” and shoot a film of a “man breaking down,” a man “melting into the war” (53–54)—a rendering of Elster that would mirror the extraordinary renditions that he helped to excuse. Though Finley argues that he would aim for documentary veracity, the film would nonetheless involve a performance, with Elster playing “a ghost from the war councils” (45). As the first-person narrator of much of the novella, Finley also renders Elster in a different sense, “doing a service” for him by portraying him on the page. But instead Elster seems gradually to fade away, by the end of the text seeming to have passed “beyond memory and its skein of regret, a man drawn down to sparest outline, weightless” (97).



Jerry Lewis. The Kobal Collection at Art Resource, NY.



Anthony Perkins. The Kobal Collection at Art Resource, NY.

Elster is wise to be suspicious of Finley's work, which, like that of photographer Brita Nilsson in DeLillo's *Mao II*, would steal his essence and transform him, as the photos transform that novel's author, Bill Gray, into a bad actor "playing the idea of death" (*Mao II* 42). Finley's only previous film does something similar to Jerry Lewis. As much an idea for a film as a film, Finley's "freakish fifty-seven-minute" work (27), like Gordon's, amounts to a distillation or rendering of an icon. Assembled from old footage, kinescopes of television shows and particularly from Lewis's muscular dystrophy telethons, Finley's film depicts the comedian as "heroic, tragicomic, surreal" (26). Because he edits out every other performer, as well as the "disabled children, the studio audience, the band," Finley's film is "all Jerry":

Jerry talking, singing, weeping, Jerry with his ruffled shirt open at the collar, bow tie undone, a raccoon flung over his shoulders, Jerry inviting the nation's love and wonder at four in the morning, in closeup, a crew-cut sweating man in semidelirium, a disease artist. . . . I had him babbling in unsequential edits . . . or Jerry soundless, clowning, he is knock-kneed and bucktoothed, bouncing on a trampoline in slow motion. . . . He inserts drumsticks in his nostrils, he sticks the handmike in his mouth. . . . [I]t placed Jerry outside the moment, in some larger surround, ahistorical, a man on a mission from God. (26)

Jerry Lewis—himself a comedic double invented by the man born Joseph Levitch—is boiled down, distilled, chopped up (like Marion Crane at the hands of Mother/Norman and of Hitchcock's editor), and reassembled into alternate versions of himself. Remembering the film, Finley even thinks of Elster as Lewis (54): both of them "rendered," their faces "collapsible."

The Lewis film bears the same relation to Lewis's telethons, then, as the Gordon video bears to *Psycho*. In both cases, a kind of crime is committed. Although Gordon once remarked that *24 Hour Psycho* is not "simply a work of appropriation or . . . a straightforward case of abduction," it seems just that: an instance of artistic kidnapping ("Douglas Gordon"). Similarly, Finley's Lewis film collects the chopped-up portions from his telethons to create, through decoupage, a captive Jerry assembled from bits and pieces. But the relations in this matrix go further and deeper. To start with a somewhat facetious example, one can't help but notice the remarkable physical resemblance between Lewis and Anthony Perkins (figures 16.1 and 16.2). Moreover, Lewis's desperation and loneliness (qualities he shares with Norman) are not so much disguised as exposed by his antic mugging. Indeed, by the end of each telethon, Jerry seemed as "psycho" as Norman. Nor should we forget that Hitchcock viewed *Psycho* as a "fun picture"—a black comedy, with Norman the lead joker (Rebello 216, 223; see also Hitchcock, "On Style"). Curiously enough, the titles of Lewis's own movies (most of them made around the same time as *Psycho*), and the similar personae he creates in them, seem also to describe Norman: What is he but a sad sack, a bellboy, a patsy, an errand boy for his mother? Isn't Norman, like Lewis, a "cinderfella" who, at certain magical moments, becomes someone else, or at least an enhanced version of himself? Indeed, during his disquisition on birds early in *Psycho*, Norman sounds like nothing so much as a nutty professor. More than that, Norman is, like Lewis, a kind of director, though he is also the only viewer of his private movie starring Ms. Leigh. Yet if Lewis seems to represent only the clownish alter ego of Norman Bates, his most famous role also depicts a divided personality with a dark alter ego: on one side, dorky Prof. Julius Kelp; on the other, oily hipster Buddy Love, the lady-killer Norman wishes he were and, in a different sense, becomes.

Making his Lewis film altered Finley as well; he became "Jerry's frenzied double, eyeballs popping out of my head" (27): that is, he too was rendered by it, just as he is rendered—boiled down and reconstituted—by Elster, who resists his blandishments but never dismisses him. What truly transforms Finley, however, is his encounter with Elster's daughter Jessica, who is sent to the desert retreat by her mother to escape from a man her mother finds threatening—the man later revealed to be the same anonymous man watching *24 Hour Psycho*. In the final "Anonymity" section, in fact, he encounters Jessica at the installation and asks her for a date (this scene takes place before the middle

section). But Jessica spends only a few days with her father and Finley before vanishing without a trace. The two men search for her and enlist the sheriff, but she never reappears, except as the nameless woman watching the Gordon installation in the concluding set piece.

These events point to further ways that *Point Omega* renders *Psycho* by obliquely reenacting its core situations and scenes. Thus, for instance, both *Psycho* and *Point Omega* depict a parent exerting extraordinary control over a child: Norman's mother over him; Jessica's mother, Galina, over her. Second, both also address the ethics of observation. Before Jessica disappears, Finley spies on her in the bathroom and in bed, thereby mirroring both Norman eyeing Marion through his peephole (see 55, 73–74; and figure 16.3) and the anonymous watcher in the museum (or vice versa). In each case, the viewer or reader is also implicated in this matrix of observation: as our cruel eyes study him, we damn Norman for doing what we are doing; we watch the anonymous watcher, and Finley, watching the women, at once thrilling to and condemning their voyeurism. Third, there is at least one vanished woman in both *Psycho* and *Point Omega*: Marion and Jessica, respectively, but also Mrs. Bates. These absent women remain present—there yet not there: Norman's mother abides in Norman; Marion is revived in Lila; Jessica haunts Finley's mind and, as I've noted, reappears like a ghost in the final section.



Through his peephole, Norman Bates watches Marion Crane undress.

Further, after Jessica vanishes, Finley comes to resemble Sam, Marion's boyfriend, and Arbogast, the detective who searches for her. Thus it makes sense that Arbogast (Martin Balsam) is on screen in the second "Anonymity" section, when the watcher sees him knifed by Norman/Mother. Real or potential stabbings, indeed, are the central acts in both texts, as becomes clear when, late in *Point Omega*, the officers searching for Jessica find a knife (91). This discovery, Finley realizes, is the end of his journey: "the omega point has narrowed . . . to the point of a knife as it enters a body. All the man's grand themes funneled down to local grief, one body, out there somewhere, or not" (98). The knife pricks Finley's guilt for having been "the man who'd stood in the dark watching while [Jessica] lay in bed" (88). As with Norman, so for Finley: to look is to kill. He understands that he is complicit in Jessica's vanishing and in the ravaging—the melting down—of her father. Like Norman, Marion, and Elster, Finley has come to recognize the nature of his "private trap."

In the second "Anonymity" section, the watcher (who, according to Jessica's mother, may be named Dennis) watches the stabbing of Arbogast while standing with his own back to the wall (102). His position mirrors Elster's in Finley's unmade film. This shared stance suggests an expansion of the range of responsibility: just as Elster was complicit in the Iraq invasion and the crimes that followed, and Finley was complicit in Jessica's disappearance and possible death, so too is this watcher complicit in her vanishing. After all, Dennis (it may not be an accident that spelling his name in reverse yields "sinned") is the one whose menacing anonymous phone calls convinced Galina to send Jessica to the desert. Fittingly, then, during his final viewing, he recollects (or anticipates—Gordon's installation and DeLillo's novella both engineer a collapse of chronology) the concluding scene of Hitchcock's *Psycho*, and fixes on Norman/Mother's "long implicating look, the complicit look at the person out there in the dark, watching" (107; see figure 16.4). This complicity also clutches us as viewers or readers of *Psycho*, obtaining vicarious thrills from brutal murders (as the "mad" doctor in Bloch's *Psycho II* charges); it also, DeLillo implies, encompasses all Americans for permitting our "extraordinary renditions" to take place. *Psycho*, one might say, anticipates Abu Ghraib.



Norman/Mother's "implicating . . . complicit look" at the end of *Psycho*.

The framing set pieces in *Point Omega*, then, are renditions of the events in the desert as well as renditions of *Psycho*—and vice versa: a "mutual and inverse" reflection and transformation (Elliott 229). The characters seem, as the watcher comprehends, to be "transmigrating, passing from this body into a quivering image on the screen" (102). In that final set piece, the man asks Jessica, "Can you imagine yourself living another life?" (111). His words echo Norman and Marion's conversation on the afternoon of her death, as if Norman were ventriloquizing Dennis in the same way that he and his mother speak through each other. As we have seen, DeLillo's novella poses this question throughout, embodying it most strongly in Dennis, who, near the end of "Anonymity 2," "waits to be assimilated, pore by pore, to dissolve into the figure of Norman Bates" (116). Gordon's work has drawn out the Norman within him, eliciting the sort of doubling that happens repeatedly in all versions of *Psycho*. DeLillo thus renders Hitchcock in terms of technique—manipulating audience expectations as skillfully as the "master of suspense"—but, more significantly, through a shared moral vision that exposes viewers' and readers' complicity with violence and terror.

Of course, these themes and situations pervade Hitchcock's oeuvre. The fantasy of living another life haunts films from *The 39 Steps* through *Strangers on a Train* and *Vertigo*. *Rear Window* also brilliantly anatomizes the ethics of voyeurism and complicity; mysterious women appear (and disappear) in films as diverse as *Vertigo* and *The Lady Vanishes*; *Rebecca* and *Vertigo* (as well as the unmade *Mary Rose*) depict the dead exerting power over the living. And virtually all of Hitchcock's films trace, like *Point Omega*, a transference of guilt. Clearly Hitchcock habitually rendered himself, often reusing the same ingredients to bake his legendary "slices of cake" (Truffaut 103).

Yet *Point Omega* is unmistakably a work by Don DeLillo, reconstituting elements from his earlier works. For example, its desert setting recalls the desolate scenes in his early novel *End Zone*, and Elster's quasi-spiritual retreat replicates the withdrawals undertaken by numerous DeLillo characters, from Bucky Wunderlick's abandonment of rock stardom in *Great Jones Street* and Glen Selvy's monkish mortifications in *Running Dog* to the grief-stricken transmutations of Lauren Hartke in *The Body Artist*. DeLillo has also repeatedly placed his characters in motel rooms—his symbol of soulless postmodern America—where they frequently come face to face with their buried desires (see, for example, the end of *Players*). The interview format Finley conceives for his film (itself borrowed from early Jean-Luc Godard films) reuses Bell's method in *Americana*. And the ubiquity of cameras and their effect on behavior is a primary subject of *Running Dog* and many other DeLillo works. *Point Omega*, then, is also a ruthless rendering—an extraction of the essence—of Don DeLillo's career.

A brief, little-discussed moment in Hitchcock's *Psycho* may serve to illustrate both the meanings of "rendition" and the themes I've been elucidating. Exploring Mother's bedroom in the Bates house, Lila is suddenly startled by her own reflection—actually a double reflection—in a mirror. We see Lila staring, her reflection staring back; because another mirror faces this one, we also see Lila's back (figure 16.5). Three Lilas watch Lila watching herself, as we watch them watch. She is rendered by the mirror: not only is she reflected by it (3b), but her doubling of Marion is confirmed as she is cut into parts like her sister. Meanwhile her effort to do a service for Marion (definition 3d) is furnished for our approval (2c). Lila's guilty response, however, captures our prurient curiosity as well as our complicity. "Viewing Lila," William Rothman explains, "it is as if the screen were a mirror and we were viewing ourselves" (322). This scene, with its mirrors within mirrors, reveals how an act of viewing may be both a violation and an exposure of such violations. In this sense and more, DeLillo's—like Hitchcock's—ultimate point is a political and ethical one: a critique of complicity, whether accomplished through a linguistic camouflage that enables a travesty of justice (and that permits horrors that make Norman Bates's sick little murders seem trivial) or through the objectification that results from cruel eyes studying other humans in their most private moments. In this regard, these renditions carry a moral force that transcends postmodernist games and reminds us of the stakes involved in our own watching, our own flirtations with terror.



Lila Crane (Vera Miles) is cut into parts by the mirrors in Mrs. Bates's room.

NOTES

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1. For more on Bloch's sources in the Ed Gein murders, see Rebello 8. For an account of the writing of the screenplay, see Rebello 33–50; see also Raubicheck and Srebnick 56–65, 82–92.
2. Naremore similarly observes that Van Sant's film "resembles nothing so much as a museum installation" (390).
3. Recent poems by Kim Bridgford ("Psycho" and "Marion Crane") and Juliana Gray ("*Psycho*"), from the books discussed in the introduction to this volume, forge further links in the chain. The stream of influence also moves in the other direction. For example, among the countless magazines stacked in Gein's house were issues of *Startling Detective* and *Marvel Worlds* that contained stories written by Robert Bloch (Smith 11).
4. Elster's name may allude to another Hitchcock film, *Vertigo*, where the mastermind behind the machinations duping Scottie Ferguson is named Gavin Elster. *Vertigo*, too, concerns not one but several vanished women (Carlotta Valdes, Madeleine Elster, and Judy Barton) and, like *Point Omega* and *Psycho*, examines the ethics of observation.
5. Gein's murders were far more horrible and disgusting. He not only stabbed his victims, but chopped them up, skinned them, sometimes wore their body parts, and transformed some of their organs into household fixtures and furnishings (Rebello 3; Smith 7–8). These were, by any definition, extraordinary renditions.
6. Hitchcock once confessed that "*Psycho* all came from Robert Bloch" (qtd. in Rebello 40), but generally showed disdain for the source novel. Bloch, in turn, resented Hitchcock's frequent claims that he himself had invented the film's most important scenes and lines: see Rebello 170; McFarlane 262.
7. The producer casts young, inexperienced Jan Harper (short for "Janet"?) as Mary Crane, and washed-up macho star Paul Morgan as Norman. Jan is a virtual double of Mary Crane (159), just as Claiborne eventually doubles Norman. In one of the novel's many preposterous plot twists, Morgan dresses in women's clothes and prepares to prostitute himself as a way of "getting into" Norman's character (284–287). In other words, he performs as Norman performing as a woman in order to perform as Norman performing as Mother. *Psycho House* begins with the murder of a young girl as she and her friend explore a simulacrum of the original Bates Motel and house that a group of investors has built to lure tourists to Fairvale. Though they are "pretty close to the originals" (355), the household furnishings are nonetheless replicas of a rendition: they were bought from the unmade movie described in *Psycho II* (382). There can be little doubt that Bloch's covert references to the film's fame are deliberate: as Perry and Sederholm show in their essay in this volume, Bloch contributed several teleplays to Hitchcock's film series, and was intimately familiar with the director's work and persona.
8. *Psycho II*, the movie sequel, is also populated by characters who make Norman seem relatively sane: Lila (played again by Vera Miles) is consumed by revenge and schemes to drive Norman crazy by impersonating his dead mother; her daughter, Mary (Meg Tilly), who assists her in this scheme, is almost as much in thrall to her mother as Norman is to his. This film is also filled with ludicrous plot devices: for example, it turns out that Mrs. Bates adopted Norman, whose real mother, a Mrs. Fulton, is also a homicidal psychopath. But all turns out well: at the end Norman dispatches her with a coal shovel.
9. Gordon has also rendered, in different ways, Hitchcock's *Vertigo* and Otto Preminger's *Whirlpool*, in each case engendering what Monk describes as a "proliferating web of implication" (56).
10. For an analysis of Hitchcock's use of mirrors, see Toles 134–138.
11. Gordon has long been fascinated by mirrors. In *Divided Self I and II* (1996), for example, are single-screen videos that feature "parts of the artist's body doing something or having something done to them. These works display a fascination with doubling, mirroring and reflection. Their effect is further complicated by the inclusion of real mirrors in the exhibition space. The artist is shown turning against himself—wrestling, constraining, disfiguring" ("Douglas Gordon").
12. Rothman writes that Norman's peephole "stands in for our eye and Hitchcock's eye and any eye intently engaged in the act of viewing" (289). He goes on to observe that Hitchcock cuts away from Marion to a shot of Norman's eye at the very moment that she stands naked before him; DeLillo's denial of our voyeuristic pleasure thus replays Hitchcock's.

Chapter 17

The Culture of the Spectacle in American Psycho

David Seed

When Bret Easton Ellis's novel *American Psycho* appeared in 1991 its very title referenced Hitchcock's famous film, as did the surname of Ellis's narrator. Patrick Bateman does indeed kill with a knife, made into an explicit icon in the 2000 film adaptation of *American Psycho*, and he is interviewed by a detective investigating a suspicious disappearance. However, it contains many obvious differences from Hitchcock's narrative, not least that of setting. The isolated Bates Motel has been replaced with the crowded streets of Manhattan. The new Bates figure is a yuppie, in other words the very personification of 1980s success, whose job masks his serial killing. More importantly, the perspective of the novel is that of the killer himself, not of the victim; and Ellis's narrative diverges from the paradigmatic pattern of horror movies in not concluding with a final exposure. I argue here that *American Psycho* draws self-consciously on horror movies such as *Psycho* to evoke a contemporary world where spectacles of sexual violence have to be constructed with increasing intricacy until the narrator begins to collapse from an overload of these images.

Between the release of Hitchcock's *Psycho* and the publication of Ellis's novel two cultural developments took place that are both written into the text: the rise of the slasher movie and the emergence of the serial killer as celebrity. We can detect the first of these in the evolution of Hitchcock's original film. *Psycho* ran through a number of sequels—*Psycho II* (1983), *Psycho III* (1986, directed by Anthony Perkins), and *Psycho IV: The Beginning* (1990, part sequel part prequel). In this series there is a gradual spread of killings beyond Norman as well as an increase in sex scenes. In *Psycho III*, for instance, a girl has her throat graphically slashed in the Bates Motel by an assailant whose identity is hidden off-camera.

These adaptations of course took place in the cinema, but the cultural transition toward *American Psycho* also appears in the 1982 novel *Psycho II*, by Robert Bloch, author of the original 1959 novel used by Hitchcock. The narrative opens misleadingly, as if designed to be a simple sequel. Norman Bates is in a psychiatric hospital, apparently recovering—that is, until he kills a visiting nun and escapes in her habit. There then follows a series of killings, some opportunistic, by which time the second subject of the novel has emerged. A Hollywood screenwriter is trying to get Adam Claiborne, Norman's psychiatrist, interested in a film about the original Norman Bates story to be called *Crazy Lady*. The action moves to Hollywood, where Claiborne goes to discuss the script, of which we are told: "It wasn't structured like a routine suspense film, and it didn't rely on what they called 'pop-ups' for its shocks. The thing read almost like a documentary; its fright was factual" (Bloch 153). The same cannot be said for Bloch's early chapters, which have clichéd endings as each new act by Norman is discovered.

The novel not only engages with a debate about film method, but also blurs the distinction between fact and fiction. Norman is glimpsed in Hollywood and indeed haunts the action as its original pretext, although Bloch gradually broadens out the subject into social commentary. Claiborne explains to a bemused actress that the popularity of horror movies is a sign of a cultural psychosis projected by Hollywood: "I invite you to unleash your wildest fantasies of lust, murder, revenge. I lure you to identify with sadists, psychopaths" (Bloch 210). Indeed, all the leading participants in making the movie are shown to be psychotics to a greater or lesser degree. The reaction to the novel in Hollywood was not surprising. As Bloch explains in a 1985 interview: "When I decided to do a novel expressing my feelings about splatter films, which was *Psycho II*, my agent urged me to show the completed section to the studio as a common courtesy. They loathed it. The mere idea of criticizing their bloodbath tactics was abhorrent to them" (qtd. in Leming).

Bloch returns to one of his favorite fictional subjects—the divided self—when he has Claiborne register the uncanny physical resemblance between the director and Norman Bates. The climax of the novel comes when the former lures an actress into replaying the shower scene from *Psycho*. The director, Vizzini, tries to tear the clothes off the actress, she fights back, and suddenly the action seems to freeze:

Vizzini made a sound deep in his throat, then staggered back, clawing at the shower curtain behind him to keep from falling. Panting, he recovered his balance; for a moment he stood motionless as their eyes met.

Then, without warning, his hands darted forth.

Jan turned, but it was too late. Before she could move further, his nails bit into her shoulder.

And fell away. [. . .]

His voice trailed off into a gurgle and he toppled forward to the floor, revealing the redness spurting and spreading from between his shoulder blades.

Then, as the shower curtain ripped back, Jan saw the occupant of the stall lunging forward, knife in hand.

The blade swooped out at her throat.

She had only time to scream before the shot echoed and the knife stabbed down to strike the floor, still clutched in the hand of Adam Claiborne. (Bloch 309)

Bloch had served as a screenwriter in Hollywood since the early 1960s, and the paragraphing of this account is clearly designed to correspond to shots. The novel was in fact based on his own rejected sequel script. At first the actress Jan looks certain to play the role of Marion in actuality, but it is Vizzini who repeats her actions in the original scene. Bloch has set up so many candidates for the role of psychopath that his ultimate twist is to make the attacker the very character who seems to have articulated the voice of reason throughout the novel. Evidently no one is exempt from the collective pathology he himself has diagnosed. Bloch's self-conscious treatment of the horror genre anticipates Brian De Palma's 1984 film *Body Double*, which had a direct influence on Ellis, as I suggest below.

Serial killing is not only narrated in *American Psycho*; it has become assimilated into the novel's cultural environment. In a bar with friends one evening early in the novel, Patrick tries to participate in a discussion of women as sexual objects by throwing in an anecdote about Ed Gein (the model for Robert Bloch's Norman Bates), misinterpreted as a New York personality by a member of the group, which Patrick explains and then is in turn explained as having strange interests:

"No," I say. "Serial killer, Wisconsin in the fifties. He was an interesting guy."

"You've always been interested in stuff like that, Bateman," Reeves says, and then to Hamlin, "Bateman reads these biographies all the time: Ted Bundy and Son of Sam and *Fatal Vision* and Charlie Manson. All of them." (Ellis, *American* 88)

This scene predates any described killings and clearly demonstrates Ellis's understated method of throwing in details in the middle of trivia that will develop significance as the novel progresses. Gein supplied the model for Norman Bates in Bloch's original novel, and his life was made into a semi-documentary film, *Deranged*, in 1974. He was also a model for the serial killer nicknamed "Buffalo Bill" in Robert Harris's 1988 novel *The Silence of the Lambs*, whose film adaptation was released the year *American Psycho* was published. Ted Bundy's serial killings took place in the 1970s, and he subsequently became a bizarre cult figure through his video interviews. "Son of Sam" was the