

# **Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics**

Volume 10, 2018

Edited by Connell Vaughan and Iris Vidmar

Published by the European Society for Aesthetics

**esa**

## **Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics**

Founded in 2009 by Fabian Dorsch

Internet: <http://proceedings.eurosa.org>

Email: [proceedings@eurosa.org](mailto:proceedings@eurosa.org)

ISSN: 1664 – 5278

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## *Art and Life: The Value of Horror Experience*

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ABSTRACT. This paper investigates the value horror experience in relation to life. I advance an account of horror that captures its intriguing effect of disrupting and modifying the everyday experience of audiences, which has brought to my attention from teaching a course on horror film and fiction. One has to do with an audience's experience of madness, the other the experience of abnormality. I draw on Dewey's "aesthetic experience", Foucault's concept of "experience book", and the approach to the value of fiction developed by Timothy O'Leary (2009) and advance that some works of horror can effectuate what O'Leary calls "transformative experience" in audiences. The value of the transformative experience of horror in relation to life will also be examined. I will flesh out my account by offering a close reading of Robert Bloch's *Psycho* (1959) and argue that it has the potential to change the everyday experience of madness of the American readers in Bloch's times, and the experience of abnormality of the worldwide readers thereafter. I defend my account by showing its merit over, for example, the hedonic accounts of the appeal of horror, which maintain that the appeal of horror lies in pleasure. The inquiry is also an attempt to shield the horror genre against accusations raised by G. Di Muzio, who argues that horror films are immoral for they have corrupting effect on audience by desensitizing viewers' compassion for the victims.

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## 1. Introduction

Philosophers have long been puzzled by our persistent engagement with different forms of painful art, including narrative horror, despite the fact that such works induce intense, negative and painful emotions that we typically avoid in everyday life (such as fear, anxiety, disgust, despair, sadness and hopelessness). A number of theorists have advanced what Aaron Smuts calls “hedonic accounts”, arguing that readers/viewers derive pleasure from consuming horror fiction and that it is this pleasure that motivates them to do so (see Smuts 2007, 2014).

Hedonic accounts come in various forms. In these accounts, the pleasure of consuming horror fiction may take the form of the pleasure of physiological excitement due to an adrenaline rush (e.g. Morreall, 1985), pleasure at subversion (e.g. Wisker, 2005), the Freudian pleasure of the return of the repressed drives, or intellectual pleasure. As an example, Noël Carroll (1990) contends that the narrative structure of horror fiction typically proceeds from the onset to the discovery, confirmation and confrontation of a threatening and impure monster. The audience derives intellectual pleasure when they get to know whether or how the monster can be confronted. The painful emotions that the audience endures is the price paid for this intellectual pleasure.

The hedonic accounts have invited many criticisms that I cannot afford to rehearse in full here. One such criticism is that these accounts do not square well with the audience’s actual experiences: readers/viewers typically find the experience of consuming horror fiction to be painful and

not pleasurable (see Smuts, 2007, 2014). The hedonic accounts are particularly vulnerable to criticism if they take pleasure as the overarching value of, or motive for, consuming horror fiction. This is because it is possible for an individual to value the painful emotions felt when consuming horror fiction but not the alleged pleasures gained. For example, a student in my *Horror Film and Fiction* class expressed that the most valuable part of her viewing experience of *The Night of the Living Dead* (George Romero, 1968) and *Ju-on: The Grudge* (Takashi Shimizu, 2002) is the profound feelings of futility in the face of the unintelligible, undefeatable evil.<sup>2</sup>

I have sketched the hedonic accounts in a way that highlights their dual function: on the one hand, they provide a motive for consuming narrative horror, and on the other hand, they advance an account for the value of narrative horror.<sup>3</sup> At this point, it should be noted that my concern

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<sup>2</sup> This case is suggestive of non-pleasurable yet worthy experience. Similar cases are sometimes put forward as responses to ethical hedonism. See for example, Robert Nozick, "Happiness," in *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989): pp.99-117 and Todd May, "Is Happiness Enough?" in *A Significant Life: Human Meaning in a Silent Universe* (Chicago, Illinois; London, England: The University of Chicago Press, 2015): 25-60. Smuts (2014) argues that painful art can enhance the worth of lives without necessarily enhancing our well-being or welfare. This paper is going to explore worth as such of horror fiction.

<sup>3</sup> The two should not be conflated, however. As Philip Nickel (2010) rightly notes, the former is a psychological explanation but the latter a philosophical inquiry. The hedonic accounts, as Nickel sees them, are merely providing a motivational factor for consuming narrative horror. However, I do not think it is necessary to follow Nickel in holding that

for narrative horror is more about what its value than what motivates people to consume horror fiction. Specifically, this paper explores the values of narrative horror other than pleasure, though I have no strong objection to seeing pleasure as a good worthy of pursuing. My inquiry is partly motivated by the observation that readers/viewers do express that the experience they have from consuming horror fiction is more profound than pleasurable experience. This inquiry is also a defense of the horror genre against accusations from philosophers like Gianluca di Muzio, who argues horror films are harmful in that they desensitize the audience's capacity for compassion. Spectators of slasher horror films "are attached to these films by a mix of curiosity for the macabre and a desire to feel strong emotions" (di Muzio, 2006, p.281). However, satisfying one's curiosity for the macabre and desire to feel strong emotions does not justify the harm that the films can bring to the audience. He concludes that horror films are morally bad.

I will not pursue the debate over whether horror films really have such a desensitizing effect on the audience. Instead, my strategy is similar to that of Philip Nickel, who, in response to Di Muzio's views and the hedonic accounts, argues for a value of horror other than pleasure and enjoyment. Nickel's position is that horror fiction "often dramatizes the ordinary or everyday world gone berserk and the transmogrification of the common place", whereby they afford epistemological value that is comparable to that

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pleasure has no place at all in a philosophical inquiry into the value of horror. A reason is that it can be argued that pleasure is a good worthy of pursuing and that horror fiction indeed affords pleasure.

of philosophical skepticism (Nickel, 2010, p.17-p.18). I, on the other hand, will draw on John Dewey's ideas of "experience" and "an experience", Michel Foucault's "experience book" and the Foucauldian approach to the value of fiction developed by Timothy O'Leary to illuminate how some horror fiction and films can effectuate what O'Leary calls "transformative experiences" in the audience in a way similar to a Foucauldian experience book (see O'Leary 2009). They also serve the roles of art envisioned by Dewey in *Art as Experience*: "art breaks through barriers that divide human beings, which are impermeable in ordinary association", by virtue of which it changes our self and how we see and experience the world (Dewey, 1934, p.254; hereafter cited as *AE*) Works of horror fiction are thus liberating on Dewey's account. They are ethically valuable in a Foucauldian sense because they promote an experimental attitude in the audience, which is conducive for the *telos* of ethics (that is, freedom). I start with two horror films that effectuated transformative experiences in two viewers respectively. Then I offer a reading of a piece of literary horror—Robert Bloch's *Psycho*, showing its potential for effectuating transformation on readers collectively.

## **2. The Experience of Horror: Repulsion and Freaks**

I now detail the cases that motivate the current investigation. These cases concern two individual viewers' interactions with two horror films respectively, in which the films disrupted and modified their everyday

experience of the subject matter at issue, and probably their selves as well. In one case, Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* (1965) had the effect of changing a student's understanding of people who experience mental disturbances. One of the student's family members is being treated for a mental disorder and claims to see ghosts. This student used to be annoyed when her family member made these kinds of claims, for she was informed by science and her subjective experience of a world in which there are no ghosts. From what she told me, I believe that she had always known that people who experience these kinds of mental disturbances may think and perceive the world differently, but she did not manage to grasp the significance of those different perceptions to them. *Repulsion*, however, engaged her in all dimensions—cognitively, sensorily, viscerally and affectively—and brought her into the mind of the disturbed heroine, Carol. This engagement is achieved, I think, via the progressively distorted filmic images showing Carol's subjective experience with the world. For example, via malleable spatial configuration, which is significantly indicated in relation to Carol's body, viewers are made to share Carol's progressively distorted bodily perception of her banal apartment and delusions. As Carol goes mad, the corridor in her apartment gets longer and narrower and the ceiling is lowered. In a later bedroom scene the ceiling almost presses on Carol's body. In another scene the spatial configuration of the bathroom in Carol's apartment is distorted. The bathtub in which Carol drowns the body of her first victim, Colin, becomes disproportionately small and is unusually distanced from Carol, who is at the bathroom door. This shot is an artistic attempt to show that the dead body is no longer perceivable in Carol's mind.

While the malleable spatial configuration allows viewers to share at a visceral level the claustrophobic spatial experience and distorted bodily perception of a mad person, the progression allows viewers to gradually step into Carol's deluded world, rendering it a unifying experience.

Susan Feagin argues that one of the values of fictional literature is its ability to enhance one's affective flexibility. Affective flexibility is a pre-condition for other abilities like experiential imagination, the ability to undergo mental shifts, emotional control and so on (see Feagin 1996, pp.248-249). I would say that this value was actualized for this student. I have mentioned that she had always intellectually understood that people who experience mental disturbances perceive the world differently. Since viewing *Repulsion*, her understanding of mental disorders was enhanced, and took on a new dimension. This enhanced understanding is not merely cognitive. A mere cognitive understanding is, to quote William James's understanding of the term, a mere "cold and neutral state of intellectual perception" (James, 1894, p.193). As Smuts explains, the enhanced understanding that art makes possible is essentially emotionally charged, meaning that one comes to *appreciate* certain events; that is, they come to affectively grasp and feel the significance of those events (see Smuts, 2014). In the current case, the student came to appreciate the different perceptions a person with a mental disorder may experience as if she had somehow lived through them herself. As they are capable of undergoing mental shifts, viewers and readers are able to allow the different experience brought about by their engagement with a piece of fiction to intervene in their usual way of experiencing the world. For the student in this case, in having come to

appreciate the aforementioned example of Carol's distorted vision of the bathtub, she also came to appreciate the significance of the perception of seeing ghosts to her family member.

Another case involves a student's viewing experience of Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932). Before viewing this film, she held the view that abnormality should be respected and tolerated—she presupposed that abnormality was an object to be treated in certain way, and had already drawn a line between normality and abnormality. However, having viewed the film featuring “the wicked normal” (e.g. Cleopatra) and the freaks, who not only have a strong sense of solidarity but are utterly at ease with their bodies with physical abnormalities (as represented in a famous scene in which the limbless human caterpillar lights a cigarette effortlessly using only his mouth and enjoys the cigarette like any smoker does), she felt that the normal/abnormal line became blurred. After viewing the film, she came to realize that abnormality is not entirely foreign to herself as an object to be respected and tolerated and that, in her own words, “we are all freakish in some ways”. This recognition had an effect on her future experiences: she constantly reminded herself of it when years later she produced a book on sexual minorities in Hong Kong.

It appears to me that existing accounts of the appeal or value of horror can do little to address the potential that horror fiction has for effectuating such a change in the audience. For instance, such an effect has no place at all in hedonic accounts, for it appears to be more a disturbing, shocking experience than a pleasurable experience. And how the experiences with the horror films interact with the audiences' everyday experiences in a way that

they draw on, and modify everyday experience remains inadequately explored in these accounts. A way to capture the change and the interaction in question, I think, is to draw on Dewey's concept of "experience" in *AE* and Foucault's "experience book". Although the two sets of concepts are said to be "powerfully polysemous" and "très flottant" respectively (see Schusterman, 2000, p.30; O'Leary, 2005, p.548), I think they jointly provide a theoretical basis for an account of the horror experience that motivates the current inquiry.

To start with, two features of Dewey's aesthetics that are particularly relevant to the current inquiry are his emphasis on the continuous relationship between aesthetic experience and everyday experience, as well as the indispensable role of the perceiver. Dewey, as a naturalist, deems that human life, like that of any living organism, is essentially in constant interaction with the environment, including the natural and the social environment: "Experience is the result, the sign, and the reward of that interaction of organism and environment" (*AE*, p.22). More than a mere product, experience is also a matter of doing and undergoing that "are not impressions stamped upon an inert wax but depend upon the way the organism reacts and respond" (*AE*, p.256). It is a process, an activity in which "the organism brings with it through its own structure, native or acquired, forces that play a part in the interaction" (*Ibid.*). As the environment is not always conducive to human needs, the interaction can be bumpy, filled with resistance, frustrations, suspense, crises, obstacles and conflicts to be resolved. In such a flux humans take delight in the consummation of experience, when humans can see order, a sense of

harmony, unity, congruity or equilibrium. Dewey then conceives of “*an* experience” as an exemplary case of such an experience of unity. In contrast to the experiences that result from humanity’s constant interaction with the environment, which can be dispersed and distracted (i.e. “inchoate”), *an* experience occurs “when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment” (AE, p.36). It is a situation that does not have a mere beginning but an initiation, and it is “so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation” (AE, p.37). *An* experience is an exemplary, self-sufficient unity that “carries with it its own individualizing quality” that makes it stand out from experience (*Ibid.*). In other words, *an* experience emerges out of a continuous flow of experience.

Dewey deems that art, owing to its expressive nature and its ability to work in the experience of others, is the exemplary human endeavor for affording *an* experience. If experience is the interaction of an organism with the environment, then aesthetic experience can be seen as the result, the reward of the interaction between the perceiver and the work of art: “The word ‘esthetic’ refers to experience as appreciative, perceiving and enjoying. It denotes the consumer’s rather than the producer’s standpoint” (AE, p.49). As such, aesthetic experience is also a process, an activity that engages the doing and the undergoing of the perceiver. As *an* experience, aesthetic experience is an exemplary unity that stands out from the continuous flow of experience of the perceiver. It stems from everyday experience in the sense that everyday experience provides the raw materials, context, or situation for an aesthetic experience to emerge. Thus Dewey says, “the esthetic is no intruder in experience from without, whether by

way of idle luxury or transcendent ideality, that it is the clarified and intensified development of traits that belong to every normally complete experience” (AE, p.48). Put together, an aesthetic experience is pervasively situated in the perceiver’s everyday experience.

Dewey’s ideas regarding the continuous relationship between aesthetic experience and the everyday experience, and the indispensable role of perceiver, I think, shed light on the *Repulsion* case just discussed. The film makes possible an aesthetic experience of madness to the student, and the experience emerges out of, and is situated in, her daily experience with a person experiencing mental disturbances. Dewey deems that the aesthetic experience that art makes possible is one in which the work enters the experience of the perceiver: “A work of art is complete only as it works in the experience of others than the one who created it” (AE, p.110). Perhaps it can be said that while Roman Polanski (as the artist) attempts to convey the private experience of Carol’s madness to the public world, the student (as the perceiver), by “taking in” the experience, completes the aesthetic experience by allowing the film to re-create and modify her own experience.

However, it does not follow that the film has the capacity to work in and modify the experience of a perceiver only if the perceiver has firsthand experience with people with mental disorders. In fact, to Dewey, experience is not necessarily subjective, private and personal. Recall that Dewey’s experience is a matter of the interaction of an organism with its environment, “an environment that is physical as well as human, which includes the materials of tradition, institutions as well as local surroundings” (AE, p.256). It follows that any members of a community may have a

collective or shared everyday experience with a subject-matter at issue. The everyday experience with madness, then, is not necessarily constituted of one's firsthand experience with people with mental disorders but of the materials of tradition, institutions and local surroundings.

This brings us to Foucault, whose works expose how modes of everyday experience are insidiously shaped by what Dewey calls "the social environment". Like Dewey, Foucault refuses to see everyday experience as merely subjective and private but as "the correlation between fields of knowledge, types of normativity and forms of subjectivity in a particular culture" (Foucault, 1984, p.4). This form of experience is "a kind of long-term, background experience that we share with our culture and our time, and that gives the world to us in certain form" (O'Leary, 2009, p.6). For Foucault, certain forms of experience are historically variable and thus contingent (see O'Leary, 2005, p.549). However, Foucault does not merely aim at describing the contingent factors that insidiously shape modes of everyday experience. As stressed in *The Use of Pleasure*, he also tries to incite readers "to think differently" (Foucault, 1984, p.9). By exhibiting the historical-cultural contingencies that constitute one's modes of everyday experience, he seeks to modify them. His historical yet critical studies on sex, madness and punishment aim to serve as an "experience book", in which "experience" takes the sense of "experiment", offering the readers an experience that "one comes out of transformed" (Foucault, 1980, p.239). This is Foucault's idea of a "limit-experience", one that "wrenches the subject from itself" (Foucault, 1980, p.241); that is, one that "tears us away from ourselves and leaves us no longer the same as before" (O'Leary, 2009,

p.77).

Recall the changes the horror films brought to the two students just discussed: in the case of *Repulsion*, the student came to *appreciate* the significance of the different perceptions a person experiencing mental disturbances may have. This appreciation may have acted on her everyday experience of madness, softened her stubborn resistance to madness and changed the way she interacted with her family member. The changes, I think, can also involve a recognition on the part of the audience that individuals' perceptions of the world can differ significantly. It undermines their everyday experience of the world and commonsense understanding of reality. The audience may come to realize that their understanding has been shaped by the knowledge given to them through education and narrowed by their firsthand experience of the world. Something similar can be said of the case of *Freaks*, which seemed to soften the student's division between normality and abnormality. In a sense the films fulfill what Dewey calls "art's office"—they break through barriers and differences, they unify by "building up the complexity and richness of the individual personality", and they change one's self by composing differences (*AE*, p.254). The films also function like Foucauldian "experience books" in that they produce what O'Leary calls a "transformative experience", which "helps us to detach ourselves from ourselves, to re-orient ourselves toward the world, and to modify our ways of acting in the world" (O'Leary, 2009, p.6).

### **3. Psycho as a Fictional Experiment**

If the above account of the transformative experience that the horror films brought to individual viewers sounds promising, then I venture to take a step further and suggest that some other works of horror fiction can have similar effects, not only on select individuals but also on readers collectively. One such piece of horror fiction, I think, is Robert Bloch's *Psycho*.

In an attempt to characterize his *Madness and Civilization* as an experience book, Foucault says that it enables one to “establish new relationships with the subject at issue: the I who wrote the book and those who have read it would have a different relationship with madness, with its contemporary status, and its history in the modern world” (Foucault, 1980, p.242). It may be interesting to note that Bloch indeed talks about the effect of writing *Psycho* on him as the writer: “I discovered, much to my surprise—and particularly if I was writing in the first person—that I could become a psychopath quite easily” (cited in Winter, 1995, p.21-p.22). Nevertheless, my subsequent discussion of *Psycho* focuses on the effects it can have on readers. I will examine how *Psycho* offers readers a fictional experiment that has the potential to change their relationship with madness. As is well known, the protagonist in *Psycho*, Norman Bates, is inspired by a real serial killer from Wisconsin called Edward Gein, who was found to have murdered, decapitated and eviscerated at least two women in 1957. Bloch later explains that when he wrote *Psycho* he knew nothing more about Edward Gein than the murders. He supplied him with a motive to kill: “the Oedipus motif seemed to offer a valid answer, and the transvestite theme appeared to be a logical extension” (Bloch, 1962).

Bloch's choice of the Oedipus motif is indeed an attempt to draw on the readers' everyday experience of madness in creating this work of horror. As a matter of fact, Bloch explains that his frequent use of psychoanalysts and psychiatrists in his works of fiction "is a result of observing their status in fact" (cited in Olivares-Merino, 2013a, p.75). A quick look at the cultural context in Bloch's times as detailed by Eugenio M. Olivares-Merino (2013a) can help us understand Bloch's comment. First, psychoanalysis was fervently embraced in the late 1940s and 50s in the United States and was deemed to be a prestigious therapy. The simplified versions of this field of knowledge were made widely accessible to the public through magazines. Added to this, it joined forces with other domains when it permeated through popular culture via movies and literary fiction. Some psychiatrists (e.g. David. H. Keller) produced works of fiction and appeared as authorities at cultural events like the Science Fiction Convention. It was also common for psychoanalysts to illustrate pathology using literary texts. Recall that Foucault sees experience as an effect "of a particular arrangement of fields of knowledge, ensembles of rules, and forms of relation to the self", which "involves the way in which an object is seen and conceptualized for a given culture", "the institutional practices of internment and the forms of knowledge which develop within and bolster those institutions" (O'Leary, 2005, p.548; 2009, p.79). Perhaps we can say that the "Freudian dogma" was a major constituent of the background experience of mental disturbances or madness among American readers in Bloch's times. The authority of the doctors and the popularity of Freudian psychology jointly constituted a structure of everyday experience that

shaped the way mental disturbances and madness were seen and conceptualized within this culture.

However, Bloch is suspicious of Freudian psychology and of psychoanalysts. He comments that psychotherapy is “an art rather than a science” (cited in Winter, 1995, p.22). In a similar vein to what Foucault says in *Madness and Civilization* of “the medical personage” that were called upon to treat madmen, Bloch claims that psychiatrists had replaced clergymen as authority figures: “they have become the modern priestcraft. They have supplanted the religious infallibility of previous centuries” (Ibid.). In sum, his frequent use of Freudian theory in his work is more a result of his sensitivity to how it constitutes his readers’ everyday experience of madness than his endorsement of the theory.

Regarding *Psycho*, Bloch openly admits that he utilizes the Oedipus motif in this work simply because “it [“Freudian dogma”] is currently in general acceptance” (cited in Olivares-Merino, 2013a, p.78). The Oedipus motif appears at the very beginning of the novel, when Mother vehemently criticizes her son’s reading habits. In response to Mother’s accusation that what he reads is filthy, Norman replies,

Psychology isn’t filthy, Mother! [...] But I was only trying to explain something. It’s what they call the Oedipus situation, and I thought if both of us could just look at the problem reasonably and try to understand it, maybe things would change for the better. (*Psycho*, p.15, hereafter cited as *PS*.)

In fact, Bloch is using the Oedipus motif as a veil to misdirect his readers. As Olivares-Merino insightfully notes, the real success of *Psycho* lies in Bloch's using the Oedipus motif to deceive his readers into believing that Mother is the only real threat while Norman is the victim (see Olivares-Merino, 2013b, p.109). In other words, having framed the readers' minds in the everyday experience of madness in the Freudian doctrine, *Psycho* proceeds to undermine this experience. A shocking effect of this novel for the readers is the gradual realization of the awful truth: Mother is not a threat after all (in fact, she is even not real), and the real threat had always been Norman Bates. As Lila says at the end of story, "the horror wasn't in the house [...]. It was in his [Norman's] head" (*PS*, p.171).

If, as Olivares-Merino suggests, Bloch's real success is the use of this oedipal cover-up, then the aforementioned shocking effect works for readers who were misled into seeing the fictional situation through the Freudian lens (let us call them "ordinary readers"). For these ordinary readers, the transformative experience may involve a realization of how stubborn and un-skeptical they had been in the face of clues suggesting an alternate scenario. One such clue is ingeniously mediated through the character Sam. Shocked by the fact that that his fiancée, Mary, had run away with a large sum of stolen money, Sam's everyday experience of people cracks and he becomes skeptical:

Funny, Sam told himself, how we take for granted that we know all there is to know about another person, just because we see them frequently or because of some strong emotional tie. [...] Once you

began speculation about that, once you admitted to yourself that you didn't really know how another person's mind operated, then you came up against the ultimate admission—anything was possible. (*PS*, pp.82–83)

Thus viewed, the shocking effect in question may have to rely on the ordinary readers stubbornly adherence to their everyday experience of mental disturbances in the face of what they read.<sup>4</sup> The transformative effect hinges on whether *Psycho* is capable of shocking the readers out of their dominant, background experience of mental disturbances. It may prompt them to reflect on how their reading of the fictional events was limited by their background experience, and how they were misled by the knowledge that they thought they had at their disposal in knowing about mental disturbances. The Oedipus complex was a handy yet an over-simplified attempt to capture the complexities of, and the horror that possibly resides in, a human mind.

Foucault remarks that the “truth effects” of fiction lie in the transformative experience that a book makes possible (see Foucault, 1980, p.243). The truth effects of fiction can be understood as “the creative and

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<sup>4</sup> Horror films that deceive audiences in similar ways include *The Others* (2001) and *The Sixth Sense* (1999). The former deceives viewers into believing that Anne is a loving mother trying to protect her children from the intruders, while the latter deceives viewers into believing that Dr. Malcolm is helping while the child-patient Cole is being helped. Both films involve a subversion of mother-children and doctor-patient relationships respectively.

productive power of the book in the context of a particular historical moment” (O’Leary, 2009, p.87). I have just offered a reading of *Psycho* that has this effect. One may now ask if this means that *Psycho* has effects only for ordinary readers who are situated in the context of a particular moment—what about readers who were not distracted by the Oedipus situation that Bloch deceptively plots? Indeed, I gauge that there were readers like that even in Bloch’s times. Furthermore, readers around the world since those times may be less influenced by the Freudian theory as the ordinary readers did. Many readers may be well informed about the story due to its popularity, which especially grew after the release of Hitchcock’s movie adaption in 1960. As J. M. Nieto García points out, “if we know before we start reading the novel that Norman and Mother are the same person, we are likely to read some elements in the novel differently” (Nieto Garcia, 2013, p.61). Let us call these types of readers “informed readers”. Can *Psycho* carry out transformations in these informed readers?

I suggest that the potential transformative experience of *Psycho* for the informed readers can be the singular, “subjective, genitive” experience of madness that the work makes available to them.<sup>5</sup> *Psycho* engages readers in a fictional experiment that tests what kind of “titanic work of mental delusion” is possible.<sup>6</sup> It explores how a deluded mind can operate. Bloch

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<sup>5</sup> Gary Gutting says that the treatment of the “experience of madness” offered by Foucault’s *The History of Madness* is an objective one in that it is about “the way in which normal people perceived those who were mad” (Gutting, 2005, p.77). In this sense, the treatment is not a “subjective, genitive” one.

<sup>6</sup> This term is borrowed from Olivares-Merino, 2013b, p.114.

concludes his 1962 article “The Shambles of Ed Gein” that “the real chamber of horrors is the gray, twisted, pulsating, blood-flecked interior of the human mind”. *Psycho* can be seen as Bloch’s fictional experiment to see how the interior of Norman’s mind can be led astray by the experiences given to him, including his background experience of madness.

As mentioned above, Norman casts his situation with Mother in the light of the Oedipus complex. In this sense his background experience of madness is, like the ordinary readers, founded in “Freudian dogma”. The plot then unfolds through Norman’s perceptions and interpretations of situations, which conform to the oedipal situation he orchestrates. The Oedipus complex provides him with the means to legitimately fabricate himself as a passive victim-self in a love-hate relationship with Mother. Mother is possessive and violent; she would even kill “the bitch” who flirts with her son. Norman victimizes himself in his recollections—for example, he remembers how Mother smashed his head against the mirror when he was young and how this incident renders him pain and distorted vision whenever he looks in the mirror. Despite his hate towards Mother, he is also a loving, concerned son who insists on taking care of Mother himself. He is even willing to conceal Mother’s crimes. Put differently, then, *Psycho* is a fictional experiment to show the human mind’s astonishing (or in Norman’s case, terrifying) ability of fabrication, and the extent to which the process of fabrication involves one’s using his background experience and knowledge as raw materials.

Let me explain. We learn at the end of the story that Norman’s fabrications are first set off when, after killing his mother and her lover,

Norman imitates his mother's handwriting and writes a suicide note addressed to Norman himself. In the process, Norman becomes Mother. Echoing Bloch's own experience of writing in first person as a psychopath, the process of writing as if he was Mother had a powerful, disintegrating effect on Norman's already unstable self. Norman later retrieves Mother's corpse from her grave, preserves it and keeps her at home with him. Occasionally he also dresses like Mother. These are Norman's fabrications in their most extreme forms.

Even Norman's belief that Mary is a "bitch" who flirts with him is a fabrication that forms as a result of both Mary's sexual appeal (which drives him to peep) and an interplay of what has been given to him—namely, the fact that Mother used to say that women are bitches, the aforementioned traumatic experience with mirror, and the whisky that works him up and allows him to think later that he is passing out. It may sound odd to say that the whisky is something given to Norman. Yet his decision to drink is causally linked to what Mary says to him earlier: "You live alone like this and everything is bottled up" (*PS*, p.37). After Mary has receded into her own room, Norman feels like "he couldn't bottle it up any longer" and immediately the word "bottle" reminds him of a drink (*PS*, p. 43). Through the peeping hole, he finds that Mary is undressing and "gesturing" to him in front of the mirror (while in the previous chapter, readers are told that Mary was only admiring her body and tossed herself a kiss). Together with his distorted vision of the mirror image that makes him dizzy, Norman decides that Mary knows that he is watching and is toying with him. Exactly as Mother says, Mary is also a bitch. This belief supplies Mother with a motive

to kill in his oedipal drama, and Mother does it when he is drunk and passes out.

On Foucault's analysis, the experience of madness in the modern Western world involves seeing madness as a determinable object that can be investigated, studied and explained scientifically. Correspondingly, "the subject capable of understanding madness was also being constructed" (Foucault, 1980, p.254). Similarly, Norman takes himself as a subject that is capable of knowing the madness of Mother and himself. Ironically, this further complicates his mind, causing him to lose his grip on reality. We have already seen how he psychoanalyzes his situation with Mother. Added to this, Bloch presents Norman as "a compulsive reader" (Olivares-Merino 2013b, p. 106). On numerous occasions, Norman affirms that he reads a lot and knows a great deal. When Mary suggests that he put Mother in an institution, Norman responds,

*'She's not crazy!'* [...] *'She is not crazy,'* he repeated. *'No matter what you think, or anybody thinks. No matter what the books say, or what those doctors would say at the asylum, I know all about that.'*  
(*PS*, p.36).

Norman also conceives of himself as a knowledgeable grown man "who studied the secrets of time and space and mastered the secrets of dimension and being" (*PS*, p.92). Later he calmly reveals to Sam that he knows, as if alluding to Dr. Frankenstein, how to revive Mother from "what we call suspended animation" (*PS*, p.149). In particular, as a subject who is capable

of knowing madness, he shows a sense of self-awareness of his own mental problem. His diagnosis is that “he might even be the victim of a mild form of schizophrenia, most likely some form borderline neurosis” (*PS*, p.149), though clearly he underestimates the severity of his condition. At one point he interprets his behavior of washing hands as a compulsion, “particularly during the past week. Guilt Feeling. A regular Lady Macbeth. Shakespeare had known a lot psychology” (*PS*, pp.94-95). In his mind, the behavior is symptomatic of guilty feelings of complicity in Mother’s murder of Mary. The truth is, however, he is only washing hands after shaving. Recall that it was common for psychoanalysts in Bloch’s times to illustrate mental pathology using literary texts including Shakespearean tragedies. Here, what facilitates Norman’s fabrication is the knowledge of mental pathology that was partly constructed, and made accessible to the public, through fictional literature. In short, Norman’s taking himself as a subject who is capable of knowing ironically further prevents him from seeing who he really is. Perhaps it can be said that the horror in *Psycho* lies in the fact that it prompts us to consider the possibility that we might be over confident in knowing our selves. As Sam concludes in his skeptical reflection,

Anything is possible. Talk about not knowing other people—why, when you came right down to it, you didn’t even know yourself. (*PS*, p.83)

One may note that this reading of *Psycho* seems to posit the readers as mere spectators of the titanic delusion of Norman’s mind. So how does it engage

them to the extent that it effectuates a transformation? Here is my conjecture. As we can see from the discussion above, Norman confidently believes that he knows a lot. He experiences the whole situation as real. More importantly, he experiences it as a coherent set of truths, though they do not correspond with reality. Through Norman, readers also experience the deluded world of a psychopath as a coherent, unifying whole. It is *an* experience of madness. Readers are constantly provided with intelligible explanations for the various situations Norman faces, though these situations may look strange. Norman's motives and reasons for his actions are all understandable. Readers can follow Norman's chains of thoughts leading up to his actions. They can probably appreciate, i.e. to feel the significance of his reactions in response to different situations, and grasp what other fictional characters and events emotionally mean to him. Readers may even admire his thoughtfulness in devising plans to protect Mother and to cover the murders, or feel anxious for him, for example, when he is questioned by the detective Arbogast. While Polanski's *Repulsion* engages viewers in Carol's deluded world via its progressively distorted filmic images, and Browning's *Freaks* engages viewers in the life of the freaks partly by consistently showing how they are at ease with their deformed bodies, Bloch's method is to persistently present Norman's madness as a set of coherent truths that is meaningful to any sane reader. For us, coherence is a criterion of truth, a sign of reason and sanity. Yet Norman's deluded mind operates coherently, just like what we believe how our own minds work.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> As a matter of fact, as Coltheart and Davies in *Pathologies of Belief* (Oxford:

This, I think, is also one of the most disturbing elements of *Psycho* that prompts transformative experience in readers, particularly those who have “a perception of madness that admits no meaningful alternatives to standards of normality, one which rejects any beliefs of behaviour that deviate from these standards” (Gutting 2005, p.71).<sup>8</sup> Carroll interprets the name “Norman” as “neither man nor woman but both”, rendering Norman as a borderline case of an impure monster in his definition of horror (Carroll, 1990, p.39). Alternatively, Nickel is inclined to take the name as an “ironic suggestion of normalcy: a normal man, an everyday man” who constitutes our everyday reality, and the horror of Norman’s story is “about the darkside of seeming everymen” (Nickel, 2010, pp.25-26). While both interpretations refer mainly to the movie version of Norman, I would suggest that in Bloch’s novel, the name hints at a critical reconsideration of conventional distinctions between reason and the unreason, “normality” and “abnormality” as well as of what “norm” is.

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Blackwell 2000) shows, many deluded people (such as Capgras patients) hold a highly coherent set of beliefs.

<sup>8</sup> Gutting says that this is a perception of madness against which Foucault’s outrage is directed.

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