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“Did he smile his work to see?”—Gothicism, Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* and the art of taxidermy

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ABSTRACT This article attempts to read Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) as a film that belongs to the genre of the corporeal Gothic. It attempts to study the fluidity of human anatomy, as shown in *Psycho*, through the lens of taxidermy. In *Psycho*, Norman Bates practises taxidermy to “fill” his “empty” time. But taxidermy is not used in the film merely as a marginal art practised by a marginalized character. It is a major motif that contributes significantly in adding to the Gothic atmosphere of the film. Highlighting the materiality of the human body through “grotesque preservation” and thereby creating a discourse on the preservation/destruction duality, that is central to taxidermy, is the point through which the paper seeks entry into the zone of the Gothic and into the world of *Psycho*. The decaying body of Mrs Bates, the deranged body of Norman Bates, and the tortured body of Marion Crane are studied as “taxidermic recreations” that not only reflect a taxidermist’s urge to construct compliant bodies but become sites of the creator’s and the viewer’s desire, much in the vein of a Gothic creation. The paper thus tries to understand whether the art of taxidermy, in general, and, its use in *Psycho* in particular, contributes to the genre of the Gothic. This article is published as part of a collection on Gothic and horror.

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Taxidermy and the Body Gothic

From the string of “body horrors” during the early Gothic narratives of the 18th century down to the “abhumans”¹ of late Victorian Gothic tales human anatomy has been a site of innumerable fantastic dissections and conjoining. Throughout human history the body has been considered as highly volatile, one which has to be contained within a strict vigil to keep it from spilling over its boundary. The cultural construction of an indoctrinated body follows a predictable process: the destruction of a natural body, its recreation into a tamed version, and its constant patient preservation. These three processes are the conduits through which the body in the Gothic genre, in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) and in the art of taxidermy will be explored.

Taxidermy shares one of the central concerns of the Gothic: its preoccupation with the past, and an attempt at preserving the past through corporeality. It may even be said that a common thread between the Gothic texts and the art of taxidermy is the practice of *grotesque preservation*. The very art of taxidermy encapsulates the contradictory notions of being and not-being. The attempts of mimicking life, of arresting movements, and of preserving a body that is both present and absent may serve as a metaphoric representation of what the Gothic projects, that is, the ever present anxiety with the body thwarting all attempts at fixity.

Since the art of taxidermy is based primarily on corporeality, its conjunction with the Body Gothic needs to be explored first. Contemporary theoreticians like Marie Mulvey-Roberts, Steven Bruhms, Kelly Hurley and Xavier Aldana Reyes consider the Gothic as “inherently somatic and corporeal” (Reyes, Introduction). Gothic literature is usually dependent on the reader’s shared experience of bodily sensations for its meaning. Taxidermy, like the Body Gothic, not only relies on, but is absolutely dependent on affective viscera. The affective and morbid features that taxidermy, as a discipline, endorses and for which it is at times snubbed, are also the features of the Gothic that are looked down upon. Reyes (2014) points out that within the canon of academic writing on Gothicism even if “[...] this visceral quality has been acknowledged at all, it is separated from the more subtle workings of the suggestive or the sublime and seen as a less refined and accomplished artistic form” (Reyes, Introduction). The task of the Body Gothic is to place the materiality of the body squarely within the Gothic literary canon. Taxidermy may be an effective tool to carry out such a task. In fact, deformity, alterity, liminality, grotesquery, transgression and excess are all common features shared by both taxidermy and the Gothic.

From trophies to exhibits to images of longing, taxidermy has travelled a long way. A taxidermy body-form is so loaded with contradictions and ambivalence that it becomes a fertile space of interpretative strains in whichever setting or medium it appears—a private museum, a diorama, a written text, or a visual art like photography or film. Taxidermy has been a rich source of study in colonial and gender discourses as it apparently rests on the power relation between the predator and the prey, the dominant and the dominated, and the self and the other. Haraway (1984–1985) looks upon the enterprise of taxidermy as “the commerce of power and knowledge in white and male supremacist monopoly capitalism” (1984: 21), while Rachel Poliquin in *The Breathless Zoo* (2012) considers how a taxidermy body serves as a signifier of Oriental exoticism; she describes them as “metonymic of entire geographies” (87). The art of taxidermy apparently highlights the control that the creator has on the creation, but the interpretations of such a creation are extremely fluid. The countless meanings that a single specimen can generate testify to the fact that such creations cannot be simply reduced to the dominant/dominated binary. Herein resides another similarity between taxidermy, Gothic narratives, and films. The creator at times is caught up in the unexpected consequences of his/her own creation.

From anthropomorphic taxidermy to miniatures, from small curiosity shops to gigantic dioramas, taxidermy deals with the skin of dead animals. It is an art that arises from a merging of the antithetical reality of life and death, stillness and motion, and fragmentation and integration that brings forth the discourse of the Gothic.

The nineteenth century witnessed a proliferation of taxidermy creations. Walter Potter’s (1835–1918) anthropomorphic museum of curiosities, Hermann Ploucquet’s (1816–1878) anti-naturalistic tableaux, and Charles Waterton’s (1782–1865) use of taxidermy as a trenchant attack on contemporary politics all flourished during the nineteenth century as animal re-creations were made to “ape” human actions. The carcasses of the animals were dressed as humans and were displayed as participating in myths and folklores that belonged to the domain of human narratives.

Significantly, the late nineteenth century also witnessed a proliferation of Gothic texts that problematized the man/animal binary. By rummaging through the myriad labyrinths of a highly complex physical constitution of the human subject, the authors of the Gothic texts obliterate the reassuring lines between familiar and unfamiliar, past and present, fantasy and nightmare, unity and fragmentation, and progression and regression, giving birth to characters like vampires, werewolves, ape-men and beast-people, perching on the precarious strands of fluid forms. Kelly Hurley in *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, materialism, and degeneration at the fin de siècle* (1996), discusses the proliferation of “abhumans” that populate the British Gothic narratives at the turn of the century: *The Hunting of the “Soko”* (1881), *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), *The Weapons of Mystery* (1890), *The Great God Pan* (1894), *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896), *Dracula* (1897), *The Beetle* (1897) to name a few.

The soft and yielding carcasses of the animals, like Dr Moreau’s “samples for vivisection” in the horror-cum-science fiction *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896), are used as bodies that are moulded to imitate human actions and behaviours. Taxidermy projects concrete visual exhibitions of orangutans, chimpanzees and gorillas mimicking gestures of the humans bringing the fluidity of our own species to the fore. The animals thus become grotesque representations of the human form, reminding us of Edward Prendick’s unease after his return from the dystopic island of Dr Moreau. After witnessing the transformation of animals into *humanimals*² (who were forced to mimic the humans) in the island, Prendick, after his return home, starts noticing animal gestures and poses in humans:

I would go out into the streets ... and prowling women would mew after me, furtive craving men glance jealously at me, weary pale workers go coughing by me, with tired eyes and eager paces like wounded deer dripping blood.... Then I would turn aside... into some library, and there the intent faces over the books seemed but patient creatures waiting for prey. Particularly nauseous were the blank expressionless faces of people in trains and omnibuses; they seemed no more my fellow- creatures than dead bodies would be ... (Wells, 2005: 138–139).

This intermingling of dead/ alive, and animal/ human brings forth the idea of the permeability of the living corporeal form. The irony in both taxidermy and the gothic body is a desperate attempt to achieve wholeness and stability with raw materials (the skin and the body) that are themselves given to fragmentation and permeability.

While cutting, splitting and splicing a body, a taxidermist admits to an anatomy that is fragmented and permeable, while re-creating it as its own replica s/he mirrors our traditional construct

of a stable and integral body. In short, taxidermy may be seen as a futile effort to make us forget about our fragile corporeality by creating a body that is whole and integral framed in a permanent repose. But the very presence of such a body brings to the beholder's mind the image of a protean body. The very presence of a unitary stable physical construct mounted in front of us ironically reminds us of its fluid instability.

This taxidermic hankering after a body that is whole and in permanent repose betrays an angst that brings it closer to the Gothic. When we speak of the body in relation to the Gothic, we tend to focus on the destructive and the disruptive. We speak of mutilation, desecration and annihilation. However, there is one aspect of the Gothic which usually goes unnoticed—the act of preservation. After all, Gothicism is associated with the past—and what is the past if not a repository of the memories of lost time? Be it an ancestral curse, a ruined mansion, a familial secret, a demented aristocrat, or a decayed body in a closet, the Gothic always preserves. It may be seen as a form of taxidermy: the taxidermy of the spatial, the temporal, the psychological, and the corporeal.

Taxidermy and *Psycho*

Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) brought taxidermy in mainstream narrative cinema at a time when taxidermy was beginning to be reviled. Concern for animal rights, wild life preservation laws and a clear shift in cultural response to taxidermy had already begun to see the art as the grotesque mind's propensity to create grotesque bodies. With such cultural shifts in mind, Norman Bates' "grotesque aesthetic" of preserving the past in the form of human and avian anatomy may be a fertile space to explore the "Gothic body" in the visual text of *Psycho* (1960); a film teeming with juxtapositions and contradictions brought out through the unclassifiable nature of the bodies of Norman Bates and his mother, Mrs Bates.

A study of taxidermy as it appears in *Psycho* (1960) may prove to be a fertile endeavour as, apart from the blatant corporeality that taxidermy suggests, we may also consider how taxidermy in *Psycho* (1960) becomes a metaphoric conduit that channelizes a creator's triumphs, his failures, his fears and his longings. Hitchcock shows stuffed corpses as sites of human hope, desire and loss. In this light, *Psycho* (1960) not only reflects the age-old functions of taxidermy animals as trophies and exhibits but it also becomes symptomatic of a modern taxidermy that was yet to arrive in the realm of visual arts.

Although taxidermy appears in concrete visual form in Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), it may be seen as a metaphor running through a few of his other films as well. The idea of a borrowed body runs through many of Hitchcock's films: in *Rebecca* (1940), Mrs De Winter struggles to fit in the absent body of Rebecca; Barbara Morton serves as a visual re-embodiment of Miriam Haines in *Strangers on a Train* (1951); *The Wrong Man* (1956) toys with the dangers of a body double; Cary Grant in *North by North West* (1959) is recreated into a man that exists only in the imagination of the government officials; *Vertigo* (1958) again is a film where borrowed memories seek refuge in borrowed bodies. In fact, the metaphor of taxidermy runs throughout *Vertigo* (1958). In *Vertigo* (1958) it may be said that Scottie is metaphorically acting like a taxidermist. He is taking the skin of Judy and stretching it to fit the manikin of Madeleine, emptying Judy and filling her with Madeleine. The entire film centres on a constant search for one person in another person's body. We constantly search Carlotta Valdes in the body of Madeleine Elster in the first half of the film, and Madeleine Elster in the body of Judy Barton in the second half. Madeleine Elster has to be destroyed to bring in Judy Barton. But once Judy

appears on-screen all of us try to find traces of Madeleine in her, knowing fully well that she never *was* Madeleine. Robin Wood in *Hitchcock's Films Revisited* (2002) states that by identifying with Scottie we have also fallen in love with Madeleine.³ Thus even after realising that Madeleine is an illusion, we tend to impose that illusion on the real Judy, filling and dressing her up with a woman who never existed.

Scottie in *Vertigo* (1958) does exactly what Hitchcock does to his women—Ingrid Bergman, Vera Miles, Grace Kelly and Tippi Hedren (Spoto). He searches in them a perfect body and tries to impose *his* idea of a perfect body on *their* anatomy. Scottie's attempts of re-creating Madeleine in Judy in *Vertigo* (1958), Norman's attempts of taming a vibrant Marion and a terrifying mother in *Psycho* (1960) and Hitchcock's attempts of creating a beautiful and obedient anatomy in Tippi Hedren⁴ may be seen as a continuous biological narrative where all these creators are trying desperately to resurrect a body that exists only in their imagination. Thus taxidermy may be seen as an appropriate medium through which we may explore Hitchcock's attempts of destroying a body, recreating it, and then patiently preserving it. Such a reading may add a new dimension to the study of corporeality in Hitchcock's films.

The obsession with the memory of a body and its preservation that is explored in *Vertigo* (1958) is taken a step further in Hitchcock's shocker *Psycho* (1960). In *Psycho* (1960), while we are busy analysing the destruction of a body in the film, we tend to ignore another act, an act of preservation of a body—the body of the "much-maligned" Mrs Bates: a body which serves as a surrogate home for her son. Mrs Bates may be seen as one of the earliest examples of an animated corpse, of a dead woman walking. She may be seen as a source of inspiration for many of the "walking dead" that populate today's films.

Psycho (1960) is replete with ideas of a body being replicated, destroyed, recreated and reddestroyed. From using a body double for Janet Leigh in the shower scene, to the stuffed bodies of birds generously littered in the motel office, to the empty eye sockets of a long dead mother, Hitchcock seems to create his own kind of taxidermy with the body of the film. The film is breathtakingly fast-paced, with the plot thickening from the very beginning, and abruptly seeming to come to a standstill with the murder of the protagonist. Just when we have completely identified with Marion, she is ruthlessly killed, much to the bewilderment of the viewer. The knife not only rips Marion apart, it also slashes the corpus of the film's narrative, only to be restored again through the shell of another character, Norman Bates, with whom we momentarily identify and then realize, much to our horror, that the shell of Norman contains the vengeful mother within. The ultimate disillusionment comes when the empty eye sockets of Mrs Bates stare at us. Her immobility, her helplessness come home to us as we realize that we too are immobile and helpless as we watch, with a mixture of curiosity and squeamishness, the wrath of a director who creates, destroys, recreates and reddestroys the viewers' reactions by alternately filling, emptying, refilling, and then re-emptying the bodies of the major characters as well as the body of the film.

Alfred Hitchcock's diorama

Psycho (1960) may be seen as Hitchcock's diorama where the fragmentation of human body is followed by a passionate but violent reconstitution of it. While discussing the Gothic elements in *Psycho* (1960), critics pay a lot of attention to the dark and stormy nights, bizarre killings, a confined and demented mother, a dilapidated menacing tower of a house, the abundance of mirrors, and a psychopath. One strong symbol that is potentially

Gothic in *Psycho* (1960) is surprisingly ignored, that is taxidermy, an art that Norman Bates practices to “fill” his “empty” time.

Robert Bloch’s novel *Psycho* (1959), on which the film is based, shows Norman as a fat, shy man in his forties. We first encounter him reading a description of the Aztec victory dance in *The Realm of the Incas* which describes how the enemy, after being defeated, is killed and his whole body is transformed into a “sound box”:

The drumbeat for this was usually performed on what had been the body of an enemy: the skin had been flayed and the belly stretched to form a drum, and the whole body acted as a sound box while throbbings came out of the open mouth—grotesque, but effective (Bloch, 2014: Loc 59).

With a “comfortable shiver” Norman then indulges in his own fantasy:

Imagine flaying a man—alive, probably—and then stretching his belly to use it as a drum! How did they actually go about doing that, curing and preserving the flesh of the corpse to prevent decay? (Bloch, 2014: Loc 67)

Such descriptions of rendering a body permanently motionless, mutilating it and then transforming it into a replica of itself, only more compliant this time, bring the basic idea of taxidermy to mind. Mary Jobe Akeley in *The Wilderness Lives Again* aligns this idea of using a recreated corpse as a trophy to the art of taxidermy. She describes in graphic detail the process of killing, skinning, tanning and preserving animals practised by her husband, Carl Ethan Akeley (1864–1926), the legendary nineteenth-century fin de siècle taxidermist (Mary Jobe Akeley 1940, cited in Milgrom, 2010: 81). Her description of recreating an elephant, as reported by Milgrom, shows the skill and dexterity of a man simulating nature with a fidelity that verges on madness:

Akeley skinned animals like a Park Avenue plastic surgeon [...]. The legs were cut on the inside; the back was cut longitudinally along the spine; the head was cast, cut off. Once skinned, the elephant was fleshed [...] It took Akeley and his team of porters four to five days to remove and prepare the thick, two thousand pound hide [...] When the salted skin arrived in the museum workshop, it was hard and stiff and had to be tanned—a twelve—week process of daily turning to achieve optimum suppleness. (Mary Jobe Akeley said that her husband’s tanning formula [...] was so good that he never lost a wrinkle, a wart, or a tick hole) (Milgrom, 2010: 81).

Such works of precision had to have a strong impression on the beholders. Carl Akeley, while twisting, turning and manipulating the animal could also have envisaged the reactions of the visitors who would come to visit his dream project—a diorama of Africa in the United States, a diorama so perfect that one would be transported back in time and space to the wilderness of the “heart of darkness”. When Hitchcock decided on *Psycho* (1960), he was also planning his own diorama: a diorama where the commingling of life/ death, youth/ old age, motion/ stillness, silence/ scream would leave the audience bewildered.

The slashing bars of Saul Bass:

Psycho (1960) was planned on a shoestring budget where Hitchcock used his TV crew for shooting and the film was

completed in 42 days. Only two men, Saul Bass and Bernard Hermann, came expensive. The slashing bars of the credit sequence and the slashing chords of Hermann’s music in *Psycho* (1960) had the effect of flaying the corpus of the film at the very outset. Raymond Durnat’s detailed description of the credit sequence in *A Long Hard Look at Psycho* (2002) gives us a feeling that someone is splitting, slashing, skinning and grappling his way into a narrative:

The Paramount logo fades to a black screen, which turns light grey as music starts: chunky staccato chords under keening violins. From the right-hand edge, black stripes stretch across the screen; more appear, at unpredictable heights, till they block the screen like a window—blind. Against the last bands, streaking across at middle height, white angular flecks appear... and turn out to be the tips and tails of letters, slashed laterally and vertically disaligned. The ‘window blind’ breaks up as more black bands thrust in, pushing the last grey strips off left. The bits of letters click together, to read... ‘Alfred Hitchcock’s’. Uncompleted syntax holds the screen for a full two seconds, until the letters’ middle stratum skids left, pursued by more grey bands, which amass in a tight, though still staggered, formation ... New shards of letters slide in... On the now black background, the scattering of broken letters slide and snap together, spelling ‘Psycho’, for about two seconds, until that word, too, cracks into three strata (Durnat, 2002: 19).

The verbs used generously by Durnat, like “stretch”, “slashed”, “breaks”, “thrust”, “push”, “pursued”, “scattering”, “snap”, “cracks” eerily bring forth the images of breaking, making, re-breaking and remaking of a body. The black and grey stripes of the credit sequence act as knives that split and scatter the letters. The letters that form the words “Alfred Hitchcock’s” and “Psycho” themselves may be treated as bodies—they first appear as “white angular flecks” that later develop “tips” and “tails”—bodies that are “slashed laterally and vertically disaligned” until the “bits of letters” like bits of flesh and bits of bones are “clicked together” to form the name of the creator. The “middle stratum” of the letters “Alfred Hitchcock’s” then “skids” only to form “a—mass” that is “tight” and yet “staggered”. This is followed by “new shards of letters” that “slide” in—reminding us of “a mass”, a mass of flesh that can only “slide” in. Finally, the “scattering of broken letters” like broken joints and bones and bits of flesh “slide and snap together” to form the name of the creation, until that too “cracks into three strata”. The creation, destruction, recreation and re-destruction begin from the very beginning: from the film to the film maker to the viewer—no one is spared.

The slashing chords of Bernard Hermann:

We may now move on from Saul Bass to Bernard Hermann, from the slashing bars to the slashing chords of *Psycho* (1960). From the credit sequence Bernard Hermann starts creating his own kind of slashing: “chunky staccato bursts with keening violin” is how Durnat describes it (Durnat, 2002: 19). Joseph Stefano’s reactions, as stated by Jack Sullivan, when he heard Hermann’s score for *Psycho* (1960) is interesting: “When I first heard it, I realized what he’d done. He’d taken everybody’s guts and used them for music” (Sullivan, 2006: 243). His “anxious violas” when Marion dresses to flee from her Phoenix apartment, the “whispered tremolos and harmonics” just before Arbogast is stabbed, the “languid chords” sweeping across the Phoenix sky as the camera pans and enters the private space of lovers, the

“desolate chords” while Norman cleans Marion’s blood followed by the “madhouse cue”⁵, the cue that first peeps its head when Marion suggests to Norman that his mother should be institutionalised, rears its head in the mop-up scene, slithers menacingly around the female voice-over of Norman as he states “she wouldn’t even harm a fly”, and finally dies out slowly in the final dissolve of the swamp: dense, stark, jagged and brutal, yet somehow creating an atmosphere of abject loneliness in which every character is trapped.

While the strings of Hermann tighten and become fiercer in the shower scene with the repeated slashing down of the knife (coupled with the repeated onslaught of swift violent cuts on screen), the viewers along with Marion, unable to grasp the absurdity and randomness of such violence, hopelessly try to “claw” their way out. Jack Sullivan in *Hitchcock’s Music* (2006) depicts Bernard Hermann’s music as a surrogate of the knife itself:

[...] the slashing glissandos seem to stand in for the stabbing knife and Marion’s cries—as well as our own [...] Sight and sound are insidiously united; Hitchcock’s devastating montage seems cut with a musical knife, Herrmann’s stabbings launching the attack (Sullivan, 2006: 255).

Herrmann’s jagged slashing chords come back again when Lila discovers Mrs Bates’ stuffed corpse in the basement. There is no escape from these sometimes melancholic, sometimes violent shrieks of Hermann’s strings. We are trapped into this mad world of string bows where the attack may come from any quarter: the swooping down of a random predator/ creator over an unsuspecting creature that just happens to be at the wrong place in the wrong time. Jack Sullivan further states:

Everywhere the music suggests enclosure. The grim figures in contrary motion during “The Hill” draw Lila toward the house we desperately want her to not enter, the violins sliding down as the basses creep up—a brilliant evocation of entrapment [...] The only escape from *Psycho*’s trap is madness or death [...] (Sullivan, 2006: 257).

From relentless movements between “the dense seventh and ninth chords” (Sullivan, 2006: 254) *Psycho* (1960) leads us forcefully to stillness and silence. Music and silence have been meticulously planned to bring out both the terror of music and the dread of silence at their utmost pitch, suggesting respectively the rhythm of a pulsating live body and the silence and shuffling of a hollow carcass:

The most unforgettable silence follows the shower murder. Shuddering basses collapse with Marion, a deathlike silence splashed by the running shower, suggesting the tragedy of a young life down the drain. (Sullivan, 2006: 251)

After the unnerving desolate strings in the post-murder cleaning scene, the quietness that follows while Marion’s car sinks slowly into the swamp is equally jarring. Finally, as against expectation, when Mrs Bates’ empty eye sockets reflect the light of the bulb in the basement, we encounter no brutal bursts of the string bow, but rather a dead silence, only pierced a moment later by Lila’s shriek. The juxtaposition of sound and silence, rhythm and stillness make up the perfect recipe for Hitchcock’s and Hermann’s delicious shocker. After the initial fight for life, the struggles and the shrieks, comes silence—the mark of surrender—the yielding of one’s body to the predator.

The dead and the mutilated

Hitchcock in his book length interview to Truffaut titled *Hitchcock* (1984), describes the shower scene in the following manner:

We had a *torso* specially made up for that scene [...] but I didn’t use it. I used a *live girl* instead, a *naked model* who stood in for Janet Leigh. We only showed Miss Leigh’s *hands, shoulders, and head*. All the rest was the *stand-in*. Naturally, the knife never touched the body; it was all done in the montage. I shot some of it in slow motion so as to cover the breasts. The slow shots were not accelerated later on because they were inserted in the montage so as to give an impression of normal speed (Hitchcock 1984: 277 emphasis added).

If we have a close look at the shower scene we may understand that the viewers, along with Marion, go through this entire process of pain and horror as the bathroom door opens and a shadowy figure approaches the curtain. We only get flash views of the attacker and the knife and therefore cannot orient ourselves enough to create a defence. In fact, what the murderer does to Marion, the camera does to us. The camera is the agent of violence for the audience, and yet, as Hitchcock himself reveals, the knife is not seen penetrating the skin for once. Much in the vein of Steven Bruhm’s depiction of Romantic dramas in *The Gothic Bodies* (1992) where the spectacle of violence does not take place on-stage but is transferred to the stage of the viewer’s mind, Hitchcock also makes the murder happen in our minds. Such imagined spectacles of pain problematize the relationship between the viewer and the viewed. While the dead, the mutilated, become mere objects of curiosity and squeamishness, the viewer is not spared as well; he/ she is placed both within and without that narrative of pain through the complex process of *seeing*. As Bruhm states: “[The] history of pain [...] is in many ways a history of looking; it is a narrative of watching a pained object while occupying a contradictory space both *within* and *outside* that object” (Bruhm, 1992). The viewer is thus placed in a porous zone where the subject, object, self, other, victim, predator, fiction, and reality seep into one another. As Fred Botting, in search of a wider Gothic structure in *Limits of Horror* (2008), states: “[...] fiction and film cross into everyday life, displaying the permeable, shifting boundaries between reality and fantasy and enveloping every social position. We are all Frankensteins, or monsters” (Botting, 2008:6). Botting’s reading of the Gothic bodies thus suggests a merger between the created, the creator, and the viewer reminding us of Poliquin’s reading of the taxidermy animal-object in *The Breathless Zoo* (2012) where the re-creation of animals becomes a site of the creator’s and the viewer’s desire and yearning. The desecrated female bodies of *Psycho* (1960), the human/non-human creatures of Gothic literature and the re-created corpses of animals in taxidermy become agents, at times, of a violent heaving of those longings and angst back onto their creators as well as their viewers, provoking almost a primeval response in them, a kind of “bodily knowing” (2012: 39) as Poliquin would say, as they come into close contact with such exhibits. Such creations bring us face to face with the fact that we are all participants as well as victims in such acts of violence.

After the murder in *Psycho* (1960), (unlike the novel which switches abruptly to Norman waking from a stupor in his room), Hitchcock’s camera lingers in the bathroom, exploring the aftermath of the violence. Its focus on the shower head, Marion’s legs in the tub, the course of the blood that flows towards the drain, her face pressed against the toilet floor, and her eyes staring

back at us, serve to complicate our emotions: we experience a mixture of horror, disbelief and shame. The vulnerability and helplessness of a body bereft of life and open to the stark gaze of the viewer brings forth the uneasy sensation of our own lust for dreadful sights thinly disguised under a mask of shocked sympathy. The tight close shots of Marion's naked corpse and the camera's roving around the site of massacre, though visually comprehensible are yet perplexing to classify. Such perplexity probably arises from wondering as to what is more shocking, "the human violence [...] or the idea that someone was transform[ing] these vestiges into something else" (Melissa Milgrom when she first encounters the mangled carcasses of animals at Tanzania, 2010: 4–5). Perhaps this is the reason why taxidermy comes to mind when we contemplate the dead and the mutilated. What we witness is a violation of the husk, the outer covering, the hide that hides us. The wounds, the cuts, or the burns of a mutilated or dismembered body are conveyed to the viewers primarily through the ruptures on the skin. The skin is the testament of "a life lived" (Gregory and Purdy). There is nothing symbolic about the skin in taxidermy; it is real. The captivating and yet perplexing power of taxidermy reside in the authenticity that the skin of the animal generates; the skin as the bearer of a "life lived" ultimately transmuted into the raw material that becomes a creator's trophy.

If we consider the shower scene as an important part of the film's corpus, we may visualize Hitchcock using a "torso", a "body double", the "hands", "shoulders" and "head" of Janet Leigh as raw materials out of which he fleshes out the most effective slashing in film history. By the slow movements of camera and by inserting the "slow movements" into the montage, Hitchcock creates his most spine-chilling scene of the film. Such creations, such movements are brimming with possibilities—the possibilities of dynamism in stillness—the transition from "life" to "death" and from "death" to "life-like". Laura Mulvey's description of the death scene in *Death 24x a Second* (2006) focuses on this amalgamation of stillness and motion:

For a moment, the stillness of the recently animated body is juxtaposed with the stream of water still pouring from the shower, inanimate material in unrelenting movement. First, in close-up, the water runs down the drain, creating a circular axis that the camera echoes just before this image dissolves. The circular movement prefigures the next close-up on Marion's eye. As the involuntary flickering of the eye is usually a guarantee of life itself, its fixed, inanimate stare becomes uncanny. Just when the image's stillness seems necessarily to derive from a photograph, a single drop of water falls in front of the camera. Its effect is to reanimate the image, to create another contrast with the inanimate corpse (Mulvey, 2006: 88).

While offering a contrast between mobility and passivity, the scene also offers us a fleeting glimpse of the blurring of stillness and motion: a dead eye on the verge of blinking and a dead eagle poised to fly. The viewers not quite believe, and yet believe, that the eye may blink again, the arms may call out again, and the birds may fly again.

Mrs Bates as an amalgamation of various bodies

In ironic fulfilment of our wishes and our dread, Alfred Hitchcock offers us another option—the transition from the dead to the "lifelike" in the figure of Mrs Bates. Ironically, onscreen Mrs Bates is never played by Anthony Perkins. Mrs Bates in *Psycho* (1960) is a classic example of what taxidermists term as "Re-Creations". Melissa Milgrom in *Still Life* (2010),

while describing a hawk that is not a hawk at all, but a mixture of "turkey, chicken and goose feathers", explains:

According to the rule book, "Re-Creations are defined as renderings which include no natural parts of the animal portrayed [...] For instance, a recreation eagle could be constructed using turkey feathers, or a cow hide could be used to simulate African game" (Milgrom, 2010: 34).

Mrs Bates in *Psycho* (1960), though projected as Norman while murdering Marion and Arbogast, is actually an amalgamation of "[...] a variety of doubles, including a female "Lilliputian"—Her voice is three different people's; one was provided by a man, another by Jeanette Nolan [...] In her final scene, her voice is a "collage" of different voices, even within the same sentence" (Durgnat, 2002: 14). Thus Mrs Bates is not Mrs Bates at all, neither is she her son. She is constructed through a blend of various bodies and voices; all coming together to create one of the most menacing serial killers in film history. She is thus, as a taxidermist would describe, a re-creation, an assemblage.

The dry arid empty shell of Mrs Bates is a twisted reminder of the young healthy sensual body of Marion. The blood and guts of Marion, a freshly killed body of the first half of the film gives way to the dry barren body of an old withered dead woman from whom nothing will seep out—no blood, no guts. Yet this body moves: it acts, it kills. The shower scene can be seen as a point in the film that reverses the role of human anatomy. The frail constitution of an apparently ill body emerges triumphant as it lashes out with all its might at a pulsating titillating body and converts it into a mass of flesh thereby giving vent to years of deprivation, helplessness and frustration. It seems as if the stuffed creations and re-creations of the Bates motel have decided to lash out at anything that is alive—anything that has blood and guts—the blood and guts that they have been emptied of.

While Mrs Bates is a corpse that is re-animated, Marion offers us a reverse narrative of the body. She embodies the presence of death within life even before she actually dies on-screen. The use of another body as her substitute before her murder in the shower scene, the dispassionate, almost clinical consideration of how her body shall be strategically used in the murder scene reduces her to an object that is merely acted upon. Just as Judy's body in *Vertigo* (1958) seems to be an empty shell that is filled, emptied and refilled by the men in her lives, her body becomes a living tomb of at least two dead women (Carlotta Valdes and Madeleine Elster); death also resides in the live body of Marion as her body is moulded and replaced at times to fit the demands of the kill-scene: a passive body, as Laura Mulvey would say, to be actively gazed on.

Death is a precondition in the art of taxidermy. Samuel J. M. M. Alberti (2008) states, "the biological death of the living beast is the birth of the specimen". Mrs Bates had to be killed in order to be preserved. But in the case of Marion, Hitchcock reverses the process. Marion becomes a specimen, an object whose body is used as raw material to create the infamous slashing scene even before she dies. Helen Gregory and Anthony Purdy in *Present Signs, Dead Things: Indexical Authenticity and Taxidermy's Nonabsent Animal* (2015) while attempting a parallel between photography and taxidermy speak of the current trends in taxidermy. They state that

[...] artists have shifted away from addressing issues surrounding representations or simulacra of life as portrayed through a dead specimen and moved toward the creation of sculpture that frequently relies

for its impact upon a self-conscious depiction of its own deadness.

They describe Emily Mayer's sculpture, *Last Resting Place (Their Death in My Hands)* (2007) in the following manner:

It depicts a dead cat resting on a taxidermist's workbench alongside tools, sketches, and a mug filled with pens and pencils and functions as a commentary on mortality and on the pet as a site of embodied memories. In this case, the cat does not appear to be sleeping; it is evidently and uncompromisingly dead, waiting for the taxidermist to perform her magic.

The shower scene in *Psycho* (1960) where Hitchcock "creates" the most effective slashing (one that has been, and is still being, recreated again and again), may be interpreted as an anticipation of the installation that Gregory and Purdy speaks of. The only difference is that the task of recreation had begun way before the "exhibit" was dead. The title of Mayer's sculpture/installation "Their Death in my Hands" thus acquires a sinister tone when applied to Hitchcock's staging of violence on female body. The shower head, the tub, the drain, the curtains, the cold sterile walls call to mind "a taxidermist's workbench alongside tools, sketches, and a mug filled with pens and pencils". The dead eye of Marion, her face pressed on the bathroom floor becomes a "commentary on mortality", the randomness of violence and a site of wasted hopes. One significant point of departure is that, unlike the cat, Marion is not "waiting for the taxidermist to perform [his or] her magic"; the magic is generated in the very process of dying. It is the enactment of pain and torture that Hitchcock preserves. Hitchcock knows that the compelling effect of the scene on the viewer would depend upon a foregrounding of the unmistakable "deadness" of the desecrated body; all the props in the bathroom so meticulously recorded shall add to the horror of this taxidermal installation.

From being museum exhibits and trophies, animal taxidermy have now come to epitomize longing, mourning and death itself:

Despite its emergence from the traditions of museum collections and trophy hunting, the new taxidermy has opened up a broader discourse on loss, memory, fragility, decay, and transformation. (Gregory and Purdy)

Mrs Bates' "stuffed body" and all the other recreated assemblages of Norman vest taxidermy with qualities of "loss, memory, fragility, decay, and transformation" that Gregory and Purdy speak of. In this sense, *Psycho* (1960) becomes symptomatic of modern taxidermy. Mrs Bates is not a trophy, nor is she an exhibit in the Bates diorama. Rather her body is guarded zealously by her son. She is a "nonabsent" embodiment of all that Norman dreads and yet yearns for. Thus Mrs Bates and Marion in 1960 already anticipate two significant shifts in modern taxidermy of the twenty-first century; while Mrs Bates becomes a site of Norman's lost days, Marion becomes a nondead⁶ exhibit of Hitchcock's installation, an exhibit whose created lifelessness is displayed in a stark and literally naked form.

The uncanny presence of death in a live body is also given a concrete physical form in Norman Bates. Norman Bates suffers from such overidentification with his mother that the last words of Mrs Bates proclaiming her innocence almost ring true. The body of Mrs Bates is shown as a refuge of a young, healthy but deranged man. Mrs Bates becomes a repository of a number of opposites—young/old, healthy/sick, mobile/immobile, mother/son, male/female, life/death, victim/victor, guilty/innocent—

myriad binaries visually rendered at the end of the film where Norman, Mrs Bates, and the car that contains Marion blur and dissolve into one another—a "Re-Creation" indeed.

The indent made on the bed by Mrs Bates' body in her room is a powerful image of the presence of absence. Presence and absence are locked up in a complex symbiotic relationship as the visual presence of the body of Mrs Bates points to her actual absence while the absence of the body on the bed apprehends her presence. The indent made on her bed is our first direct interaction with her body without the medium of her victims, Marion and Arbogast, in between. But this body is only a void, an emptiness that Norman fills.

The Bates house—a diorama, a workshop

The rapid industrialization of a suburb and its consequent adverse effects on a small roadside motel cause Norman to turn more fervently to an idyllic past. His house becomes a frozen version of a preindustrial world, reminding us of Walter Potter's tableau:

The enclosed world of the tableau invites nostalgia because of the association of miniaturization with childhood, and with a private temporality which is outside time, along with the delicate handiwork of a pre-industrial world (Henning, 2007: 671).

However, his house is also a dystopic studio where the living and the dead merge and become one. The Bates house may be seen both as the workshop and the diorama of Norman—a refuge, a dream, and yet a source of terror. Norman's house has his childhood intact; it is a house where his mother shall never die:

"This place ... this place happens to be my only world. I grew up in that house up there. I had a very happy childhood. My mother and I were more than happy" (*Psycho*, 1960, 1:37:46 -1:37:56).

Norman's use of the past tense while describing his home to Sam Loomis suggests that he is more than aware that his diorama is only a "dream", a thing of the past.

Norman—a pathetic exhibit of his own dystopic diorama

Norman is essentially a loner, one who guards his house ferociously and would easily go to the extent of killing anyone who dares to enter his diorama, a repository where he has meticulously mummified his past. This space is threatened by two intruders: Arbogast and Lila. On both occasions the results are catastrophic. Taxidermists while easily invading the space of the body, loathe invasion of their own work space. In *Still Life* (2010) Melissa Milgrom speaks of the insularity of the taxidermists and their stinginess in sharing their secret recipes:

[...] taxidermists, who tend to be solitary workers, purposely cut themselves off from the outside world. No other profession has so steadfastly barred visitors from its dreary workshops [...] Gruesome dissections took place in dark, smelly rooms [...] Arsenic, formalin, carbon tetrachloride, and other dangerous chemicals that taxidermists used as preservatives were stored in open containers and filled the workshops' stagnant air with carcinogenic dust (Milgrom, 2010: 16).

Standing in sharp contrast to the horrors of a workshop is the description of a diorama:

Dioramas are three-dimensional time capsules of vanishing landscapes. Like meticulous stage sets, they simulate reality with dreamlike precision. Dioramas depict places in the world that are no longer as beautiful or as “natural” as they used to be (Milgrom, 2010: 26).

We are once again transported to a world of juxtapositions; Norman’s house reminds us of the stench of decayed flesh, yet to Norman it is his diorama—a place where he could resist change and recreate a world that is no longer as “beautiful” or as “natural” as it used to be. Thus the dark, distant, menacing house towering and dominating the entire space in and around the Bates motel is at once a studio, a diorama, a museum, a tableau, and a dreary workshop. Perhaps Norman agrees with Ken Roy Walker’s view on taxidermy. As Walker expresses himself to Melissa Milgrom: “You can almost hear a heart beat. You can almost see the spark of life, and it’s a gift to bring the spark of life back” (Milgrom, 2010: 42). On the other hand, Jack Fishwick’s take on the futility of taxidermy—“Even though I do it, I think it is totally weird. Bizarre! It’s a pointless exercise, because it will never be perfect. No matter how good you are, you’ll only get a semblance of life. It’ll never be alive again” (Milgrom, 2010: 54)—brings Norman’s failure to the fore. He can never make his mother live again. His mother is merely a mangled shell, a twisted reminder of “what was” but “never shall be”. Thus he carries all his failures, all his disappointments within his own body so much so that his body itself becomes a kind of diorama where past and present, mother and son, surrender and resistance, destruction and preservation, and hatred and love commingle. Again, it is not only Norman whose body is a melting pot of opposites. The stuffed effigy of Mrs Bates is also a repository of juxtapositions. The “body” of Mrs Bates becomes a surrogate home for Norman. It becomes a tableau where Norman himself becomes a specimen. He is that taxidermist who becomes a pathetic exhibit of his own dystopic diorama, a grotesque product of his own workshop.

Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and his World* (1965), defines the grotesque as that which

[...] seeks to grasp in its imagery the very act of becoming and growth, the eternal, incomplete, unfinished nature of being. Its images represent simultaneously the two poles of becoming: that which is receding and dying and that which is being born (Bakhtin, 1984: 52).

The body of Mrs Bates as well as the body of Norman represent “the two poles of becoming”—a constant flux of receding, dying, and being born again—the son emerging out of the mother and the mother grotesquely emerging out of the son, a progression from past to present, and a regression from present to the past. It is perhaps this reversion from the present to the past that is visually rendered by the last shot of Norman where the living young man dissolves into the old dead Mrs Bates. In fact, the penultimate dissolve of Hitchcock’s camera leaves the narrative in a fluid state, the transformation of one visage to the other is not complete—it captures “the very act of becoming”; just as the Gothic represents the human body as “[...] between species: always-already in a state of indifferentiation, or undergoing metamorphoses into a bizarre assortment of human/not-human configurations” that Kelly Hurley speaks of in *The Gothic Body* (Hurley, 1996: 10). Hurley could well have had *Psycho* (1960) in mind when she described these “beings” of unending transmutations.

Taxidermy is an art that rests on the preservation/destruction dichotomy; an art that rests on an oxymoron. When we are devoted to something intensely, we tend to preserve and possess it, but if we want to preserve and possess it permanently, we shall

first have to destroy it. It is perhaps out of this dilemma that taxidermy is born. Carl Ethan Akeley’s passion for reconstructing not merely a replica of any animal, but rather a recreation of one particular animal, *his* animal, *his* creation sets him apart from other minor taxidermists. Past sixty, lying on a stretcher, a few days before his death in the lush rain forest of what was then the Belgian Congo, Carl Akeley tells his wife: “Mary, this is the Kivu at last. Here the fairies play! Isn’t this forest the most beautiful, the most ancient in all the world?” (Milgrom, 2010: 85). It is this “beautiful”, this “ancient” world that he had tried to reproduce in New York and for which he had devoted more than 20 years of his life. He did not live to see the completion of his dream-diorama, the African Hall. But he died loving the forests of Africa, its flora and fauna. Yet to replicate them he had to destroy them first. In the process he perhaps destroyed himself as well. Both Akeley and Norman lose themselves in their own dioramas; it is in Norman’s own house that his “fairies play!”

Notes

- 1 The term “abhumans” was first used in *The Night Land* (1912) by William Hope Hodgson (2013) to define “the not-quite-human-subject”.
- 2 Kelly Hurley borrows the term “abhumans” from Hodgson to describe the human bodies that at the turn of the century destabilized the idea of human normativity (1996: 3). In the present context in which we try to describe the animals that are captured and re-created by Dr Moreau in the images of humans, the term “humanimal” may not be too farfetched.
- 3 Robin Wood in *Hitchcock’s Films Revisited* (2002) elaborates on how we see Madeleine exactly the way Scottie sees her: “Leisurely, steady-paced subjective tracking shots characterize the sequences in which Scottie follows Madeleine; we are placed behind the windscreen of his car in the driver’s seat as he follows her around the streets of San Francisco, pursuing a dream through modern surface reality; we wander at his walking pace round the graveyard; we watch Madeleine continually through his eyes, her distance, her silence, his and our inability to understand her, help her, protect her, are all a part of the fascination” (114).
- 4 Donald Spoto’s biography of Hitchcock, *The Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock* (1999) provides a detailed account of Hitchcock’s obsession with Tippi Hedren (Spoto, 1999: 443–479).
- 5 The phrases “languid chords”, “desolate chords”, “Madhouse cue” (2006: 257), “anxious violas”, “whispered tremolos and harmonics” (2006: 250) are used by Jack Sullivan in *Hitchcock’s Music* (2006) to describe the desolation that *Psycho*’s music inspires.
- 6 The word *nondead* is being used in the spirit in which the word “nonabsent” has been used in *Present Signs, Dead Things: Indexical Authenticity and Taxidermy’s Nonabsent Animal* (Gregory and Purdy, 2015, emphasis added).

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this paper as no datasets were generated or analysed.

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