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The Uncanny Changes Hands: Promoting and Managing Hitchcock's *Psycho* on American Television

Alex Remington

What works on film does not necessarily work on television. This essay uses the tangled feature sale of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) to air on American broadcast television in late 1966 to explore the collision of television regulation, discourses about violence and the horror genre, and the relationship between film and television. Paying a hefty sum to acquire the film for broadcast, CBS encountered multiple problems shaping the film's arrival on television and ultimately sold the film without airing it. At a moment when the American film industry desperately needed television and television demanded more film product, CBS's attempts to promote a famously shocking and profitable film by highlighting its changes for television spoke volumes about the recursive relationship between cultural respectability and economic might within which horror often finds itself trapped. The perception of the horror genre as violent proved to be simultaneously alluring and unwise for CBS, and the problems surrounding *Psycho*'s transition shed light on the jagged corners of an integrated media landscape. *What* can be said *where* depends as much on industrial practices as it does on reception contexts, and this paper argues that practices like promotion and risk management are integral for understanding how horror was managed for television. Mixing analysis of regulatory policy with scholarly literature about media industries, as well as press coverage of *Psycho*'s sale to television, I highlight the industrial discourses surrounding CBS's management of the potentially volatile relationship between increasingly explicit horror films and their distribution on television. I also underscore where the relationship between television and film, particularly the intermedial space of film on television, produced particular forms of horror.

***Psycho* Makes the Move (or Return) to Television**

Before looking at how CBS navigated *Psycho*'s initial move to broadcast television, it is helpful to understand how Hitchcock's feature film was tied to television since its inception. Much has been said regarding Hitchcock's self-

financing of the film and foregoing of a director's fee for a stake in the film's negative, but less has been noted of *Psycho's* discursive and visual associations with television. Stephen Rebello (1991) notes that the director aimed to reduce expenses associated with the film by planning it similarly to his big-budget films but shooting it quickly and inexpensively with his Shamley Productions unit like an episode of his TV series (26). From the outset, *Psycho* inhabited a peculiar position in the art-versus-commerce discourse that characterized—separated, really—television and film. Not quite a big-budget studio feature, nor solely a television episode, *Psycho* was an “experiment in solving movie-type problems with television solutions” (Rebello 1991, 189). Realism and speed were hallmarks of the production, and these and other industrial techniques associated with a televisual model helped to produce a distinctive visual language for the film. One interesting detail indicative of the television episode/feature film dynamic is the use of Edsels, Fairlanes, and Mercury models in the car lot Marion Crane visits after leaving Phoenix with stolen cash. Ford Motor Company was a sponsor of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, and a decision was made to feature Ford cars within the film (Rebello 1991, 82). Here advertising enters the film frames of *Psycho*, further blurring the television/film boundaries and showing how tenuous the conception of film as an artistic medium free from commercial advertising restraints could be. Without forcefully overstating the connection, the point here is to highlight claims made by Jennifer Porst (2021) and Christopher Anderson (1994) that television and film were deeply connected rather than oppositional industries. *Psycho* shows just how deep this connection was; the film grew, quite literally, out of television, and the fingerprints of television are felt on this widely influential horror film.

Psycho's return to the television context in which it originated was documented over the course of a year by various newspapers and industrial trades. During the summer of 1966 it was announced that CBS had acquired the rights to the movie and would be airing the film during the following season (Adams 1966a). NBC had passed on the opportunity (Glaser 1966). The film was set to air on CBS stations and affiliates as the feature for “C.B.S. Friday Night at the Movies” on September 23, 1966, but CBS abruptly cancelled the airing that week (Gent 1966). Several trades reported that the murder of Valerie Jeanne Percy, daughter of Republican Senatorial candidate for Illinois Charles H. Percy, prompted multiple CBS affiliates to inform the network they would not show *Psycho* (*Broadcasting Magazine* 1966; Gent 1966; *Variety* 1966). Concerns about content, particularly the murder of Marion Crane, and the timing in regards to the Percy murder were raised by affiliates, and a decision was made by CBS to cancel the airing and postpone it until a later date. Several articles

appear towards the end of 1966 to discuss the cancellation and possible re-scheduling of the film. William H. Tankersley, then CBS vice president, offered that *Psycho* would be released to CBS broadcast stations and affiliates in the spring of 1967 (Hudson 1966). In a rather abrupt about-face, CBS announced mere weeks later that it would *not* air *Psycho* on any of its stations. The cancellation “was based on the network view that the movie was quite acceptable for the theatrical use but was not at all right to send to homes that tune in CBS” (Adams 1966b). Another article revealed that CBS reportedly paid \$800,000 to secure the broadcast rights, and “it seems in order to commend the network for its decision” to presumably maintain its status as a cultural authority and sell the rights (Molloy 1967). Several months later, *The New York Times* (1967) affirmed WABC-TV in New York was set to air *Psycho* on June 24, 1967.

On a conceptual register, thinking through horror’s assumption of different forms when moving from feature film to television in an increasingly integrated media environment is a study in how volatile cultural forms engage with industrial and regulatory frameworks. As the horror genre navigated the migration from film to television—and as television became an influential “author” for the horror genre—it moved from a filmic arena defined in contradistinction to the domestic space to a televisual arena primarily oriented towards the American family by advertisers and networks (Spigel 1992).¹ Involved in this transition were industrial forms and practices, like advertising and self-regulation, that created a unique discursive space within which the horror genre operated. Interestingly, though, *Psycho* did not quite change as much as would be expected in a “family” space. What these regulatory efforts hoped to achieve and what they realistically achieved at the reception level never quite matched. Nevertheless, conversations *around* the film’s move to television tell us much about how horror creators and distributors navigated the genre’s own perception by networks, critics, and television audiences. At stake here are questions of what horror is and is not, especially as television became an increasingly strategic economic space for Hollywood. A second goal of this case study is to think more deeply about “suitable” fare for television, particularly as the horror genre became welded in the public perception to violence. The question of acceptability—and the limits of such—is essential because television became so deeply intertwined with American domesticity by advertisers, trades, and networks that, regardless of whether the medium itself seamlessly equates

¹ The potential CBS showing of *Psycho* would not be the first time the film moved to television. The film appeared in November 1960 on Canadian pay-TV without the furor surrounding the film’s move to American television (*Broadcasting* 1961).

with the domestic, industrial practices like regulation and promotion reflected public discourses around acceptability and shaped the horror genre “at home.”

Scholarship that examines industrial and regulatory structures related to the film-television dynamic has been essential to understanding *Psycho*'s transition to television. Porst (2021) notes that Hollywood's sale of feature films to television was ultimately about economics and strategic programming policies rather than an “aha” moment regarding television's ascendance in midcentury America (2021, 44), and she looks at discursive and industrial sites essential to crafting feature film appearances on television like court cases, trade associations, policy documents, and shifting contexts around labor and rights. This analytical move reorients our understanding of genre beyond the screen to the diverse sites of genre “authorship” that are profoundly influential. In that vein, Kevin Heffernan (2004; 2014) is helpful for underscoring the broader historical contexts of integrated media distribution and exhibition related to the horror genre. Horror is as much an industrial form as it an aesthetic, psychoanalytic, ideological, or affective one, and Heffernan affirms this by highlighting where industrial practices like distribution and promotion shaped particular forms of horror. Deborah L. Jaramillo's *The Television Code* (2018) is indispensable for triangulating industry, form, and television. In looking at the practices and discourses of television (self) regulation, Jaramillo provides a roadmap for understanding the twinned industrial and cultural forces shaping horror on television, and regulatory policy is equally informed by both.

A second useful body of literature is one loosely composed of horror television and *Psycho* scholarship. The scholarship on horror television is increasingly rich and varied, as evidenced by books like *TV Horror: Investigating the Dark Side of the Small Screen* (Jowett and Abbott 2013), and emerging analyses of television horror have done the heavy lifting to “break open” film-based conceptions of horror that hold the most influence over structuring academic approaches to the genre. *Psycho* becomes an interesting object here because it bridges academic work in both film and television studies due to its genesis—so to speak—in Hitchcock's use of his television production unit Shamley Productions to produce the film. *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (CBS 1955) necessarily becomes part of the conversation, and tracking *Psycho*'s move from film exhibition to television requires an understanding of television horror in midcentury America. Marc Jancovich (2018) broaches this conversation and emphasizes that any understanding of the horror genre on television begins with television's social construction as a domestic medium. Hitchcock himself is a horror host in his eponymous television series, and Phillip Hutchison (2018) situates the roles of darkly comic horror hosts in containing generic horror

content on television. Jancovich and Hutchison's research is helpful for thinking through media specificity and the role of the horror host in horror's move from film to television. Last, but certainly of equal importance, Stephen Rebello's *Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of Psycho* (1991) has been helpful for navigating the television-film-television trajectory of horror's most famous boy next door.

“A Very Adult Quality”

Psycho's move foregrounds CBS's attempts to manage potential risks arising from the ambivalence around filmic horror on television, particularly considering the genre's association with violence, as it navigated the regulatory policies of the National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters' Television Code. Adopted in 1952 (and lasting until 1983), the Television Code was a form of self-regulation promulgated by television trade associations to protect television, then a fledgling medium, from threats of government intervention and to standardize content to sustain and enlarge viewership for the purposes of selling “eyeballs” to advertisers (Jaramillo 2018). As Deborah Jaramillo notes, “the Television Code deferred to democracy and capitalism—not morality—as ultimate authorities” (2018, 16). That does not mean morality was absent from the conversation, however. Defining suitable content for television, an effort designed to attract and capture television viewers with the promise of widely appealing and inoffensive programming, was an integral part of the Television Code. The Code flexed its morality-for-the-sake-of-commerce muscles by incorporating language that decried the use of horror for the sake of horror and “fraught sensory experiences” (Jaramillo 2018, 101). These elements might alienate viewers and, worse yet, alienate advertisers. Purveyors of television horror thus bore the responsibility of walking a tightrope with audiences for the sake of increased viewership and advertising revenue.

Present throughout much of the trade discourse surrounding *Psycho*'s move to television was an emphasis on censorship and editing, with much being said about the film serving as an important litmus test for how horrific feature films could be edited for television. During conversations about the postponement of the film, a CBS spokesman offered that the film was purchased with a “right to edit” and expressed reservations about whether *Psycho*, given its notable status as a feature film in the horror genre, could be

made palatable for television viewers (*Broadcasting Magazine* 1966, 68).² A similar sentiment is echoed with the suggestion that “it seems obvious now that the movie content does not meet the network’s standard for home viewing” (Molloy 1966). WABC-TV offers its own take on the editing controversy, noting that “the scene in which a woman is stabbed in a shower would be cut down somewhat ‘to show possibly three stabs instead of the entire 12’” (*The New York Times* 1967). This comment is rather revealing when it comes to the transmogrification of *Psycho*: when it finally comes to air, it is not necessarily the shower scene *itself* which causes concern but the *number* of shots contained within said scene—its duration. What is never in question, however, is the need to edit the film. It was unfathomable to networks and advertisers that *Psycho* would make it to broadcast intact. The same CBS spokesman who expressed reservations about the film’s suitability for family viewing also remarked that the edited version of the film shown to CBS affiliates before its initial airing “took out the horror but kept the suspense” (*Broadcasting Magazine* 1966, 68). A nearly identical “shifting” of genre occurs when Tankersley, the same CBS executive defending the decision to reschedule the film in light of the Percy murder, opines that cancelling the broadcast airing of *Psycho* would be tantamount to ruling out a “good murder mystery” (Hudson 1966). Discursive slippages around the horror genre enabled CBS to capitalize on the ability to shift perception of horror programming to “suspense” or “mystery” programming, a strategy that would take center stage as a method to bring horror feature films to television. This ability to shift the generic positioning of television fare had previously been navigated by television series such as *The Twilight Zone* (1959-64), *The Outer Limits* (1963-65), and *Thriller* (1960-62), and each of these series walked a fine line between out-and-out “horror” themes and those related to science-fiction, mystery, or suspense. By the time *Psycho* was set to air in September 1966, these series had ended their original runs, but the practice of shifting or hybridizing generic content for television audiences persisted.

The need to edit *Psycho* for broadcast television “suitability” also speaks to an emerging media practice around the sale of features to television that depended on controversial content in film being standardized for imagined

² The reservations about *Psycho*’s telecast are interesting given the film’s famous emphasis on the cinematic experience. Filmgoers were warned that admittance after the start of the film would be barred to minimize “distraction” and preserve the unity of the filmgoing experience. *Psycho*, in other words, was promoted as an experience only available to moviegoers, which makes it a curious test for television distribution of modernized horror fare. It is thus worth noting the important role the horror genre plays in the contested spaces of television and film reception.

television audiences. This practice revolved around the regulatory centering of children and families as the imagined users of television, and this positioning worked to shore up economic imperatives for both film and television. In the late 1960s, Hollywood's motion picture Production Code was effectively abandoned to make the film industry more competitive with less inhibited features coming from European filmmakers. At the same time, the film industry had grown increasingly aware of the need to sell features to television as a form of economic viability, and the television industry was equally aware that it needed more programming to fill its airwaves (Heffernan 2004; Heffernan 2014). At this pivotal moment, it became clear that a conflict existed between the need for the American film industry to compete with other markets through less restricted content and the need for American features to sell through television, a market defined primarily in relation to the American home and family. Though the film Production Code may no longer have been dominant, television still depended upon its own self-regulation to protect its commercial interests.³ *Psycho*, especially in trade discourse, became a particularly compelling case study for how feature content would migrate to television in a newly liberated film environment, and this conflict was codified in the discursive relationship constructed between adult, child, and television. A group of Westinghouse stations, among the first to decline airing *Psycho*, cautioned that the new crop of feature films vying for market dominance in the late 1960s exuded a "very adult quality," and that a station policy review was necessary to ensure television programming did not create unusual or embarrassing conversations between adults and children in households (Gent 1966). It is possible that the potential broadcast of *Psycho* was closely watched by industry critics because it indicated how the conflicts between market imperatives for film and television industries would proceed, and this complicated dance between lurid filmic content and less-lurid television content was being navigated (though by no means solely) by Norman Bates, a character born out of television production strategies who went on to infamy in a feature film.

A final point to consider is how *Psycho* navigated the relationships among horror, advertising, and regulation. Mentions of advertising are curiously left out

³ Despite (and often because of) the self-regulation of the television industry promulgated by the Television Code, debates over programming—and violence in particular—were highly visible in the 1960s. Newton Minow's famous "Vast Wasteland" speech on 9 May, 1961 set the stage for continued debates over violence on television that resurfaced two years after *Psycho*'s sale to television when Senator John O. Pastore initiated "an inquiry into the effect of televised crime and violence and anti-social behavior by individuals" (Surgeon General 1972). The latter, perhaps unsurprisingly, centered the relationship between media content and children, reinforcing television's discursive construction as a domestic medium.

of trade discussions about *Psycho*'s distribution on television. Extant copies of *Psycho*'s original broadcast on WABC are difficult, if not impossible, to come by, so it becomes a matter of inference and imagination to ascertain sponsors' and advertisers' relationships to the televised film. One viable inference is that CBS was aware that furor over the shower scene would surface when *Psycho*'s transition to film was announced, so efforts were taken to ensure television audiences were aware the scene was being edited to minimize frightful aesthetics or lurid content. When the film's broadcast was first announced, it was explicitly mentioned in *The New York Times* that CBS executives believed the shower scene "could be suitably sheared a bit here and there without destroying the dramatic impact" (Adams 1966a). At the other end of this saga, WABC ensured audiences the shower scene would be edited down. What is at stake here is a fragile ecosystem where infamous generic fare must be balanced with viewership-generated advertising revenue. The TV Code was extremely important in staving off less standardized fare that might threaten television's economic system, and CBS had the unenviable task of attracting viewers while allaying fear through censorship. In an ironic twist, trailers for *Psycho* could not be shown on *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* episodes due to the TV Code. *Sponsor* (1960) offers that "the tease of the coming attraction in a theater is transformed into uncontrolled titillation and suggestiveness on the home screen." That *Psycho*—a film shot with a television crew using televisual techniques—could not be advertised on the very television show for which its "film" crew worked highlights the discursive problems the horror genre has encountered while navigating integrated media industries.

Branding the Horror Genre as Violent

Closely tied to television regulation is the relationship between violence and the horror genre, and *Psycho* had to carefully navigate this discursive branding of the genre. It is important to highlight how the term "horror" was used in connection with violence in trade discourse, and that this connection guaranteed that *Psycho*'s move to television would conflict with the aims of television regulation. Though violence occurs in any number of films or sets of films, including the "crime" and "action" genres,⁴ it is considered unusually threatening when viewed in conjunction with "horror." From the outset of its

⁴ These generic terms—including "horror"—should be used with a dose of caution as the concept of genre itself brings about a number of ontological and epistemological problems. Kendall Phillips (2018) discusses this in relation to the horror genre in *A Place of Darkness*.

move to broadcast television, *Psycho* is repeatedly discussed through the lens of murder using the famous shower scene. The same summer-1966 *New York Times* article featuring a CBS executive ruminating on how to trim the shower scene begins by describing the film as containing a “celebrated scene in which Janet Leigh is slashed by a knife wielder” (Adams 1966a). In later articles documenting its move, *Psycho* is described as a “1960 shocker about a brutal psychopath who murders several women” (Gent 1966; Glaser 1966; Adams 1966b). *Psycho*, however, does not feature the murder of multiple women. This misremembering is curious in that it speaks to the spectacle of violence welded to this particular film and this particular genre. Without putting too fine a point on this, it can be inferred that *Psycho* was constructed and received in the late 1960s public imaginary simply as a movie about murder. Regardless, descriptions around *Psycho* and its potential CBS showing elide a number of notable uncanny elements in the film, including categorical transgression, doubling, and Gothic family houses. This is not to suggest the film should be understood *outside* of the violence of its famous shower scene, but rather that contemporary accounts stressed this particular thematic over other qualities of the film that might be considered more subtle. Nevertheless, a film that had its first run in theaters nearly a decade before was being re-associated with violence—and generally *only* violence in the cultural and industry imaginary.

The real-life Percy murder that occurred days before the scheduled airing of *Psycho* brought the conversations about horror and violence into stark relief. CBS made the understandable decision to forego showing the film given the real-life horrific events occupying national headlines, and the airing of a film that had been recently remembered in newspapers as a film about a murderous stranger would surely have been questionable to many viewers (not to mention broadcasting stations and advertisers). The juxtaposition of these two events—the Percy murder and the airing of *Psycho*—reinforced the association between the horror genre and violence, and this association was something CBS would grapple with while it determined whether the film could make it to air. This can be seen in coverage of *Psycho*’s *imminent television debut* after the Percy murder, where CBS executives quickly moved to position their product as a mystery or suspense film. *Psycho* *is* a suspense and mystery film, but it seems the discursive trap in which the network found itself was promoting the telecast of *Psycho* through emphasis on its violent shower scene and then desperately trying to change the public narrative around its product after real-life violence intervened. Discussing the film’s airing on television through attention to its more fear-inducing scenes might have been unwise for a medium protected by self-regulatory language designed explicitly around warding off questionable subject

matter. The Percy murder ultimately pushed CBS to scramble for new press directions and underscored the jagged edges of American television, the horror genre, and discourses about media effects and violence.

Comedy, or at least the containment of fear through comedy, served as one method for feature films categorized as “horror” to gain distribution in the television industry. Scholarship on the development of horror hosts like Vampira and Zacherley emphasizes the ritual of comedic horror hosting that served to contain the spectacle of horror films as they were sold into television syndication, and this ritual often allowed rather progressive (or salacious, depending on the viewpoint) fare to enter homes via television (Hutchison 2018). Airing in syndication and often on unaffiliated, independent stations, these curated horror offerings were allowed more leeway in terms of content because the Television Code did not have to be followed as stringently. The intermedial position of horror films on television (including the liminal spaces of off-broadcast) thus created an ambivalent televisual space where comedy and fear intermingled. Jancovich (2018) notes that Hitchcock’s intros and outros for his television series serve to reinforce television viewers’ sense of existence in the same mundane realm as his macabre stories rather than distance them from it, but the director-horror host still provides a sense of familiarity and humor (though ghoulish) that contains these episodic narratives. *Psycho* has the same *lack* of distance characteristic of Hitchcock’s series and an ambivalent relationship to containment characteristic of horror films on television. Characters like the sheriff and his wife arguably provide attempts at humor through their exaggerated reactions, but this humor does little to allay the disconcerting thrust of the film’s narrative. Likewise, the psychiatrist’s Freudian analysis at the conclusion of the film is a semblance of containment that issues little relief. Narrative distance is collapsed in *Psycho*, and there is not enough containment humor to soothe viewers. *Psycho*, an uncanny media product transgressing the boundaries between television/film and generic horror/suspense, might have been destined to encounter problems in the television market. It was constructed as terrifyingly ordinary, positioned as spectacularly violent, and bereft of any substantive containment. No amount of public re-branding after the Percy murder would help CBS recoup its initial cost, and the film was quietly aired through a different network station almost a year after it first entered newspapers as a shiny offering for the 1966 September schedule.

Conclusion

Psycho's move to television speaks to how the intertwined natures of film and television exerted force on the horror genre. The regulatory goals for early decades of television differed from those of the motion picture industry, and the conflicting desires to safeguard the medium for commercial reasons yet capitalize on feature sales to television resulted in razor-sharp editing that kept (mostly) intact popular yet lurid film scenes and minimized their potential displeasure to an imagined homogenous television audience. In opposition to the view of film and television as distinct quarters producing siloed forms of generic fare, the case of *Psycho* shows how deeply imbricated these two industries were. The film industry needed television, and television needed film product on its airwaves. *Psycho*'s intermedial position as a feature film born from television—and making its way back to television—underscored the tricky waters of risk management, American cultural values, and promotion that formed an important part of Hollywood structures. After the initial brouhaha surrounding its release on broadcast television, programming controversies surrounding the film's exhibition on television continued to plague the film. In one instance, KGO-TV in San Francisco fielded a "barrage of phone calls from parents who did not wish their moppets to be confronted with such post-school Hitchcockian horror" after the station planned to air the film in its 3:30pm slot (*Variety* 1977). Beyond this, *Psycho* would go on to have multiple televisual afterlives, including the made-for-TV *Psycho IV* (1990) and the recent *Bates Motel* (2013-17), both of which press hard on the more lurid aspects of the original film.

Horror on film and, increasingly, horror on television are often conceived through medium-specific analyses, and *Psycho*'s shift from theatrical to television distribution blurs these boundaries. It might be helpful to set down the medium-specific lens and think about how (and where) horror interacted with a diverse set of industrial structures and practices that were often interdependent rather than individual. Television networks and advertisers depended on popular cinema that was re-shaped for television to lure viewers to the small screen, and the film industry became increasingly aware of the need to produce features that were cinematically distinct but capable of being distributed to television. The horror genre, which can be both popular and extreme in its orientation, is fertile soil for understanding how media industry practices like regulation, promotion, and risk management shaped media products navigating interconnected industries and where the industrial demands

of Hollywood, from television advertising to feature film sales, inscribed popular generic forms.

Alex Remington is a third-year doctoral student in the Radio-Television-Film department of the Moody College of Communication at the University of Texas at Austin. He earned his Bachelor of Arts in Art History from the University of Southern California and his Master of Arts in Arts, Technology, and Emerging Communication from the University of Texas at Dallas. His research focuses broadly on American media industries, media history, and cultural analysis. His current work looks at the sedimentation of cultural attitudes and industrial practices in volatile cultural forms like horror, and he explores how these forms navigate industrial, cultural, and regulatory frameworks through practices like branding. He is currently working on a long-form project about television horror in the 20th century. He has been published in *Media Industries* journal, *The Velvet Light Trap*, *In Media Res*, and *FLOW*. He is also a Graduate Fellow for the Center of Entertainment and Media Industries at UT-Austin, a research center that explores convergence, location, and access in media and technology industries.

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