

Norman Bates as “One of us”: Freakery in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho*¹

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Abstract

In the mid-nineteenth-century, P.T. Barnum gained a fame for exhibiting attractions and persons such as the Feejee Mermaid, “General” Tom Thumb, and Joice Heath. While freakshows had previously existed to a certain extent, they did not gain great popularity until this period. However, with increased access to travel through rail lines, it was possible to bring freaks to spectators, rather than spectators traveling long distances to gaze at freaks. In addition, industrialization made more leisure time possible for persons who previously would not have had such a luxury. Also, industrialization was beginning to shape perceptions of what was considered a normal body; bodies ought to be able to operate standardized machinery and wear mass-produced clothing.

Thus, it was a shift in culture that made the freak show possible. Rosemarie Garland-Thompson argues that freaks are made, not born, and the people often described as freaks of nature are in fact, “freaks of culture” (10). Nadja Durbach believes these freaks of culture were valued or devalued as the case might be for their ability to shatter dichotomies (3). This epistemological shift in the way bodies were perceived came from a practice Robert Bogdan has called “freakery,” which he defines as “a way of thinking about and presenting people—a frame of mind and a set of practices” (24). The creation of freaks was achieved through various means, through exotizing the other, through medical testimony, pure showmanship, and sometimes plain trickery. This mode of freakery joined many other modes of entertainment and education in the nineteenth century which would later be separated more formally into theaters, museums, and fairs.

Durbach argues that ultimately it was film that spelled the end of the freak show (174). Films could create greater spectacle, and were easier to transport and share than freak shows. Obviously, many of the popular entertainment acts of the day were preserved in some ways in film. Vaudeville, for example, was clearly influential. However, when Todd

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Browning's *Freaks* (1932) attempted to integrate the freak show into film, it was met with disgust.

It would seem then, that the era of the freak show was over, even on film. While freakery has enjoyed a revitalization recently on television through talk shows documentaries, and dramas, freakery's "frame of mind and set of practices" also continued in film, and particularly in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960). In the post war world, Hitchcock's Nazi spies were not as threatening as they once had been, and so Hitchcock turned to a new threat: the serial killer. While the public learned many of the grisly details of Ed Gein's crimes in Wisconsin, they could easily dismiss him as a true freak, one they were nothing like. However, the young, handsome, charismatic Anthony Perkins was more difficult to dismiss as a freak, but the presentation of his character, Norman Bates, follows many of the practices of freakery. Norman shatters dichotomies by being at once his mother and himself. He is simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by women. He is simultaneously guilty and innocent. His hobbies involve manipulation and preservation of bodies, both birds and beasts, which he "hates the look of" when "stuffed." The end of Hitchcock's film becomes positively clinical. A doctor is brought in to explain Norman to the audience. Instead of freaks of the body, Hitchcock's film and other films create freaks of the mind, and so the freak show goes on. However, important differences emerge between Hitchcock's presentation and the freak show. Audiences at freak shows could be engaged directly, while film remains a mostly voyeuristic enterprise.

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