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Lovely...Lovely...Lovely...

by Z. Samuel Bernstein

PSYCHO is the story of the chaos of psychosis; SUSPICION is about the gnawing destructiveness of suspicion; VERTIGO is about psychological and philosophical vertigo; SPELLBOUND is about a chap who is spellbound; it may not be very illuminating, therefore, to suggest that FRENZY is about frenzy. But the idea does not seem to have occurred to most critics, who laud it as "fun and games time again" which "titillates the audience" in "playful scenes of suspense."

There is undeniably a humorous touch apparent in FRENZY; but, on the whole, the film is a study of the psychotic, compulsive state -- the chaos-world, as Robin Wood has so aptly described it, that lurks beneath human relations.

Richard Blaney (Jon Finch) is slightly neurotic, but has a reasonable amount of integrity. Bob Rusk (Barry Foster) is psychotic, presumably schizo, warped by maniacal sex drives; in his moments of extreme mania, he acts wildly, madly, passionately, in a lunatic frenzy. The course of the film brings Richard Blaney to that point of frenzy. It also brings the audience to feel (rather than intellectually to fear) the incredible tension, madness, and frenzy which is buried in each of us.

In STRANGERS ON A TRAIN and SHADOW OF A DOUBT, the good guy and the bad guy are seen as part of the same personality. They are linked at the beginning, and we watch the good guy try to extricate himself. In FRENZY, we watch the two characters entangle -- and there is no extrication. The climax of the film shows Blaney totally possessed, and the viewer made to experience his agony and his frenzy.

The film opens, in grand Hitchcock style, with a cluster of "Normal People" listening to a highly respectable speech about pollution. Then a body floats by in the river, strangled with a necktie. The theme which has run through Hitchcock's films as a leitmotif is very clear: even in the most respectable gatherings, chaos lurks beneath the surface.

The cut to Blaney, putting on a tie, of course implicates him at once. But we see Blaney in a mirror, rather than directly -- the film is also about illusion.

Blaney is confronted by the bartender (Bernard Cribbins) and accused of theft. Babs Milligan (Anna Massey) interferes: "He never stole nothing in his life."

"How d'you know?" asks the bartender.

"I work with him."

"And what else?"

Blaney throws a handful of change, and then his salary advance on the counter. "I had to;" says Blaney, "he thought I didn't have it." This traditional cinematic convention implies the integrity of the protagonist. The unnecessarily nasty tone to the bartender's accusation hints at Blaney's innocence in the necktie murders as well as the theft -- our hero may be flawed, but he cannot be all that depraved. The audience sympathizes with Blaney, even though he tends to be violent (squishing a bunch of grapes) and high-tempered (demanding a triple brandy.)

The meeting between Blaney and his ex-wife (Barbara Leigh-Hunt) is an example of Hitchcock's incomparable editing. The meeting opens with a prefunctory kiss, in a two-shot (i.e., both characters are together on the screen), but the characters quickly move into one-shot (appear separately in the frame). The use of the one-shot (to imply emotional separation) and two-shot (to imply emotional togetherness) continues throughout the scene.

(In one shot) "Just look at the state you're in," says Mrs. Blaney kindly. Cut to two-shot which is held until...

"I lost my job," he says, rather nastily -- and then dialogue continues in one-shot.

"Dinner is on me, we'll go to my club," she offers, and Hitchcock shows them in two shot. He cuts to another two-shot of them dining at the club, which is maintained until Blaney says, "You ought to get married again."

The dialogue grows more antagonistic, the cutting faster: "If you can't make love, sell it." A cut to Mrs. Blaney for a reaction, a cut to Blaney, then a cut to his hand crushing the glass.

The encounter has told us several interesting things about Blaney: that he was once a Good Guy (he received a citation while in the RAF for gallantry and leadership); that he now has difficulty finding his place in the world; and that he expresses himself through violent gestures. This is the frenzy that lurks in him, and peeps through from time to time.

The murder scene is quite remarkable: the incredible tension, the fast editing, the visual prominence of the victim's neck during the rape. We have already seen the "normal" personality of Bob Rusk: he is genial, affable, friendly, and rather good-natured. We now run into his darker

side: he is a compulsive rapist and a homocidal maniac.

This is our first view of his frenzy. Rusk is sweating, panting, and frantic. He follows a ritual, rhythmically chanting "lovely, lovely, lovely"; then in disgust the ritual removal of the tie-pin; and then the murder. Despite the mechanical and cold-blooded aspects of the crime, this is essentially a crime of frenzy. It is a passion -- a compulsive, obsessive thing, which totally possesses Rusk. There is no trace of the genial Rusk we saw before; there is a nasty, aggressive unwholesomeness in the first shot of Rusk in Mrs. Blaney's office.

The frenzy is, of course, sexual. These are not murders so much as murderous rapes. This is undoubtedly analogous to the frenzy that overwhelms Norman Bates when he dresses up in his mother's clothes to kill: but in PSYCHO, Hitchcock never allows us to become involved in that compulsive passion. We watch only the surface, the normal Norman. In FRENZY, Hitchcock makes us feel the subsurface, the underlying psychotic character of the passioned frenzy.

The evidence piles up against Blaney: his personality is becoming inter-wound with Rusk's, although he doesn't realize it. The chaos-world is about to erupt around him.

His relationship with Babs Milligan deserves some mention in terms of Hitchcock's oeuvre. He easily convinces her that he is not the sex-killer -- and she trusts him almost immediately. It is remarkable for a Hitchcock film. Remember that earlier Hitchcock has dealt with lack of trust -- the problems of NOTORIOUS, SUSPICION, REAR WINDOW, and so on, are resolved when male and female trust each other. But since TORN CURTAIN, Hitchcock has had other concerns: in TORN CURTAIN, Julie Andrews and Paul Newman resolve their distrust midway through the film. Hitchcock's interest in the theme of salvation-through-mutual-trust has waned.

The viewer, of course, sympathizes entirely with Blaney. We see the evidence accumulating against him, and we feel how weak his explanations will sound to the cops. The amazing sequence with his friends, who can provide an alibi but will not, serves to reinforce our identification with Blaney. He is, after all, the Wrong Man, even though the Chief Inspector (Alec McCowen) has been collecting very damning circumstantial evidence.

The murder of Babs Milligan is an extraordinarily understated sequence. The focus-pull from Bab's face to Rusk prepares the audience. The macabre humor as Rusk offers Babs a place to stay ("Where the fruit comes from, that's where I'd like to go if I wasn't tied down" and "You've got the whole of your life ahead of you") builds tension as they walk up the stairs to Rusk's room. Then Rusk closes the door with the key line ("You're my type of woman") and Hitchcock pulls the camera slowly out, around and down the stairs, out through two doors and across the street. (Technically a remarkable shot; it's usually difficult enough to move the camera through one door! This does appear to be two shots, however, impeccably fitted together) We know Rusk's schizoid personality well enough to know what ritual goes on behind that door, and Hitchcock stresses the sense of finality.

Hitchcock cuts to the rather humorous sequence involving the policeman and his wife (Vivien Merchant). We ought to remark that the humor here plays a very different role from the humor of PSYCHO. The macabre jokes in PSYCHO are understandable only on second viewing ("A boy's best friend is his mother" and "Why don't you stop in a motel? It's safer") -- the humor is hidden by the terror and suspense. In FRENZY, it seems, the reverse holds: the terror and chaos are hidden by the humor. We have no time to reflect on Babs' death; the interlude with the Chief Inspector's continental meal returns us to the complacent world of everyday life.

We have seen, thus far in the film, only one sequence of Rusk's frenzy -- the rape and murder. The potato truck sequence, then, reveals yet another aspect of the chaos-world. Rusk himself has no control over his passions, over his frenzy.

Rusk realizes that the tie pin is missing, and there follows a frantic search of his room. Throwing the bed covers helter-skelter, and rummaging through drawers (revealing to the viewer that he has kept Babs' clothes -- a shock, indeed), he is again in a state of frenzy. It possesses him completely. There is no cold-blooded planning here, and no arrogant ritual; only blind panic and hysterical fear. He rushes from his room in panic, and the shadows are prison bars.

The scene in the potato truck evokes two rather powerful images. The first is the association of Rusk with Darkness. Flashing car lights threaten exposure, and the dark, dank, earthy potato sacks provide security. The second is the image of Rusk sticking his head into the potato sack, which is identified with the woman's genitals (her legs are protruding from the sack). This bizarre return-to-the-womb imagery, which has overtones of perverse sexual intercourse, is a grim reminder of Rusk's compulsive tendencies.

The scene is interesting, too, for what it is not. It is not Teresa Wright in SHADOW OF A DOUBT searching for the ring which will incriminate Joseph Cotten. Unlike SHADOW OF A DOUBT, where we want her to find the ring,

Hitchcock's

FRENZY

and be rid of the chaos-world, in FRENZY, we would prefer that Rusk didn't find the tie pin in time -- we want him caught in the act.

There is no cross-cutting in the potato truck scene, as in STRANGERS ON A TRAIN between Robert Walker reaching for the lighter and Farley Granger winning the tennis match. There is no parallel action, in FRENZY, between Rusk and Blaney.

The scene serves further to illuminate the nature of the psychotic world. Rusk's cool and calm personality has given way to blind, maniac panic. He is both the victim and the machinery of the frenzy. The gruesome, obscene battle with the corpse is a struggle within the chaos-world. Rusk is opposed by inanimate objects in his frenzied race against time.

The tie pin is recovered, Rusk emerges from the darkness of the potato world to the surface world of light.

The exchange between Blaney and Rusk, when Blaney asks for help, is crucial to the film. Blaney is hiding, in the dark shadows of the fruit cases -- he is about to enter the chaos-world. The conversation between Rusk and Blaney is almost entirely in two-shot. This is the moment of transference. The guilt, the chaos, and the frenzy are transferred from Rusk to Blaney. There is a brief moment of audience sympathy for Rusk; his offer to help Blaney strikes us as a helpful gesture from the genial side of Rusk's personality. But it is not. It is only a reversal, a double-cross; Rusk is not only psychotic, he is a bastard as well.

The weight of the film returns to Blaney. The psychotic world has been thrust upon him now, and will try to destroy him.

The discovery of the clothes in Blaney's suitcase is a shock to the viewer. It is the final, damning bit of evidence. Blaney's reaction is not despair, but frenzy. He shouts that it was that bastard Rusk. He struggles with the police. He is caught in the extension of his own aggressive, destructive personality. He, too, is in a state of frenzy, from which he will not be released for the remainder of the film.

The frenzy does not relent. He is dragged from the prisoners' dock down into prison, still screaming that it was Rusk. He is gripped by frenzy, and it has never occurred to him (apparently) to try calm, rational explanations. He is carried down the stairs, and Hitchcock cuts to an overhead shot (the first of many) of Blaney, thrown into jail. We watch him from above, constricted in a tiny cell. He is down in hell.

Blaney has now reached the same compulsive state that Rusk suffers. The film has worked up to this moment very carefully. The sympathies of the audience are prepared for the most audacious moment in Hitchcock's work since the shower-bath murder. Hitchcock is going to make his audience feel the nature of the chaos-world, of the psychotic state.

We shall therefore devote some time to the climax of the film.

Let us consider Blaney's escape from the prison hospital. The hospital room is dominated by a blue-grey hue: the walls, the floor, the doors, the bed covers, the pajamas of the prisoners are all icy blue-green, rather a metallic color. The prison is a cold, impersonal place. We might compare this with the earlier Salvation Army sequence. The subject matter is the same (men sleeping in cots), but the Salvation Army room is dominated by reds and browns, to imply, visually, a warm, humid, stifling atmosphere. Hitchcock has frequently before used color to suggest mood. (One might remember MARNIE as a film dominated by colors. Marnie's mother is blue, her husband is brown, and her psychosis is red. Marnie herself is slightly out of phase--if everything about her is blue, she is dressed in shades of olive green. One might also remember the cold blues and warm browns of TORN CURTAIN.)

But back at the hospital, Hitchcock here repeats visually the idea of imprisonment as a cold, impersonal, immobile state. There is an overhead shot of the inmates and doctors, which zooms down to Blaney escaping. It calls to mind the overhead shot of Blaney thrown into the cell. This is a frozen world in which Blaney is trapped, frozen emotionally as well as visually. There is no room for psychological growth, no opportunity for emotional development, but only a frozen stasis. One is reminded of Norman Bates at the end of PSYCHO, trapped in a psychological icecube in which there is neither time nor motion.

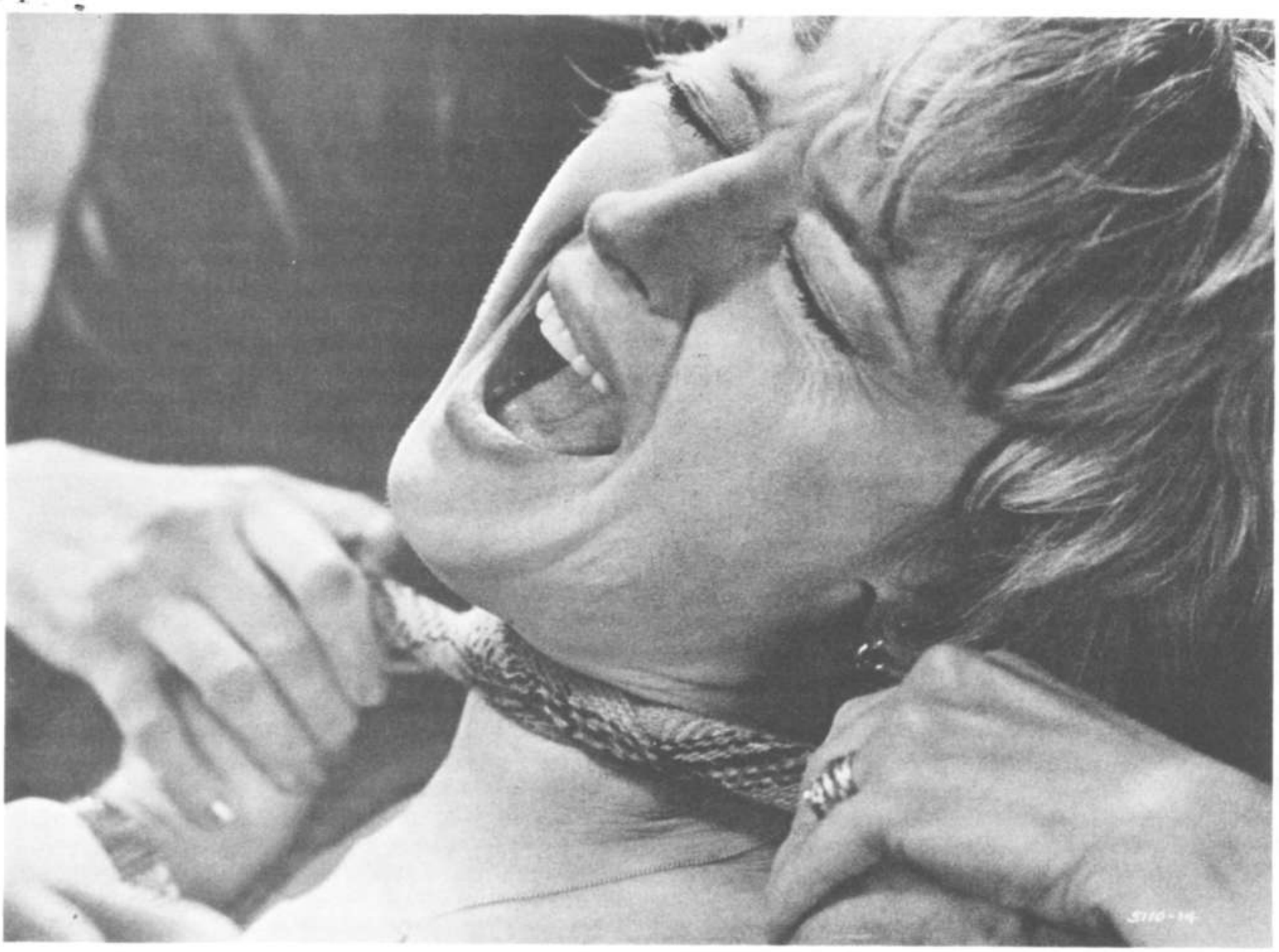
There have been other developments outside of prison, of course, of which Blaney is ignorant: he will be pardoned in the morning.

Blaney escapes from the hospital, however, leaving a world of light for a world of darkness. He is plunging deeper into the compulsive state, and the audience is pushed along with him. It is perhaps the most gripping sequence in Hitchcock's recent films: the audience is about to experience directly the state of psychotic possession.

The approach to Rusk's flat merits lengthy consideration. Hitchcock shows us Blaney's feet, his hand on the railing, his hand gripping the jack-handle, and his face--moving slowly, relentlessly upstairs, bent upon vengeance.

It is worth remembering a similar scene in PSYCHO. Hitchcock, in his interview with Truffaut, remembered having to reshoot the sequence:

> The sequence of the detective going up the stairs just before he is stabbed... There was a shot of the hand on the rail, and of feet seen in profile. When I looked at the rushes of the scene, I found it was no good, and that was an interesting revelation for me, because as that scene was cut, it wasn't an innocent person, but a sinister man who was going up those stairs. Those cuts would have been



> perfectly all right if they were showing a killer. . . . [In the final version] I used a single shot [of the detective coming up the stairs.

In PSYCHO, a single shot of a man walking up the stairs makes him "innocent"; in FRENZY, multiple shots and several cuts to his hands, feet, and face make him "sinister." It is a deliberate ploy on Hitchcock's part to let the audience feel (rather than be told) that Blaney is not innocent, but that he is going to confront Rusk violently, psychotically, in a state of frenzy. This, after all, is what cinema is all about -- to show rather than simply to tell.

Blaney is in the grip of his compulsion -- to kill Rusk -- just as Rusk was in the power of his own compulsion. The entire film has progressed to plunge Blaney into the chaos, and to let the audience feel the anguish of the psychotic state. There is a great deal of tension in this sequence, and Hitchcockian suspense at its best. We don't want Blaney to murder Rusk -- not for Rusk's sake (we have no sympathy left for him), but for Blaney's.

We fear that Blaney will be gripped by his frenzy, lose control of himself, and do violence. We hope that he will not lose control, but that the rational force of the Law will confront Rusk, rationally and sanely. Blaney is no longer free, but is a creature of the darkness, an agent of the chaos-world.

A shadow falls across Blaney's face as he reaches the top of the stairs. He is utterly immersed in the blackness of his compulsion, like a man possessed.

(An aside: Remember that, when Rusk rushed out of his room in search of the missing tie-pin, the shadows at the top of the stairs were prison-bar imagery. Now, when Blaney climbs the same stairway, the shadows are full. In short, the auteur has created light and darkness to suit the visual and emotional needs of each scene. If there be any logical inconsistency, this is poetry, not logic.)

A shot of Blaney's hand opening the door; a cut to inside the room as Blaney enters. A subjective shot, slowly pans around the room, coming to rest on the figure on the bed. The subjective shot involves the audience with Blaney. A cut to a track-out from Blaney's face, moving forward. Then a subjective track-in to the figure on the bed. The viewer is drawn along with Blaney, step-by-step. We don't want to go along. We don't want another violent outburst. We don't want Blaney to damn himself, with his pardon on the way. But we are trapped. And there is no way to resist -- just as Blaney is trapped, just as Rusk is trapped.

It is worth remembering Robin Wood's perceptive analysis of PSYCHO:

> We are able to commit acts we know to be immoral only if we inhibit our conscious process: Macbeth never really knows why he "yields to that suggestion whose horrid image doth unfix his hair." . . . but the yielding itself involves the paralysis of his conscious moral faculties. So it is with Marion: the decision having gripped her, rather than been taken, she necessarily forfeits her powers of conscious will. She drifts helplessly and we drift with her.

So it is with Marion in PSYCHO; so it is with Blaney in FRENZY.

Then a shot, looking down, at Blaney's hand, gripping the weapon: he is in hell, and we are looking down at him again. But we are also moving with him; we are in hell, as well.

Blaney strikes the figure on the bed. In a frenzy. The arm, with bracelets, falls from under the covers. Cut to Blaney's face for a reaction shot: he is horrified, as is the audience, at what might be under the covers. Has he just killed an innocent victim?

Then Blaney pulls back the covers, and Hitchcock cuts to another reaction shot: anguish? agony? supreme torture? revulsion?

Hitchcock cuts to a close-up of the face on the bed, then back to Blaney for a reaction; then to a close-up of the neck and tie -- and then the Inspector enters.

It is fortunate that Hitchcock allows reaction shots on the part of Blaney -- it is his only chance to be shocked at the horror at what he has done, and at what he has tried to do.

This is the climactic moment of the film, and perhaps one of the finest sequences in all of Hitchcock. The viewer has felt the tension, the agony and helplessness of the psychotic. Trapped by a compulsion over which he has no control, Blaney in this scene has his frenzy equated with that of Rusk during the rape-murders. The compulsive behavior of the psychopath is inherent in all of us. Its rupture of the daily routine of our lives is irrational, uncontrollable, and totally destructive. Hitchcock has said this before, in other ways -- notably in PSYCHO and THE BIRDS, but also in others, such as STRANGERS ON A TRAIN. Hitchcock has never before made his audience feel that chaotic state.

The whole of FRENZY is a slow, inexorable entanglement of the slightly neurotic Blaney and the wholly psychotic Rusk. The climax of the film leaves the viewer with no extrication from that entanglement. Blaney has reached the lowest depths of desolation, and there is no hint of cure. He may be released from jail, or paid money, but the psychological terror he has undergone cannot be erased from him, or from us.

It is a bleak message, to be sure, hidden behind a rather light tone. Hitchcock has tried once again to shatter complacency. The capacity for frenzy, for destructive madness, lurks in each of us, and all about us. This is what happened when it clutched someone. ■