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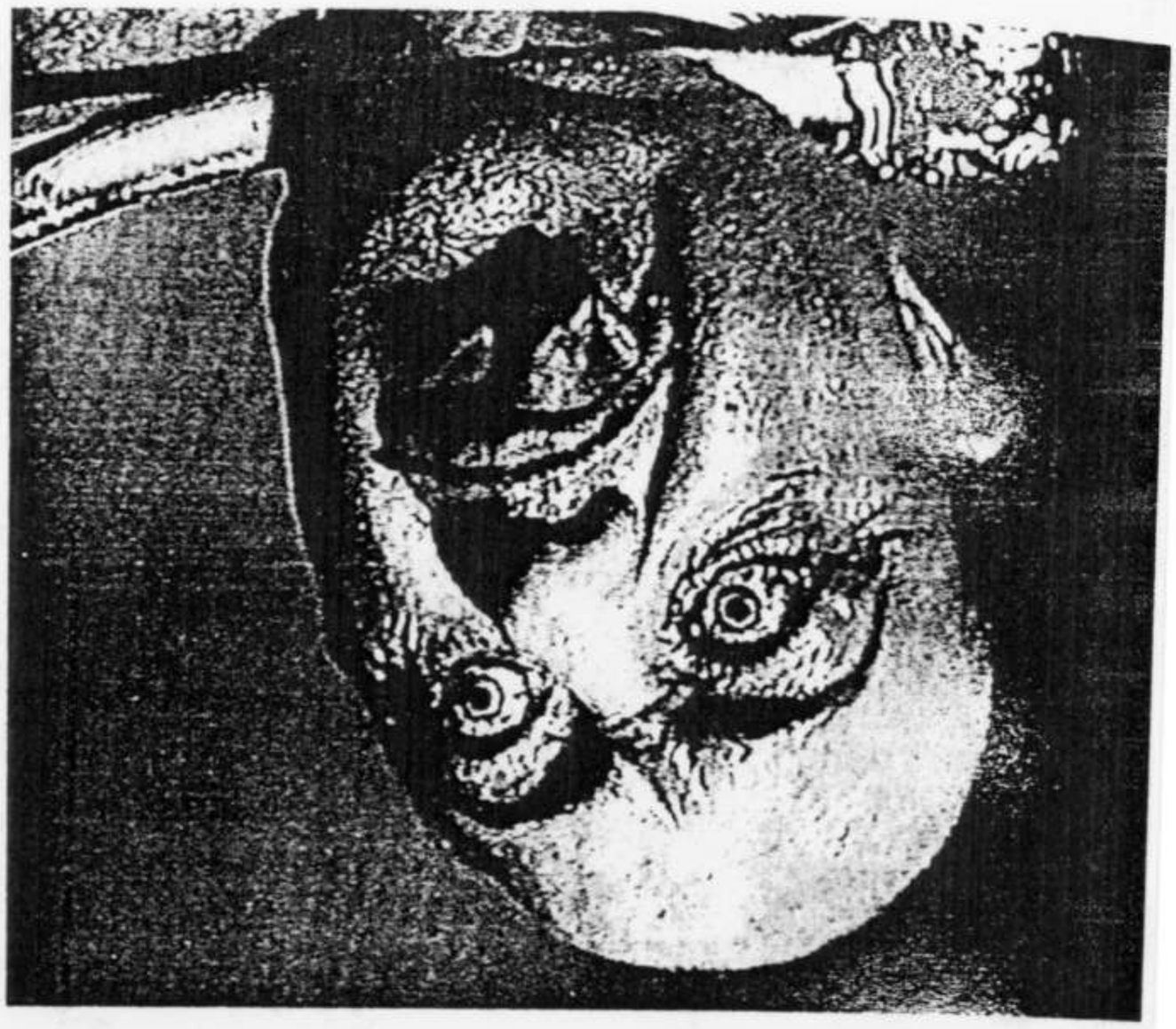
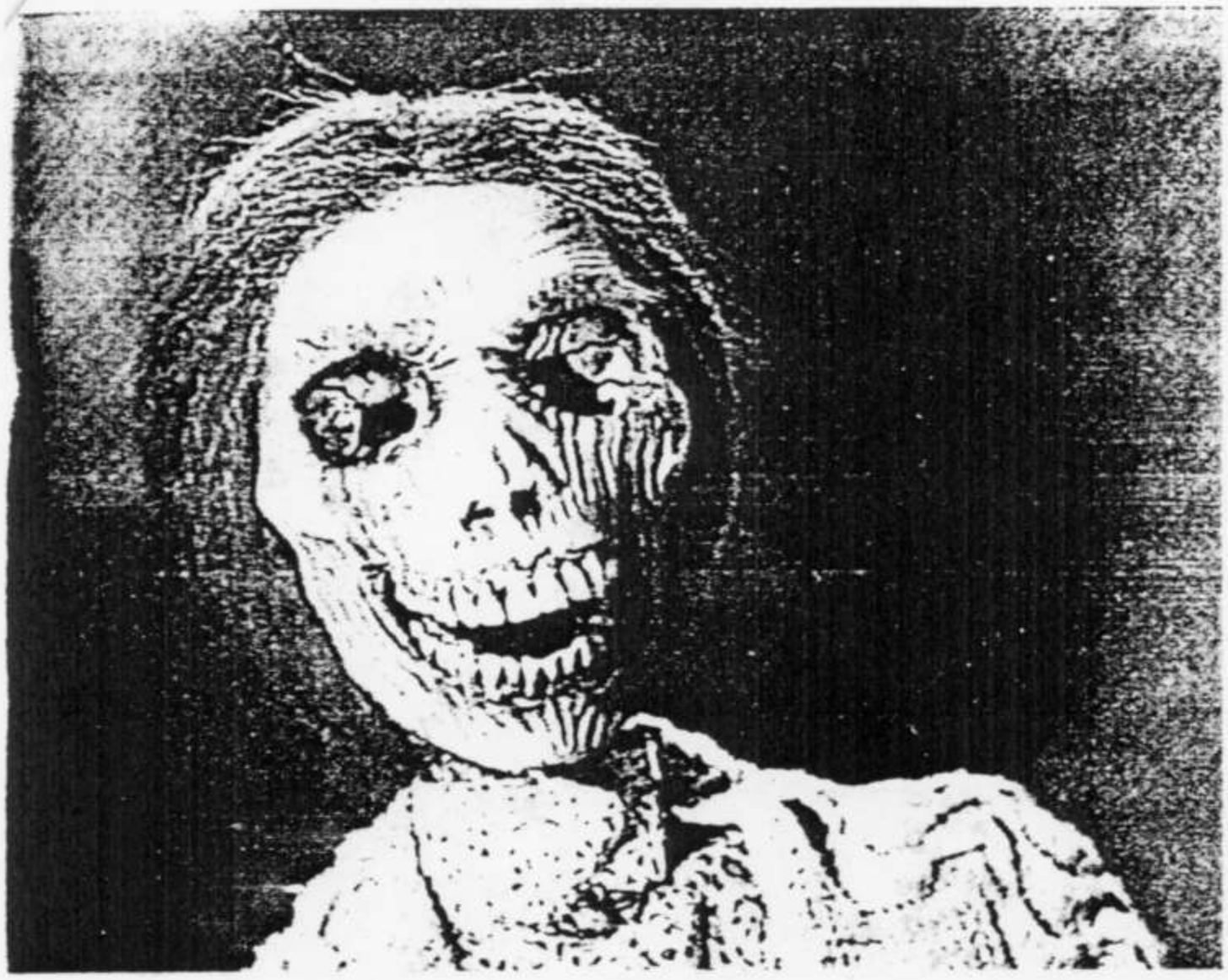


Hitchcock has always been considered a director sui generis. John W. Hall looks at Psycho *and* Touch of Evil *to show even Hitch couldn't resist the charms—and stylistic strategies—of Orson Welles.*

TOUCH OF Hitchcock's Debt to Welles

BY JOHN W. HALL



(left)
Welles' shock cut

(right)
Hitchcock's shocking revelation

PSYCHO:

HITCHCOCK VS. WELLES

The next time you watch the beginning of *Psycho*, as the camera slowly moves from a distant view of the cityscape of Phoenix into a close-up of the hotel room window, consider another even more famous film opening—the dazzling crane and dolly shot that encompasses the first three minutes of Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil*, made in 1958, just two years before *Psycho*. That shot, which travels several hundred yards across much of a town as we wait for the ticking bomb to explode, is so audacious that even today films like *The Player* explicitly refer to it.

Was Hitchcock, in the opening of *Psycho*, trying to one-up Welles' experiment with the limits of the dolly shot? Yes, without even a shadow of a doubt.

In the prepublicity for *Psycho*, Hitchcock proclaimed that his film would open with the longest "dolly" shot, approximately four miles, ever attempted by helicopter. Hitchcock was out to prove he could beat Welles' technical feat in distance if not in time. While the final result—with obvious dissolves between separate shots—was not quite up to his original ambition, Hitchcock's opening clearly displays the influence of Welles.

In fact, a case can be made that much of *Psycho*, including some of its most memorable and disturbing elements, is taken from *Touch of Evil*. The opening shot is only one of the most obvious, easily documented touchpoints. For starters, think of how both filmmakers use low-budget aesthetics, the similar use of Janet Leigh, and the squalid desolation of Southwestern

motels run by nervous, sexually intimidated young men. It's time Welles and his crew members on *Touch of Evil* receive proper credit for some of the praise of *Psycho* directed toward Hitchcock.

The overpowering sexuality of Janet Leigh (left) in *Touch of Evil* and (right) *Psycho*.

The connection between the directors is not as obvious as it may seem. Except for auteurist roll calls of the great director, Welles and Hitchcock are almost never mentioned in the same breath because, despite their concurrent Hollywood careers, they and their films have always been viewed through different lenses. Welles, despite the attempts of various critics to resurrect the standings of his later, mutilated films, is often seen as the child prodigy who burned out, his bombastic personality and baroque style too much for Hollywood to digest. Hitchcock, on the other hand, is seen as a prime example of a director who managed to maintain the integrity of his films by using his charm and rigid production methods to convince the studio executives of the commercial appeal and profitability of his films. With his inimitable black humor, he managed to shrug off minor disappointments with studios and move on to the next in line of his endless thrillers, turning every bit of publicity into a tease of great things to come.

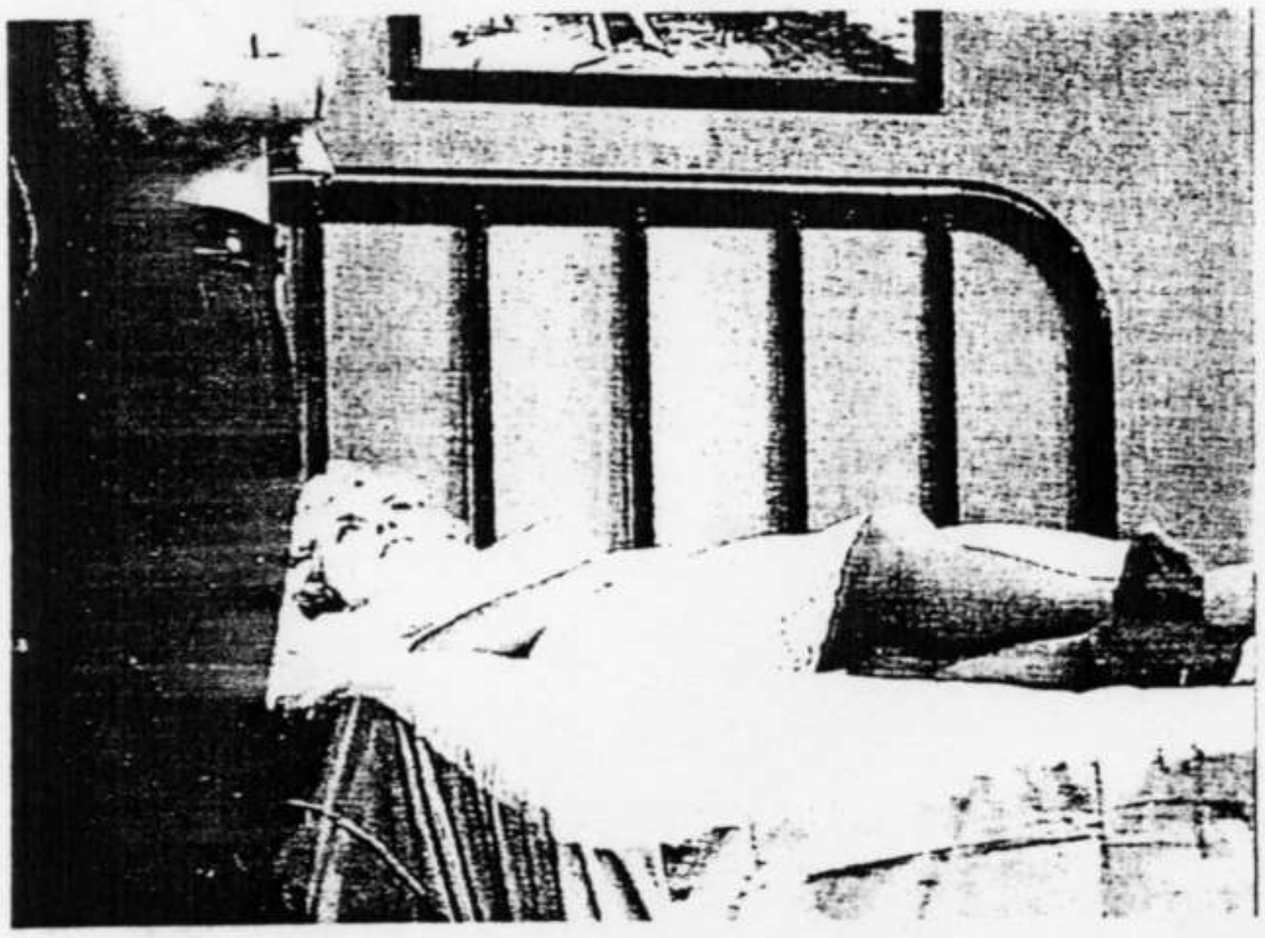
Actually, their career paths diverged as early as 1941, when both came under fire from RKO studio executives. Hitchcock agreed to reshoot an ending for *Suspicion* that backs off from the notion that Cary Grant could be a killer, saving his film from RKO's hatchet and allowing it to become the studio's biggest hit of the year. Welles, who was busy shooting *It's All True* in South America, was much less fortunate. He was unable to keep RKO from mauling *The Magnificent Ambersons* in the editing room and marching it off to a quick death at the box office. To top it off, RKO canceled *It's All True*. Though both were highly nonconformist and possessed enormous egos, Welles was painted as the "bad boy" of Hollywood, while Hitchcock became the Boy Scout, earning the studio's respect and praise in spite of his obsession with murder.

With the exception of their occasional use of the celebrated Bernard Herrmann, and Welles' foray into the thriller genre with *The Stranger* (1946), there are few points of stylistic and thematic overlap between the two before *Touch of Evil* and *Psycho*. Although both directors' visuals are clearly influenced by German Expressionism, Welles prefers distortion and high-contrast black-and-white compositions, while Hitchcock typically presents a surface normality, favoring less visual distortion and greyer shades of black. Where Welles' films are extravagant explorations of bloated, corrupt, tragic figures, Hitchcock's are tense, compact, precisely filmed explorations of guilt and obsession that often feel more like pure heroic adventures (*The 39 Steps*, *Notorious*, *North by Northwest*, et al.) than exercises in expanding cinema's limits. Not to say that Welles' films aren't as much fun as Hitchcock's, or that Hitchcock's are not as intellectually stimulating as Welles', but watching a Welles film is like eating prime rib, rich and leaving you with an overstuffed feeling. Hitchcock is an easier swallow, a lean slice of cinematic roast beef (or a slice of cake, as he was fond of saying).

By the late 1950s, Welles was a virtual outcast in Hollywood, with a reputation for being "difficult" and—unfairly—for going over budget on his films. He only became the director of *Touch of Evil* because the star, Charlton Heston, upon hearing that Welles was going to play Captain Quinlan, assumed through a misunderstanding that Universal was also letting him direct the film. Thus Welles was offered the job and took it, on the condition that he be allowed to rewrite the script to his satisfaction.

Welles, who had not directed a Hollywood film during his ten years as a virtual exile in Europe (*Othello* and *Mr. Arkadin* were Italian and British productions, respectively), used his budget and time restrictions of just under $1 million and a 42-day shooting schedule to great advantage. Instead of "slumming" in what could have been a B movie, he used many low-budget techniques to stylize the film. Except for the opening set piece, Welles was content to use the sparsely lit, inky images of film noir, handheld cameras, and jagged editing for sleaze and shock value. When Universal refused his request to shoot at the Mexican border, Welles substituted the glorious decay of nearby Venice, California.

Where Welles was limited by his reputation for extravagance, Hitchcock found with *Psycho* that Paramount was unwilling to



Would you rent a hotel room from either of these guys? Dennis Weaver (left) in *Touch of Evil*, and Anthony Perkins in *Psycho*.

put its money into a horror film that would brutally kill off its main character halfway through the film and substitute a psychotic as the main object of interest. Though Hitchcock was coming off a big success with *North by Northwest*, his standing with Paramount, the eventual distributor of *Psycho*, was troubled, given the poor box office performance of *Vertigo*, his most recent Paramount film. Hitchcock was forced to finance the production of *Psycho* himself, and he chose to shoot it at Revue Studios, the television production facility at Universal, where his TV series "Alfred Hitchcock Presents" was being made. Still, he already had a great deal of experience with low-budget filming. Since 1955 his TV series had been delivering weekly doses of murder and intrigue for a very small cost; he directed several of the shows himself. In addition, in 1956 he had made a film, *The Wrong Man*, that was a model of converting fiscal limitations into the aesthetic drabness needed to convey the life of an ordinary man undone by fate. Restricted to a budget of $800,000, a fifth of *North by Northwest*'s budget, Hitchcock must have seen *Psycho* as a challenge he knew he could win. He may even have seen it as an opportunity to prove faster and cheaper than Welles.

More apparent than any other *Touch of Evil* influence is the casting of Janet Leigh as Marion Crane. In *Touch of Evil* Leigh plays the sexy American wife of Mexican narcotics agent Vargas (Heston), alternately feisty and vulnerable. With shots of Leigh lying around dingy motel rooms in her lingerie and her ample bust accentuated by Welles' low angles, it's not hard to see why Hitchcock thought of her as the beautiful but frustrated Marion. Add to that the voyeuristic scenes of the Grandi gang torturing her in *Touch of Evil*, and it's like watching Marion Crane in another film. Of course, Hitchcock ups the ante by not merely torturing Leigh's character, but slashing her to death in front of our eyes. (Joseph Stefano, who adapted Robert Bloch's book for *Psycho* and was consulted by Hitchcock for casting, was clearly not the instigator for this bit of casting. In his book *Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of Psycho*, Stephen Rebello quotes Stefano remarking on Leigh, "She was someone with no association with this kind of movie." Stefano must not have seen *Touch of Evil*.)

Another similarity is the character and casting of the motel manager in the two films. They are remarkably alike. As the "night man" in *Touch of Evil*, a young Dennis Weaver, clad in unfashionable clothes with his shirt buttoned to the top, suggests a slightly retarded Norman Bates. Goofy, nervous, easily frightened, and decidedly uncomfortable around a sexy woman like Leigh, Weaver blinks, stutters, leers, and laughs crazily in his encounters with her. He's more simpleton than psycho, but it's not hard to see the outlines of Norman's creepy looks and behavior. Perkins uses many of the same quirks, particularly the stutter around Leigh, but hides his madness under a veneer of competence and real intelligence. Perkins, whose career was made by this performance, may also be an example of the reverse equation, Hitchcock influencing Welles: Perkins became the star of Welles' next film *The Trial*, released in 1963.

The Southwestern locales of the two films are another similarity, particularly the isolated, deserted motel settings. Dingy motels were, of course, common settings in the film noirs that were the main inspiration for the films' look. But the motels create an especially powerful atmosphere of dread and alienation in these two films, perhaps because they seem to exist in a dreamscape, disconnected from the rest of the "normal" world. The use of the sordid motel as an instrument of psychological torture and an emblem of decay in *Touch of Evil* may have inspired Robert Bloch, who wrote the novel that *Psycho* is based on, to use a motel to capture an American environment suitable as a breeding ground for psychosis and random violence. His novel, based on the notorious 1957 case of Ed Gein, a reclusive Wisconsin farmer and mass murderer, was published in 1959, a year after *Touch of Evil* was released.

Some of the key crew members involved in the visual design of *Touch of Evil* were also involved in *Psycho*. Robert Clatworthy, a highly regarded art director at Universal, performed in that capacity for both films. His signature is evident in the design of the end-to-end collection of motel units amid dust and tumble-

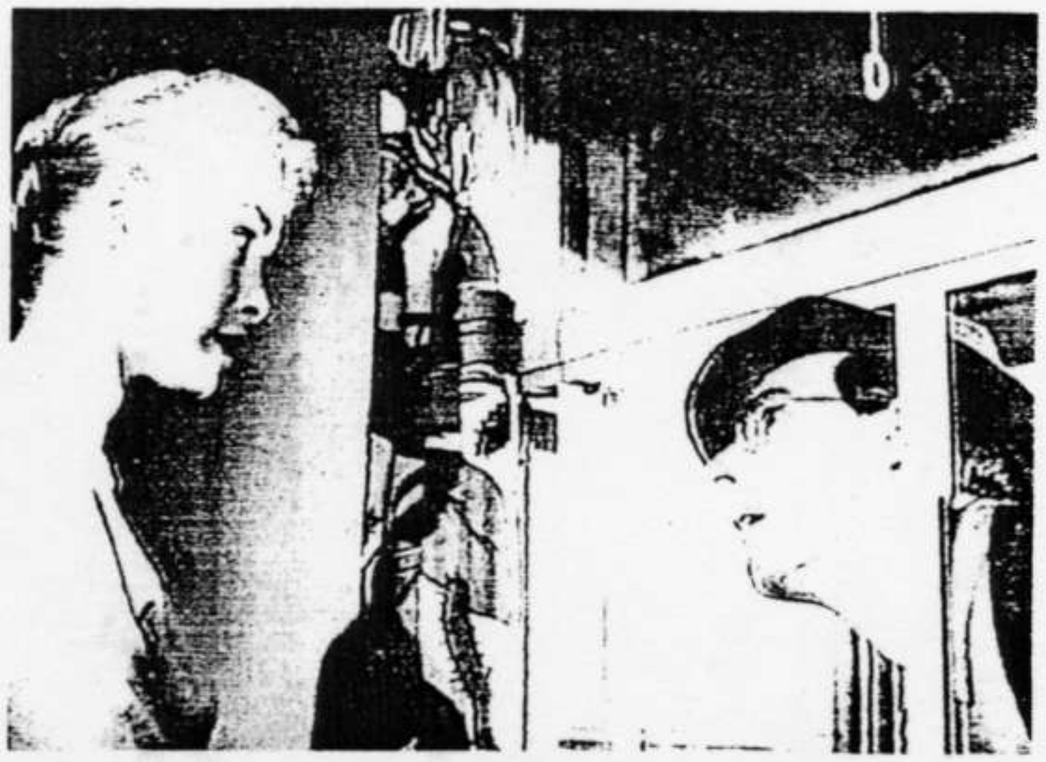
weeds in *Touch of Evil*, and the bleak L-shaped Bates motel in *Psycho* inspired by the earlier design. Also, many of the interiors of the Bates Motel and the house resemble those in *Touch of Evil*. The bordello run by Marlene Dietrich is costumed in a mess of braided lampshades, pictures, horns, and other aged paraphernalia that, lit with a slightly greyer tone and fewer shadows, reappear in a tidier form as the frozen-in-time artifacts of the Bates house. Another crew member of Welles', camera operator John Russell, became Hitchcock's director of photography for *Psycho*, which may also account for some of the visual similarities, such as the use of natural lighting in the daylight scenes.

Hitchcock may have used more than Welles' crew members and decor in *Psycho*. The famous moment of terror when Marion's sister Lila (Vera Miles) turns around the rocker to discover that "Mother" is a skeleton may have a precedent of sorts in *Touch of Evil*. In that film, when Janet Leigh awakes from her drug-induced sleep and discovers Uncle Joe Grandi hanging over the bed, dead from strangulation by Captain Quinlan, her moment of terror is conveyed in a shock cut. In one of the few subjective point-of-view shots in the film, we see her view of Grandi's upside-down face, his bulging eyes and tongue thrust in her face. Welles, using a trick that Hitchcock would borrow in *The Birds* (1963) (the quick triple cut-in on the close-up of the farmer whose eyes have been pecked out), cuts into an even tighter close-up of Grandi's face to maximize the impact on the audience. Accentuating the shock of the cuts is the use of blinking neon lights and blaring horns. Notably, there is no real precedent for this kind of shock cut in Hitchcock's films before *Psycho*. While he often created moments of extreme tension, he had never thrust something in our faces that induced sheer horror in the same way that suddenly seeing the skeleton does. Hitchcock, so often credited with ushering in the modern horror era with *Psycho*, may have been beaten to the punch by Welles and inspired by Welles' technique of conveying a character's fright.

Another of Welles' techniques that may have influenced *Psycho* is the use of overlapping dialogue. Welles was long noted for his innovations in sound, but his repeated use of concurrent conversations in *Touch of Evil* is particularly striking. The confusion, complexity, and butting-of-heads that result proves to be a dramatic, original approach to creating tension among characters, particularly Vargas and Quinlan. Hitchcock may well have had this example in mind when he suggested to Anthony Perkins and Martin Balsam, playing Detective Arbogast, that they speak over each other's lines in a staccato delivery to elevate the tension in their confrontation in the motel lobby. Hitchcock, who precisely controlled how his actors talked and moved, had never allowed his actors to step on each other's lines before (with the exception of *Shadow of a Doubt*, where the technique is used to depict the breakdown in communication in the American family).

Nonconformists that they were, both directors abhorred the police. Hitchcock's aversion to the police, perhaps stemming from an alleged forced (by his father) ten-minute stay in a jail cell at age five, is legendary. To his interviewers' surprise, Welles commented in *Cahiers du Cinema* that he loathed Quinlan. "The most personal thing I've put in [*Touch of Evil*] is my hatred of the abuse of police power," said Welles. "It's better to see a murderer go free than for a policeman to abuse his power."

While the purpose of this essay is to point out the influence of *Touch of Evil* on *Psycho*, it seems fair to acknowledge a few of the major stylistic differences in the two films which may have covered some of Welles' tracks. Welles *loved* distortion, often using an 18.5 millimeter lens in *Touch of Evil* to create the lurid, disfigured face of corruption. In attempting to make *Psycho*'s world appear as normal as possible on the surface, to hide the uncivilized impulses lying beneath and to recreate human vision, Hitchcock avoided distorting lenses, using a 50 millimeter lens most of the time. According to his script supervisor, "He wanted the camera, *being* the audience all the time, to see as if they were seeing it with their own eyes." There is also much lower black/white contrast in *Psycho*, with Hitchcock favoring a dull grey look over Welles' moody blacks and pools of light. Then of course there is Welles' affinity for affected realistic touches such as mumbling many of his lines as Captain Quinlan, creating an aural characterization while throwing away whole patches of dialogue. Hitchcock, while certainly equally adept at using sound and dialogue expressively, insisted that the audience must hear every line clearly.



Nervous, sexually intimidated young men meet Janet Leigh—with disastrous results.

Finally, is it any surprise, really, that Hitchcock and those involved in the making of *Psycho* should be so significantly influenced by the contemporary work of another landmark figure in American film, Orson Welles? That both men should almost simultaneously explore the darker edges of humanity and openly address troubling moral and sexual issues is no coincidence, but the result of two great artists pushing each other and the boundaries of what we dare to address in film. **BL**