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Feeling Nostalgic, Mother?

Gus Van Sant's retelling of *'Psycho'* is a classic example of everything old being new again in the '90s. What does that say about creativity today?

By Patrick Goldstein

One of the first outsiders to visit the closely guarded set of "Psycho," Gus Van Sant's hotly debated shot-by-shot "re-creation" of Alfred Hitchcock's horror classic, was Patricia Hitchcock O'Connell, the cinema master's 70-year-old daughter and onetime actress, who had played a bit part in the 1960 movie. She was easy to spot, since she was accompanied by daughters and granddaughters, all of whom bore an uncanny resemblance to the most recognizable member of their family.

When Pat arrived, Van Sant and Anne Heche, who plays the Janet Leigh role in the remake, were filming the same real estate-office scene in which Pat had ap-

peared in the original. She was treated with considerable deference, no doubt because the filmmakers felt that their controversial project needed a tacit endorsement from the Hitchcock clan. But as Van Sant escorted Pat around the set, she suddenly stopped in her tracks, confronted with a jarring reminder of just how much this new "Psycho" is toying with our memories of the original.

Before her stood a rotund bit player who by virtue of a prosthetic nose and jowls, not to mention a familiar egg-shaped profile, was a dead ringer for Pat's famous father. He was on the set, dressed as Hitchcock, to re-create the master's cameo appearance outside the real estate office.

Hitchcock's daughter took one jaw-dropping look at the heavysset man, turned and walked in the other direction. "If you think

Pat was shocked, you should have seen the look on my face," Van Sant said later. "It wasn't very tactful of us, although in a way, it's something Hitchcock [a notorious practical joker] would've done, isn't it—introducing his daughter to someone dressed up like her father?"

Asked about the encounter, Pat murmured politely: "I guess he was a reasonable likeness." But seeing the look of astonishment in her eyes seemed to perfectly encapsulate the buzz in Hollywood since news surfaced of Van Sant's plan to restage the most fabled thriller of its time. This can't possibly be happening, can it? Is nothing sacred? Isn't "Psycho," like the famous Hitchcock profile, one of the few pop-culture icons that should be forever left alone?

RETROFIT:
Filmmakers built a new Bates Motel and gothic-style house for the movie on the Universal lot.

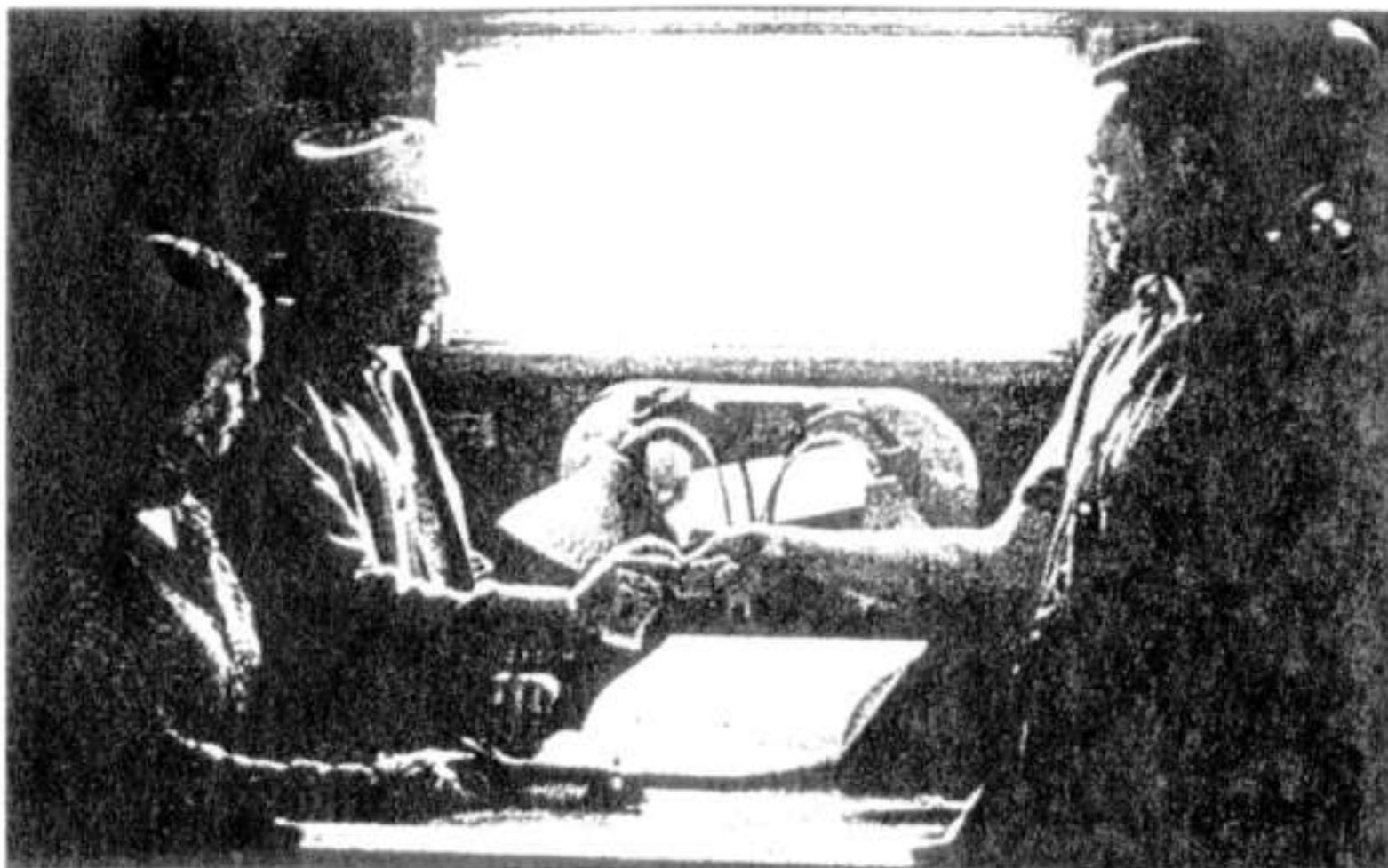
SUZANNE TENNER





MARC WANAMAKER / Bison Archives

WELCOME: Vera Miles and John Gavin, center, check in with the strange young clerk Anthony Perkins in the 1960 "Psycho."



SUZANNE TENNER

WELCOME, AGAIN: The scene is reprised with Julianne Moore and Viggo Mortensen, center, receiving a key to a Bates Motel room from clerk Vince Vaughn.

Van Sant isn't the only artist today putting a new spin on entertainment classics. In virtually every medium, most visibly in pop music, television, film and advertising, much of the creative energy that once went into originality is now devoted to repackaging familiar sounds and images. Call it Remade Culture.

In the '60s and '70s, pop culture was on fast-forward, hurtling ahead, breaking with tradition and reinventing itself nearly every year. From the Beatles to the Sex Pistols, from "Easy Rider" to "Apocalypse Now," artists explored new visions, fueled by a daring, subversive energy. Today's culture, driven more than ever by synergistic corporate marketing, is on rewind, looking backward for inspiration, sampling old material and giving it a new twist.

Today's hip-hop king, Sean "Puffy" Combs, is best known for reworking old hits, turning the Police's "Every Breath You Take" into "I'll Be Missing You," then recycling Led Zeppelin's "Kashmir" as "Come With Me." Janet Jackson's 1997 single "Got Till It's Gone" was a revamped version of Joni Mitchell's "Big Yellow Taxi." Tune in KROQ-FM (106.7), one of the best barometers for teen trends in America, and you'll hear a procession of martini-and-cigar-era swing bands.

Old TV shows keep coming back, both on TV, where the Family Channel is airing "The New Addams Family," and on the big screen—would you believe Robert De Niro is in negotiations to play Fearless Leader in a movie version of "Rocky and Bullwinkle?" Madison Avenue also has embraced Remade Culture. The Gap uses a Louis Prima song to sell khakis while Burger King uses the Ohio Players to hawk hamburgers. On the Sunset Strip, the Levi's jeans "Our Models Can't Beat Up Their Models" billboard is adorned with a photo from 1954's "The Wild One." To promote the most forward-thinking of all

You're literally stepping into the shoes of the original character, right here on the same lot, physically next to the old house. It felt like you were welcoming old ghosts.

Viggo Mortensen,
on acting in the new "Psycho"

Different" ads and billboards featuring such legends as Picasso, Albert Einstein, Hitchcock, and Lucy and Desi. Even "I Dream of Jeannie" is part of Lexus ads touting its new sports utility vehicle.

Many of these reworkings, especially the hip-hop songs, have been lauded with critical approval. (The "Think Different" TV ads recently won an Emmy.) But few in Hollywood see "Psycho" in such a gauzy light. The reason seems simple enough: Most moviegoers are convinced that the film is an untouchable icon, one of the few movies that can't be improved on.

As Premiere magazine Editor in Chief James Meigs put it recently, after the success of "Good Will Hunting," perhaps Van Sant has earned the right to "indulge in a minor diversion such as this, but at what cost? . . . Whenever a great director or producer or actor gets seduced into making a silly, irrelevant film, it's a bit of a loss for all of us."

If Hitchcock were alive today, he would surely be surprised to learn that his \$800,000 horror quickie has become an unassailable classic. Beloved by critics and fans alike, it has gained a cozy perch in the critical pantheon, although it got far less respect when it was released in August

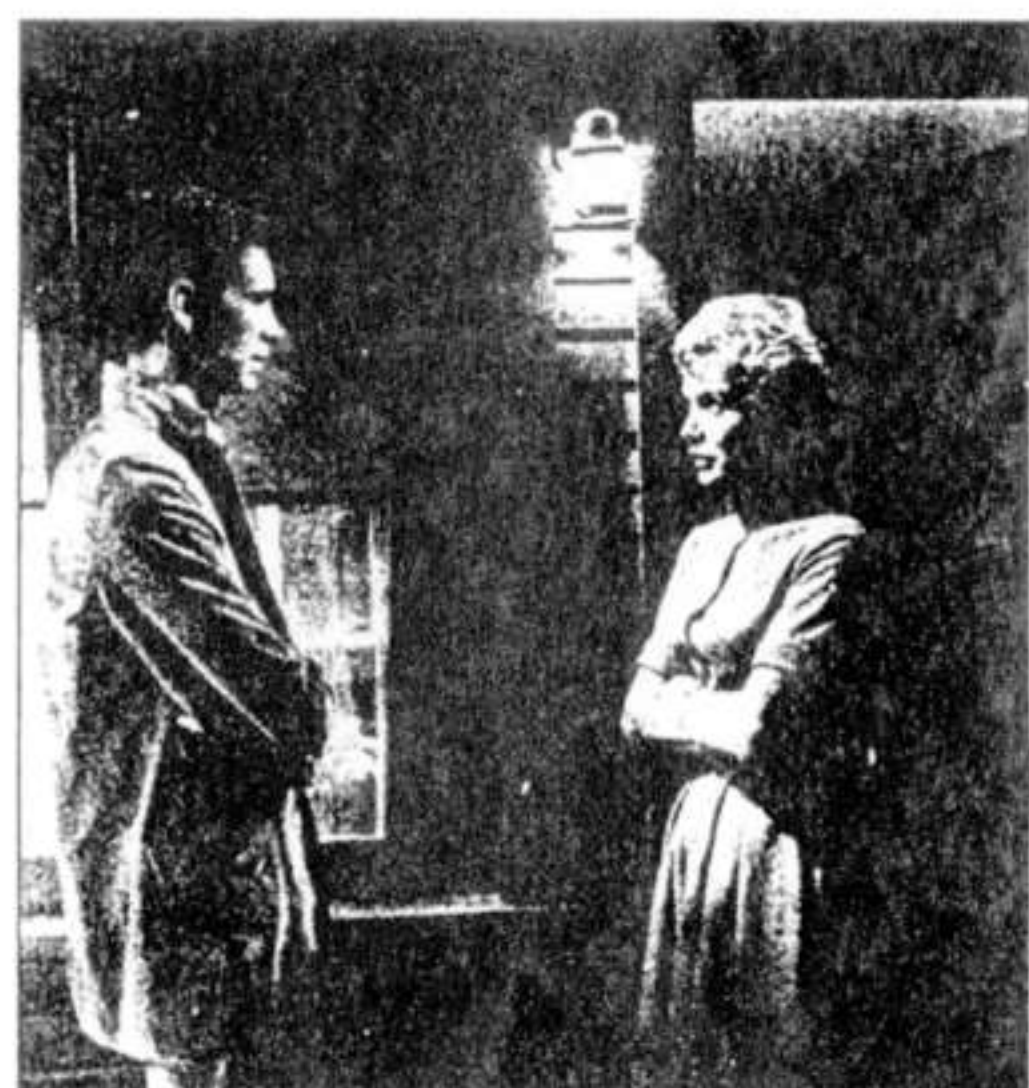
TV-show crew, it was greeted with mixed reviews. The New York Times' Bosley Crowther complained that it was "slow-paced and lacking in subtlety." The Los Angeles Times' Philip Scheuer called it "brilliant but disagreeable," adding that Tony Perkins' performance "won't exactly further his career—does Hitchcock still hate actors?"

Despite the lukewarm reception, "Psycho" was an instant sensation. In terms of cost versus return, it was easily the biggest hit of Hitchcock's career. The film has been imitated so much over the years that it is easy to forget that it was in many ways the first modern-day horror film. By the late 1950s, horror films were dominated by errant lab-experiment mutants and teenage wolfmen. Just as it was Raymond Chandler who took the detective story out of the drawing room and into the mean streets, it was Hitchcock—aided by screenwriter Joseph Stefano—who created the slasher thriller, a genre with a broad enough range to include the "Nightmare on Elm Street" and "Friday the 13th" series as well as weightier shockers such as "The Shining," "Seven" and "The Silence of the Lambs."

It's hard to imagine the new "Psycho" having anything resembling this kind of enduring impact. And with good reason: Most Remade Culture is comforting, not unsettling. In a marketplace jammed with new movies, CDs and TV shows, the most effective way to seduce fickle pop consumers is with cozy familiarity.

It's why conglomerates are mining their libraries for new ways to reuse a recognizable brand name. For Disney, it was turning "101 Dalmatians" into a live-action movie. For Universal, it's remaking "Frankenstein" as an all computer-effects film. For Warner Books, it's concocting "As Time Goes By," a novel that creates a new story for the characters from "Casablanca."

With so much of pop culture



Universal Studios

NEED TOWELS?: Perkins visits Janet Leigh, who is traveling alone and staying at the Bates Motel.



SUZANNE TENNER

NEED TOWELS II?: Vaughn and Anne Heche find themselves in similar circumstances outside the motel.

'Psycho'

Continued from Page 5

under a corporate umbrella, entertainment companies want material that attracts an across-the-board demographic. DreamWorks, which designs its animated films for kids and adults, populated its soundtrack for "Small Soldiers" with hip-hop stars such as Wyclef Jean, Bone Thugs-N-Harmony and Queen Latifah, adding new vocals to such oldies as "War" and "Love Is a Battlefield." Miramax's "Halloween H20" reworked the horror classic, with a co-star for each generation: Michelle Williams for teens, Jamie Lee Curtis for adults.

Technological advances have given pop culture an instantly retrievable past. Before videotape, old movies disappeared, except for showings in revival houses and on late-night TV. Now they're available everywhere. Old albums used to go out of print; the arrival of CDs gave record companies an economic incentive to release them again... why?

"Each year it gets harder to have a hit with a new song because you're essentially competing against every pop artist who's ever existed," says Cliff Burnstein, co-manager of Smashing Pumpkins, Hole and Metallica, whose next album will be a double-CD of obscure metal cover songs. "Pop songs don't disappear, they just migrate to classic-rock stations or TV commercials or supermarket Muzak. To break through the clutter, there's a great temptation to recycle what's been done because it's proven material."

In an era in which "I Love Lucy" reruns play almost as often as a hit single on Top 40 radio, it was inevitable that young artists would be inspired to sample something old to create something new. It may have seemed unlikely to hear hip-hop hipsters Pras and Ol' Dirty Bastard sampling Dolly Parton's "Islands in the Stream" on their song "Ghetto Supastar," but much of today's hip-hop fashion borrows from even more unimpeachably white-bread sources.

Hip-hop entrepreneur Russell Simmons, who runs Phat Farm, a youth culture clothing company, says one of his top-selling items is a blue-and-red argyle sweater he saw in an old "Happy Days" episode.

"It's incredibly hard to make something like 'Romeo and Juliet' out of the blue," says Simmons, who also runs Def Jam Records. "So instead of trying to reinvent the wheel, you take something old and [mess] it up in a way that makes it fresh and gives it attitude."

The emergence of Remade Culture is also tied to a change in artists' attitude toward commercialization. In the past, most rock performers sneered at tour sponsorships and balked at peddling their songs for TV commercials. Today, there's little rage against the machine; bands happily play corporate parties, take quick bucks for soundtrack songs and do fashion layouts in Rolling Stone. So many songs have gotten a sales boost from being featured in

Getting Tuned Up

Hollywood isn't the only realm of pop culture that's been recycling yesterday's favorites for today's audiences. For example:



Louis Prima's "Jump, Jive an' Wail" became a Gap khakis commercial.



LORI SHEPLER/L.A. Times



Associated Press

Joni Mitchell's "Big Yellow Taxi" became Janet Jackson's "Got Till It's Gone."

The Police's "Every Breath You Take" became Puff Daddy's "I'll Be Missing You."

commercials that Elektra Records recently hired the J. Michael Bloom Talent Agency to get its artists into print, TV and radio ads.

"Creative people are a lot more obsessed today with commerciality," says Mercury Records Chairman Danny Goldberg. "In the '60s, artists were ambitious, but they used to disguise it. Now they embrace it. It's about the money now. So if you want success, reworking an old song is a shortcut that helps connect you to mainstream culture."

What makes the new "Psycho," due out Dec. 4, such a striking example of Remade Culture is its very insistence on sticking so close to Hitchcock's original. Hollywood remakes movies all the time, but they usually veer off in new directions—updating the story, adding new characters, changing the title, going on the assumption that audience sensibilities have changed so much that the original needs a complete face lift.

Van Sant's novel idea, perhaps inspired by his days at the Rhode Island School of Design, was not to distance himself at all. He would literally photocopy the movie, much in the same way Andy Warhol re-created Campbell's soup cans or Ed Ruscha revamped the "Annie" logo. As Van Sant describes it, his new "Psycho" is a rubbing—"it's no different than rubbing an image off of a gravestone, except that we're doing it with a movie." The '90s spin comes from the fresh attitude the director and his actors give the old material.

Van Sant had always been a Hitchcock fan. When he was 13, his mother took him to see "The Birds" at a theater in Connecticut. When he was older, he watched "Psycho" on TV. When he began writing film scripts, he used a "Psycho" videotape as a study manual. In 1989, after he had his first taste of success with "Drugstore Cowboy," the director found himself being invited to meetings with curious studio executives.

At Universal, where he met with Casey Silver, later to become head of the studio, it was suggested that

from the Universal library. He volunteered the first title that came to his head.

"I just thought—Universal... Hitchcock... 'Psycho!'" he recalls. "I told them, 'If we're going to do a remake, why not do a great movie? Just do it in color with new actors.'"

Universal wasn't interested. "They thought the idea was a little odd," Van Sant says with a laugh, sitting in a small office on the Universal lot where he is editing the film. "In fact, I think they still think it's kind of an odd idea."

But when Van Sant returned earlier this year, coming off "Good Will Hunting," Universal changed its tune. By then, Van Sant was in business with Imagine Films chief Brian Grazer, the most powerful producer on the Universal lot.

Silver admits he was "cautious" until Van Sant made his pitch. "Hearing how passionate he was and knowing he wanted to make it in a respectful way, it seemed like a smart bet," he says. "It gives the movie a new pedigree: 'Psycho,' as told by Gus Van Sant. And if it works, it will prove there's a fascinating way to re-create films from our library."

Silver says he ran the concept by former studio chief Lew Wasserman, who had been Hitchcock's agent and longtime friend. After he gave his blessing, the filmmakers wooed Janet Leigh, who insists she is eager to see the new film, despite TV tabloid reports that she says "misrepresented" her feelings about the project. Van Sant sent Leigh flowers on the first day of filming, July 6, which was also her birthday. She declined an invitation to visit the set, saying it would only "invite more speculation that could be taken out of context. I hope they make a good picture, but it's better for me to keep my distance."

Finding the right actor for the Tony Perkins part wasn't easy. Van Sant initially approached Leonardo DiCaprio—"hasn't everybody?" he says—but when he didn't get an answer, he spoke with other actors, including Joaquin Phoenix and Matt Damon, looking for someone who could "break the Tony Perkins spell."

When Vince Vaughn came to

read for the part, his hair cropped short, wearing a white T-shirt, Van Sant knew he found his man. "It's not something you can really explain," he says, pointing to a snapshot of Vaughn on the wall over his desk. "Sometimes you can just read the story in an actor's face."

For the Leigh part, Van Sant first met with Nicole Kidman. When she had scheduling problems, he opted for Heche. For the private-eye character originally played by Martin Balsam, Van Sant cast William H. Macy. Julianne Moore plays Heche's sister, a part originally played by Vera Miles, while Viggo Mortensen plays Heche's lover, the role first played by John Gavin. Danny Elfman and Steve Bartek are producing and adapting Bernard Herrmann's classic score using a 70-person strings-only orchestra.

On the "Psycho" set, the specter of Hitchcock was never far away. The filmmakers built a new Bates Motel and a gothic-style house right in front of the original set, a popular stop on the Universal tour. Each day, the cast and crew rode past a wall of camouflage netting designed to keep tourists from seeing the house.

Mortensen said he had an "eerie" feeling going to work. "You're literally stepping into the shoes of the original character, right here on the same lot, physically next to the old house," he said one day. "It felt like you were welcoming old ghosts."

Van Sant and cinematographer Chris Doyle kept a portable storyboard of snapshots from the original film nearby so they could re-create the blocking and camera angles for each shot. When it came time to film a scene, the cast would huddle around a DVD monitor and watch a replay of the Hitchcock scene they were about to do.

"It felt a little trippy," Heche says. "I held my purse the same way Janet Leigh did, I walked the way she did, I behaved the same way she did. The whole experience was a mind trip. After dailies each day, I'd say to Gus, 'This is getting weirder and weirder!'"

While making "Psycho," Hitch-

cock shrouded the production in secrecy, using the fake title of "Wimpy" to discourage curiosity seekers. Van Sant followed suit, giving his film the pseudonym of "Sawdust." Stefano updated his original script, but only to avoid anachronisms—the major scenes are identical to the originals, down to the smallest detail. Norman still snacks on candy corn outside the motel, Marian still wears a brassiere in the film's opening lunch-hour sex scene. When Macy walks upstairs in the Bates house, he starts with the same foot—his left—on the same stair, with his hat in the same hand as Balsam in the original film.

The only significant alteration Van Sant made was in Bates' climactic appearance when he dresses as his mother in the taxi-dummy cellar. Filmed in top secrecy in late August—the cellar set had its own security guard—it was the one scene that didn't work, forcing the filmmakers to do a hurried reshoot in early October, with a new, scarier "mother" look provided by renowned makeup designer Rick Baker.

Security was tight. Guards were posted at all set entrances, crew members wore identification badges and the cast was required to sign confidentiality agreements. When a reporter visiting the set was introduced at lunch to Heche's girlfriend, Ellen DeGeneres, the comedian was full of envy: "Even I can't visit the set. They always make me leave after lunch!"

Universal even plans to mimic Hitchcock's marketing formula for the film. As with the original, there will be no press screenings when the film is released; critics will have to see the film in theaters like everyone else. "People will be outraged no matter how respectful we are to the original," Silver says.

What no one can predict is how young moviegoers, weaned on graphic thrillers such as "Seven" and self-conscious shockers like "Scream," will react. Will they dismiss the film's much-imitated story as musty and derivative? Will it have enough scares for them? And will it be daring enough to overcome the skepticism of older moviegoers who view the film as a knockoff of a classic?

Still, "Psycho's" launch should benefit from the big Remade Culture payoff: recognizability. It's why Universal's "Psycho" billboards, already up around town, don't even include the title of the movie. They simply show a hand pressed against a shower curtain, with the ad line: "Check in. Unpack. Relax. Take a shower." Your Remade Culture subconscious makes the instant connection.

"'Psycho's' image is hard-wired into moviegoers' genetic memory," Grazer contends. "It doesn't feel old to them. I've even heard lyrics about Norman Bates in hip-hop songs. It has what you want when you're marketing a movie: a huge awareness factor. Even if kids haven't seen the movie, they know the idea of it—it's cool and it's scary."

Patrick Goldstein is a Times staff writer.