The Modern Prometheus: Creature and creator in Vertigo and Psycho

Emerging from a mire of broken bones and twisted bodies soaked in spilt blood, the cracked mind of the creator reverberates with the heavy burden of his creation. The gnawing certainty of madness colours only his perception of the tragedy, however, and his loss is absolute. This description of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein could well describe the close of either Psycho or Vertigo, and it is demonstrative of Hitchcock's talent that his work stands alongside the pinnacle of literary horror. The protagonists all create, yet their inability to confront their creations is the trigger for blood, tragedy and profound loss. Shelley's searing literary exploration of this relationship is echoed in Hitchcock's striking visual representation of this phenomenon. The foreshortening focus pull of Vertigo speaks perfectly of Scottie's bewildering relationship with a reality which has failed him and a woman who has vanished. Likewise, the crooked domesticity of The Bates Motel is captured memorably in the silhouetted figure of 'Mother' and our snatched glances of her grisly form. In both cases, the outcome is nightmarish and the creator's relationship with their creature is their downfall. Scottie's recreated memory of Madeleine and Bates' construct of his mother mark them as creators, yet swapping monsters for madness and detectives for demons only accentuates the craft of Hitchcock's masterpieces.

Romantic Horror and Monstrous Births

Mary Shelley's Romantic horror is perhaps the perfect insight into the fraught relationship between creature and creator which runs below the surface of both these films. Although their links may be a little hazy, the Romantic roots of Shelley's horror could hardly be more plain. The very concept for Frankenstein was born on a stormy night amidst some of the most feted members of that movement. Yet it was not from the pen of Byron or Percy Bysshe Shelley that the greatest terror sprung. Indeed, it fell to the only woman present; a woman whose own experience of creation had been marred by family troubles and a challenging upbringing. Shelley's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, died giving birth to her, meaning for Shelley the image of 'Mother' was always intrinsically bound up with guilt and death. Shelley herself gave birth to a sickly child which died soon after, cementing the
bond between creation and death. She referred to her seminal work as "my hideous progeny." One of the most interesting themes in Mary Shelley's work is that of the 'Monstrous birth.' this, in turn, is a facet reflected both in *Psycho* and *Vertigo*. Scottie's refashioning of Madeleine is uncomfortable for Judy and unsettling to the audience. Norman's creation of his Mother is palpably monstrous in both its implications and its impact.

Using these traditional models of horror can help to highlight the skill with which Hitchcock's works convey the central tragedy of his scripts. Interestingly, however, despite parallels in the creative relationship, both Hitchcock's characters are far from the 'Modern Prometheans' of Shelley's Victor Frankenstein. Theirs are creations of the past, recreations of the lost which are perverted by their relationship to the living. In *Frankenstein* the Creature, composed of rendered corpses, is emblematic of this loss and a criticism of just such a regressive intention. Although Victor Frankenstein is cast as a dangerously progressive character, his creature remains one composed of dead things and it is this origin which it struggles to escape. Later Promethean myths of the 4th Century involved Prometheus creating humans out of clay, a base composition which in turn can be held up as illustrative. In 'Kavalier and Clay', Michael Chabon compares Frankenstein to the traditional Jewish Golem myth, coming full circle in relationship to early images of Prometheus. The notion of some spirituality or belief involved in fashioning life takes the concept away from the purely scientific realm of Frankenstein's laboratory. This in turn is a useful insight into the creators seen in Hitchcock's films, especially in the case of *Vertigo*, where Scottie literally engages in the act of reconstructing an image from memory. This is the creative relationship exercised by both Scottie and Norman Bates, utilising mental projection to recreate idealised images of the past. Both act audaciously to give these created ideals some measure of flesh, and it is this attempt which is their undoing. These classical models of Satan (as presented in Milton's *Paradise Lost*) and Prometheus (as presented in Percy Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*) provide the archetypes for the sympathetic yet flawed over-reacher, now commonly referred to as the Byronic hero.

*Psycho* and the Creature beneath the skin
Romantic scholars surmise that these flawed representative figures used in 'Romantic myth-making' allow the audience an ability to understand the humanity behind the evil that they see in the world. Hitchcock achieves this from the outset of Psycho. His opening shots challenged Orson Welles' A Touch of Evil in the use of a four mile dolly shot by helicopter. They also shared a tone, as the audience's scanning eye (represented by the dolly) fell on one seemingly random focus. In Psycho, as we scan the Phoenix skyline at the time appointed by the on screen text, our focus falls somewhat randomly on the second floor window of a somewhat typical building during a young couple's lunch-break. With this shot, Hitchcock sets up the 'averageness' of the people on whom horror is about to be wrought. Hitchcock's real message here is of the humanity behind the monstrous events that will unfold. For the audience, this technique centres the story on the couple whilst for the storyteller it ably sets up the later twist. The young couple's ill-gotten gains may be a MacGuffin, but their all-important journey leads us to the setting of our story.

Marion's eventual stop, The Bates Motel rises out of the storm like the Castle of Otranto (so famed of gothic horror) as a haunted figure glides past an illuminated window. The haunting image of the figure unseen is one of the most fundamental features of Psycho and Norman Bates provides perhaps the most obvious parallel with the Frankenstein story and Romantic horror more broadly. It is his 'creature' which is the most violent and also perhaps the most memorable of Hitchcock's films. Norman's mental creation of his mother is both a means of over-coming his grief at her death and also a fundamental symptom of a broken mind. Yet Bates' creation is not simply presented to the audience as a traditional movie monster, instead heightening the thrills by initially concealing the killer's identity. Hitchcock masterfully builds up to the film's central revelation by strikingly silhouetting the murderer who stalks the Bates motel. The mysterious and murderous “woman” that appears each time is, of course, Norman Bates. His awkward diversion of a neighbours enquiry is a telling insight into the relationship he shares with his creature: “Mother ... how shall I put it? ... isn't quite herself today.” Norman Bates is no hero, nor even anti-hero. He is irreducibly a mentally ill man whose freedom is a danger to those around him.
Another iconic Romantic pen-smith and wag, the inimitable Lord Byron, spoke of similar creative angst in his poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.

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\text{Tis to create, and in creating live}
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\text{A being more intense, that we endow}
\]
\[
\text{With form our fancy, gaining as we give}
\]
\[
\text{The life we image, even as I do now.}
\]
\[
\text{What am I? Nothing: but not so art thou,}
\]
\[
\text{Soul of my thought! with whom I traverse earth,}
\]
\[
\text{Invisible but gazing, as I glow}
\]
\[
\text{Mix'd with thy spirit, blended with thy birth,}
\]
\[
\text{And feeling still with thee in my crush'd feelings' dearth.}
\]

Byron's *Harold*, the subject of his narrative poem, is a character of some deprivation, with whom the audience sympathises only because of his desperation. Like Norman Bates, Harold's sins are precipitated by an ancestor, and the stain of impurity is writ large on both their characters. Norman's largesse may not be that of Byron's wandering aristo, yet this extract speaks of an all-consuming bond between creature and creator which consumes even as it creates life. Hitchcock initially presents Bates as a pitiable individual and this can be seen most notably in the effect he has on Leigh's Marion Crane. Her recognition of Bates' subservience to his 'Mother' and inability to address his own problems is what drives her towards a resolution of her own misdemeanours. That this resolution is - shall we say - punctured by events doesn't initially reflect on Norman until it becomes clear he is donning the garb of his deceased mother to strike out at those around him. In highlighting this troubled relationship, the Bates family dynamics are shown to be dominated largely by the overbearing mother. When Norman attempts to recreate this influence his creation runs amok and in the final scenes we are genuinely presented with the triumph of creation over creator. As Mother's skull is superimposed over Norman's face whilst he languishes in gaol, Hitchcock is both making clear the separation between creator and creature and also highlighting their dysfunctional
relationship. Essentially, the act of creation has failed to alter the original relationship. Despite creating his own image of his mother, her deceased form is the ultimate victor. Like the Creature languidly stalking the ice floes at the end of *Frankenstein*, Mother's unhampered resurgence gives her the run of Norman's broken mind.

The bloody creative force which Bates unleashes is directly mirrored in Frankenstein's creature. In both stories, the creator loses control of the monster and its murders are seen to impact upon the well-being of the creator. If Bates' unhinged mental creation is born of grief and a desire to reclaim the love of his mother, then it triumphs when that creation holds dominion over his mind. Born of grief and bathed in blood, Bates' motivation differs fundamentally from the ambitious transgression of Dr Victor Frankenstein, yet returns to similar ground in its bloody denouement. As we learn from the mouth of Frankenstein's creature itself, "the fallen angel becomes a malignant devil".

*Vertigo* and the Creature made from Corpses

Scottie is, perhaps, a less obvious creator. *Vertigo* is at once a twisting mystery tale where a man is manipulated into killing and also a psychological study of oppressive guilt and the search for absolution. Yet, it is his fashioning of a memory in real life which ultimately leads to his downfall; as he conjures up the ghost of his lost love, her image is made flesh. Scottie's obsessive pursuit of Madeleine's lost identity in the person of Judy is both terrifying and dizzying. Hitchcock's use of setting likewise makes central Scottie's quest to recreate the past; his desperate searching takes him to the Palace of the Legion of Honor Museum, the Mission Dolores, the Portals of the Past, the eldritch grandeur of the giant Redwoods and the iconic San Juan Batista mission. These sites all hold obvious links to California's past and their inclusion speaks of the slightly 'other-worldly' nature of Scottie's obsessive quest. Camera-work is likewise important, as the dizzying focus pull of Scottie's vertigo finds a complimentary disconcert in the spinning shot which captures the couples' reconciliatory kiss after Judy has assumed Madeleine's image. This linking of the central concept of the film, Vertigo, to the creative project of Scottie binds the interaction of creature and creator to the film's plot.
The scarred legacy of Scottie's rooftop plunge in the film's first moments likewise haunts the story. Asides from giving the film its name and iconic shot, Scottie's weakness motivates a quest to redress his humiliation and overcome his vulnerabilities. When he saves Madeleine from drowning, he fulfils an Orphic fantasy and becomes entangled in a web of longing for this mysterious and aloof beauty. Hitchcock pulls the rug out from under his audience, however, by shattering the expected progress of this new infatuation with Madeleine's seeming death. As Judy's real identity as Madeleine's double is revealed, we become aware of the ruse being perpetrated to hide the death of the real Madeleine. We also see an inversion of roles, as Scottie's mundanity and street-wise veneer is replaced with a dream-like obsession focussed on recreating the very image of his lost lover. After this reveal, Scottie's self-imposed seclusion seems akin to that of Victor Frankenstein's obsession in the run up to his creation, both with minds closed off from family and friends. Hitchcock's skill is in deconstructing the romantic myth of the rescue fantasy by playing with conventional structure. The controversial reveal in the second act sets up a fraught and intensive character study in the third which complicates any interpretation of the film's import. Suddenly the expected outcome is shifted, deceitful and no longer our main focus.

Scottie's attempt to model Judy upon his image of Madeleine is reflected in Hitchcock's continual use of profile shots in the film. The capture of Madeleine's profile in the perfect light becomes Scottie's overbearing quest, as demonstrated when he and Judy choose a suit. Judy's unwillingness to act as a proxy for Scottie's memory is palpable and it is unsettling to watch her squirm as he tries to create the perfect recreation of his memory. As the lady proprietor of the store says, "The gentleman seems to know what he wants." Judy is unable to see what good can come of her impersonation, and accepts only to pander to Scottie. The notion of a monstrous birth is important here, as the audience is ill at ease with the yawning realisation that Scottie is engaged in a distasteful if not unnatural act. Choosing specific dresses, lipstick and haircuts for his dress-up doll leaves Judy more Scottie's creation than her own self. Her strangely halting protests at this fact disguises both the secret that she holds and her unwillingness to be fashioned again in the same way that the real Madeleine's husband Gavin Elster had done intially. Judy becomes caught between the dowdy image
and colloquial speech patterns which are hers and the idealised and exotic mystique of the role created for her by men.

Indeed, it is an aspect of this mystique, in Carlotta's necklace, which marks the revelation of Judy's real identity and the role she played in deceiving Scottie. Interestingly, there is another parallel here with the story of Frankenstein, as the violence begins after the Creature plants the murdered child William Frankenstein's necklace on Justine the servant girl, who on this basis is found guilty and hanged. These pivotal moments with necklaces represent in both stories the moment where the creatures move beyond the control of the creator. Discovering Judy's true identity has literally made Scottie's mental projection flesh. Yet it also leaves him seemingly resentful. His menacing promise that there is "one final thing I have to do, and then I'll be free of the past" clearly terrifies Judy. Having perfected his creation, Scottie seems disgusted with it. In the words of Victor Frankenstein: "I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart." At the climax of the story, when Scottie is faced with a brutal choice which governs Judy's fate, he loses control of his created scenario once more. His mastery over his created romantic object slips. Although his realisation of the truth salves him of his lingering Vertigo, it smashes the fragile compact between the illusion and reality of both Madeleine and Judy. By tearing down the vestiges of his created 'Madeleine', Scottie likewise terrifies Judy, the reality of his illusion. In criticising her for sentimentally holding on to the necklace, Scottie appears as a Byronic hero, like Prometheus in Prometheus Unbound, consumed by the need for some form of vengeance: "Let a sufferer’s curse / Clasp thee, his torturer, like remorse."

As Judy pleads with Scottie not to abandon her, her entreaties echo the words of Frankenstein's creature: "Accursed creator! Why did you form a monster so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust?" Judy mentions her safety and catalogues what she has lost to bring Scottie back into her life. Despite a final embrace which hints at reconciliation, the near literal appearance of 'deus ex machina' (in the form of the Nun pacing to the top of the tower) startles the couple and sends Judy plunging to her death and the creator irredeemable. The enactment of the very
mise-en-scène which triggered his obsession sees Scottie torn between achieving his creative project and the literal impact of this creation.

**Reflections on the fate of the Creators**

It is exactly this moment of successful creation which binds both *Psycho* and *Vertigo*. As Scottie succeeds in reclaiming Madeleine, her fate is repeated as in the image he seeks to recreate. As Norman Bates succeeds in fully forming the Mother of his mind, she seizes control in the same way she had dominated his life before her death. Frankenstein's Creature, composed of rendered corpses, is ultimately responsible for the death upon which its creation relied. The obsessive relationships of Norman with his created 'Mother' and of Detective Scottie with his created image of Madeleine ultimately lead to both their downfalls. Their relationships begin with creation yet end in punishment and irredeemable loss. Bates loses both his freedom and his mind, whilst Scottie loses the woman he loves all over again.

If we are to cast the leads in *Vertigo* and *Psycho* as Romantic heroes in the vein of Victor Frankenstein, then it is necessary to focus on their role as creators. Yet, in studying their respective flaws, we perhaps draw closer to identifying Scottie with the lead of *Prometheus Unbound* and Bates with that of *the Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. Norman's creature beneath the skin may be more monstrous than Scottie's creature conjured up from corpses, yet their roles as creators binds the two. What makes this 'Creator' comparison so powerful is the recognition that Hitchcock denies either character the redemptive transformation afforded the progeny of the Romantic imagination. Whilst Percy Shelley and Byron allow their charges to survive following some epiphany in their narratives, Hitchcock pushes his characters towards the unredemptive and callous ending of Mary Shelley's monstrous tale. It is this lack of cathartic resolution which singles out Hitchcock's work as enduring and profoundly affecting. By shattering the structural demands of an Orphic rescue fantasy in *Vertigo* and brutally denying the redemption of Marion Crane in *Psycho*, the Director shocks the audience and leaves them off guard. It is this created space between expectation and reality that allows Hitchcock to craft shocking and captivating films deserving of such analysis. Perhaps like Mary Shelley, the only
Creator which emerges intact from her work is herself. It is the space created for the story which witnesses the tragedy. As Hitchcock himself intones in the trailer for *Psycho*, “You should have seen the blood, the whole place was, well, it’s too horrible to describe ... ”