Elbows and Assholes: The Anal Work Ethic in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho*

The commentary on the infamous shower murder scene in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) runs steadily in the direction of a theoretic crapshoot. In the film, Marion Crane (Janet Leigh), a real estate clerk, absconds with $40,000 in order to marry Sam Loomis (John Gavin), with whom she is carrying on an affair. She flees and, during a freak storm, checks into a desolate motel, where she meets Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins), who seems at first gentle, friendly, and almost childlike. Norman, though, is not “normal”: after once murdering Mrs. Bates and internalizing the mother’s voice, he reappears in drag to stab Marion to death while she takes a shower. He disposes of the corpse in a swamp close to the motel, motivating Sam and Marion’s sister Lila (Vera Miles) to investigate the disappearance. Robin Wood, concentrating on a close-up of Marion’s eye after the murder sequence match-cut to the shower drain, argues that this scene allegorizes “the potentialities for horror that lie in the depths of us all...which have their source in sex.” Raymond Durgnat agrees with Wood’s assessment, while also suggesting that this scene exaggerates and counterpoints the quickie with Sam that opens the film’s narrative, in that it more fully emphasizes Marion’s “sensuality.” He further argues that the murder fleshes out the course of this narrative’s “double predestination,” as it follows the axiom “God sends sinners a chance to repent in order that by rejecting it..., they will damn themselves more thoroughly than ever.”

Robert Samuels seconds these arguments while claiming that the shower scene’s 50-or-so cuts, which formally complement the slicing
up of Marion’s torso, suggest the effacement of the female subject in a “male-dominated cultural order” that situates the flesh at “the limits of the representable.”\textsuperscript{4} Linda Williams, reconsidering the critical reflex to interpret the murder as an instance of symbolic castration, argues that this scene, its form reenacting its content, rather disciplines viewers to take fun in the forfeit of “control, mastery, and forward momentum” that occurs when the film’s narrative setup and center of spectator identification together spill “down the drain.”\textsuperscript{5} These theorists, as we can see, offer scant attention to the toilet that frames this scene, the drawn-out filming of it a serious violation of the Hays Code. Robert Kolker, after viewing this object and the staging of the murder as “symmetrical images of drainage and sewage,” moves on to reestablish the correspondence of the scene’s content to Hitchcock’s editing style.\textsuperscript{6} George Toles theorizes a metaphorics of the eye in the film, describing the shower murder as a moment of “blockage” that exerts on the audience tremendous “pressure for release” or, more explicitly, interpretation.\textsuperscript{7} However, as Jacques Lacan argues, the anus, not the eye, represents “the locus of metaphor” and also the mechanism driving the simultaneous slippage and condensation of the images of staining, flushing, and cleansing fundamental to this scene.\textsuperscript{8}

In any case, this chapter will address—or dilate and fill in—this critical gap, first discussing the connection of anality to Max Weber’s religio-idealist work ethic, and then tracing out its implications for \textit{Psycho}’s own cinematographic, figurative, and intertextual workings. The frequent shots of toilets, of cesspools, of Marion and the other characters constantly looking behind themselves clue us into the fact that the muscle tissue of the anus, rectum, and intestines informs Hitchcock’s \textit{mise-en-scène}, editing style, and camerawork. They share the structure and functions of this tissue type, and taken together suggest that the eruptions of violence in the film only serve as embellishments of the real ethic of class elitism: that one’s salvation depends on consuming and amassing more than anyone else, that it depends on the intestinal fortitude to compete with others who feel a similar urgency to reduce the world’s things to their own shit. This chapter will then finally tease out some of the work \textit{Psycho} continues to do on the slasher film, that subgenre, so successful in the 1980s and 1990s, featuring villains whose malformations make them as ugly and formless as shit, villains whose role in their respective series resembles the work of our gastrointestinal muscles to reduce everything that comes into contact with them to much the same.