

Psycho effect

The problem of writing about 'the most written-about director in film history'

Last week I watched Leslie Stevens's recently restored and redistributed film *Private Property* (1960). Set in Los Angeles, this feature stars Warren Oates and Corey Allen as two predatory bums who inveigle their way into the home of a young housewife, played by Stevens's wife, Kate Manx, with the aim of seducing her. Although it was released the same year as Hitchcock's *Psycho*, a review in the *Guardian* draws a comparison with an earlier classic: "It's a bit of *Rear Window*, SoCal-style". The similarity stands, just. After breaking into the house next door, Oates and Allen are afforded a perfect sightline to the backyard pool in which the object of their desire bathes naked, and from this vantage point, they observe her every move, working out when is the best time to strike. All the same, Manx and her husband's expansive private property in the Hollywood Hills (they filmed it at their own house) is a far cry from the claustrophobic tenements of New York City that force the bored, apartment-bound James Stewart into playing Peeping Tom. What Stevens presents is actually *Rear Window*'s opposite: a world of forbidding boundaries between neighbours of thick hedges, padlocked gates, fences and walls.

The evocation of Hitchcock when talking about Stevens illustrates a simple truth: a comparison to Hitchcock says both everything and nothing. As D. A. Miller informs us early on in *Hidden Hitchcock*, the Master of Suspense is "the most written-about director in film history". Look hard enough and you begin to see his influence everywhere. Hitchcockian motifs, style and influence are easy to spot – could Kate Manx pass for a "Hitchcock blonde"? – but given the wealth of critical material already available, the hard task is finding something original and noteworthy to say about what you see. Both Miller's study and Laurence A. Rickels's *The Psycho Records* do achieve this, albeit with varying degrees of authority.

Despite the suggestion implied in the title, *The Psycho Records* teeters on the edge of Hitchcock criticism. From *True Blood* to *CSI*, and every variant on the horror genre in-between, the book is a consideration of what Rickels terms "the *Psycho* effect", somewhat confusingly, though this refers not to straightforward responses to Hitchcock's groundbreaking film but specifically to the editing of the infamous shower scene. Rickels quotes the director himself: "*Psycho* is probably one of the most cinematic pictures I've ever made. Because there you had montage in the bathtub killing where the whole thing is purely an illusion. No knife ever touched any woman's body in that scene. Ever. But the rapidity of the shots, it took a week to shoot. The little pieces of film were probably not more than four or five inches long. They were on the screen for a fraction of a second. . . . This was truly cutting-edge cinema.

The "Psycho effect" is actually observable in much earlier films, Rickels claims: Rupert Julian's adaptation *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925) can be considered the "premiere articu-

LUCY SCHOLES

Laurence A. Rickels

THE PSYCHO RECORDS
216pp. Columbia University Press. Paperback, £19 (US \$25).
978 0 23 118113 6

D. A. Miller

HIDDEN HITCHCOCK
208pp. University of Chicago Press. £19.50 (US \$27.50).
978 0 22 637467 3

lation of psycho horror", followed by the likes of James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931) and Karl Freund's *Mad Love* (1935). *Psycho*'s particular significance is that it "breached the anxiety defence of moviegoers and compelled the horror film genre, after a post-traumatic delay, to repeat or restart in the spot it was in

The term "psycho" first arrived in the United States via the battlefields of Europe. American soldiers returning from the Second World War, and psychologically disordered by the conflict, were given the nickname, thus introducing a war disorder into the heartlands of America. Here, the reader has to pay particular attention. Rickels identifies a quagmire confluence between the horror-"steeped" German films of the 1920s, on which Hitchcock himself cut his teeth (the German word *Schauer*, "horror", provides a sinister pun for the "shower"); the "psycho" killers of Nazi Germany ("the first social order in the civilized world to enjoin the entire population to close ranks in remorselessness before the ongoing prospect of mass destruction and murder"); and the appropriation by Robert Bloch (the author of the suspense novel on which Hitchcock's film was based) and Hitchcock of the term "psycho" to refer to an amalgamation of psychotic and psychopathic disorders.

The Psycho Records is a theoretically dense

makes for interesting parallel reading. In *Hidden Hitchcock* he undertakes a "Too-Close reading" of three of Hitchcock's works – *Rope* (1948), *Strangers on a Train* (1951) and *The Wrong Man* (1956) – in order to reveal an "understyle" that, despite being there in plain sight for all to see, is rarely observed. Indeed, this blind spot is actively encouraged by the thoughtful artifice on the screen in front of us. "Inevitably," Miller suggests, "we can't help sensing that there is more to meet the eye in Hitchcock than, in his viewer-friendly manner, he arranges to greet the eye." It is fitting that the three films Miller chooses to focus on, although not exactly forgotten, are certainly a step down from the director's best-known works. These are films to which not as much attention has been paid, and thus the implication seems to be that Miller's efforts will be doubly rewarded.

Gut feelings play an unusually large part in *Hidden Hitchcock*. The book is presented in the form of three essays, each separate and distinct but obviously working towards the same goal. A degree of repetition is involved, Miller explains, as laborious viewing sessions late into the night eventually yield, in that moment halfway between consciousness and oblivion, to something no one else has seen: an extra ballot paper in the jury scene in *Murder!* (1930); a latent appearance by the director himself in *Strangers on a Train*, not the "surreal fatso" with an unwieldy double bass in his arms clambering on board, but the author photograph on a copy of *Alfred Hitchcock's Fireside Book of Suspense* (1947), which one of the soon-to-be murderers is reading; and a host of what to other eyes are simple continuity errors. Some of Miller's spots are more illuminating than others. Fourteen-odd pages on a "canting candle" in *Rope* seems like overkill (no pun intended), whereas the case Miller makes for the "vanishing mirror" in *The Wrong Man* – "no ordinary realist object", since it only exists when Manny, the false suspect of the film's title, is in the frame – is much more intriguing.

Mirror vs candlestick: this is beginning to sound like a round of *Cluedo*, which isn't too far wrong. Miller is playing a game, certainly, and having a great time doing so. Yet he clearly also has a keen understanding of both the director's work and the criticism it has inspired. This is important as it provides a solid bedrock on which to build what could otherwise be dismissed as the ranting of a viewer with too much time on his hands. One of the most remarkable achievements of the study, of course, is the mere fact that Miller has gone back to these well-known films and found something new to comment on, even if his insistence that directorial intention lies behind those novel elements sometimes seems too much of a stretch. "Far more interesting than the obvious resistance that Hitchcock's presumed errors offer to the Master's harmonies", he proffers, "is their strange aptness to his work as disharmonies." The reader of *Hidden Hitchcock* is left with both an eagerness to return to the films in question and doubts about the validity of its claims.



German film poster, 1960

with the shower scene". *Psycho* provides Rickels with a primal scene, but it is the "slasher and splatter" films that have dominated the horror genre which constitute the heart of his study (providing some of them with a much more intellectually glamorous context than, one could well argue, the likes of the *Scream* trilogy deserves).

study and its argument is a challenging one – to fully comprehend its intricacies you need to be as well versed in psychoanalysis as you are in Hollywood gore. Its ambition impresses, however, as Rickels consistently looks beyond the confines of each picture – lone frame, the whole feature film or an entire genre – in question.

Miller takes the opposite approach, which