

Always Already Vacant: Checking In to A&E's *Bates Motel*

Mia Mangs

It is hard to forget that fateful moment in *Psycho* (1960) when the neon sign of the Bates Motel beckons Marion Crane to take refuge from the rain. In fact, so memorable is this sign that it serves as the pithy lead-in to A&E's *Bates Motel* (2013-), a show touted as a contemporary prequel to Alfred Hitchcock's film. While the show is particularly remarkable for presenting the backstory of Norman Bates and his intricate relationship with his (living) mother, it is equally noteworthy for extending the life of the film's infamous setting: the Bates Motel and the adjoining house that looms over the entire property.

For those who have seen *Psycho*, these structures already bear a significant meaning. Not only do the motel and the house signal the split in Norman's personality (i.e. Norman manages the motel, while "Mother" presides over the house), but the presence of the umbilical-like stairs that connect the two dwellings also works to obscure this split. The motel and the house, like Norman and "Mother," are two parts of the same whole.¹ The film, however, maintains the distinction between these two structures—and, in turn, between Norman and his mother—by specifically limiting viewers' access to the house. It is only when Lila, Marion's sister, breaches the privacy of the house that the truth is discovered: Norman, after murdering his mother, has preserved her corpse and assumed her identity.

What becomes so compelling, then, about *Bates Motel*—beyond the presence of a living, breathing Norma Bates—is the degree of access that the show grants its viewers. Like the patrons of a motel, viewers are afforded a weekly visit to the property and the home of the Bates family when the show is in season. In fact, it is not uncommon to see the dynamics of Norman and Norma's relationship unfold in more private moments, generally before or after they have engaged in a frantic argument, such as when they share a meal in the kitchen, when they sing and play the piano in the living room, or when they fall asleep together in the same bed. What these moments fail to undermine, though, is an overwhelming sense of vacancy.

In *Psycho*, this sense of vacancy is evoked by a number of iconic images: the motel sign that beckons Marion with the promise of shelter, the desolate motel and its empty rooms, the taxidermied animals Norman keeps in his parlor, the vacant eyes and body of Marion following her ill-fated shower, and the desiccated eyes and body of Norman's mother's corpse. These vacant images are further underscored by the way in which the Bates Motel and the adjacent house are largely isolated from the nearby town of Fairvale, California, ever since, as Norman explains, "They moved away the highway." Until the arrival of Marion Crane, Norman and "Mother" are the property's only occupants.

In *Bates Motel*, this sense of vacancy pervades the entirety of White Pine Bay, Oregon. Even here, beneath the contemporary setting of the coastal town, the show exposes a place that is—economically, morally—always already vacant. Not only has the former logging town turned to the marijuana trade to fuel the economy, but unbeknownst to Norma, the adjoining motel she acquires along with her house was once also a front for a sex trafficking ring. Amidst these revelations, the show begins to invoke a number of familiar images as the sense of vacancy only

¹ For a more detailed consideration of the nature of duality in *Psycho* and its relation to the film's setting, see Coon. The author provides a cogent analysis of how the distinction between Norman and "Mother" is simultaneously reinforced and undermined by the built environment of the film. This tenuous relationship, as Coon notes, is particularly underscored by the presence of the stairs that run between the motel and the house.

continues to grow. Norma struggles to prevent the construction of a bypass that could leave her with an isolated motel, Norman takes an interest in the art of taxidermy, and the Bates property itself seemingly becomes a locus of death, as more than one corpse has appeared there, and more than one body has gone missing from there. Undoubtedly, it is the blackouts that Norman increasingly experiences that evoke the most overwhelming sense of vacancy, and as the show progresses toward its designated end point, viewers may (or may not) be wise to extend their stay.

Works Cited

Coon, David R. "Building Suspense: Spaces, Boundaries, and Drama in Hitchcock's *Rear Window* and *Psycho*." *Polymath: An Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences Journal* 2.3 (2012): 55-68. Web. 18 May 2016.