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Medium Specific Tension in *Psycho* vs. *Blade Runner*

Novels and films, and in particular films based on novels, can never adequately compete for greater merit as both are entirely different expressive modes of narrative (Stam), however some cinematic adaptations of literary novels fair better than others. In his paper “The Dialogics of Adaptation”, writer Robert Stam describes how the mediums of text and film each have their own “respective materials of expression” (59). Texts can utilize what writer Evan Marshall refers to as: literary expressive modes including: dialogue, punctuation, narrative summary and description (142) whereas films have a more diverse array of medium expressivity including image, sound, editing, performance and mise en scène (Stam). Within Stam’s approach of “medium specific” alterations from novel to film, he also proposes that directors can use this “medium-specificity” to alter characterizations by having “the performer play against the intertext, thus exploiting a realm of tension not available to the novel” (61). Stam contrasts the “performer” of a film with the “intertext” of a novel to highlight the “medium specific” changes which occur when adapting textual characters into a filmic medium. By having a cinematic actor oppose the textual attributes of a character, this can create narratorial “tension” as the characters and the material have been drastically altered. Alfred Hitchcock’s 1960 adaptation of *Psycho* by Robert Bloch and Ridley Scott’s 1982 adaptation of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* by Philip K. Dick utilize medium specific alterations of character to create a source of tension not present in the respective source novels.

Alfred Hitchcock, as the director adapting the 1959 thriller/horror novel *Psycho*, employs numerous changes for the filmic adaptation including alterations in plot structure, perspective and most significantly: character. Not only did the overweight, deviant character of Norman Bates in the text undergo a significant transformation in Hitchcock’s 1960 adaptation, Hitchcock also employed “medium specific” alterations with the character of Norman’s mother: Norma Bates. In the original text, Norma Bates is portrayed through the literary expressive modes of dialogue, description and narrative summary. Her character is established in the opening of the text, through the mode of dialogue in conversation with Norman: “ ‘Suppose you’d gone out and found us a new location, then put the place here up for sale. But no, all you did was whine…You *can’t* leave, can you? Any more than you can grow up.’ He couldn’t look at her. Not when she said things like that, he couldn’t” (Bloch 13). Their strained mother/son relationship is firmly established during this opening conversation, as Norma accuses Norman of never being able to “leave” and thereby unable to “grow up.” Throughout the text, Bloch keeps the character present as Norma and her son engage in these kinds of frequent conversations, as result the reader becomes familiar with her character through the literary mode of dialogue. Bloch, furthermore, utilizes description and narrative summary during the murder of the character Mary Crane at the hands of Norma Bates (Norman Bates as his mother). The text describes the face of the attacker as “powdered dead-white and two hectic spots of rouge centered on the cheekbones…It was the face of a crazy old woman. Mary started to scream, and then the curtains parted further and a hand appeared, holding a butcher’s knife. It was the knife that, a moment later, cut off her scream. And her head” (Bloch 41). Bloch, as the writer, employs the literary mode of description to describe the appearance of the attacker, and narrative summary to establish the murder of Mary Crane, stating how she “started to scream” followed by her abrupt decapitation. Readers of the text are lead to believe that the identity of the attacker belongs to Norma, as Bloch has utilized literary modes of expression to establish her as a central character and the one responsible for Mary’s death.

Hitchcock utilizes medium specificity to alter the character of Norman’s mother and in turn the death of the female protagonist in his cinematic adaptation. In contrast to Bloch’s novel, Hitchcock features the character of Norma Bates primarily and sparingly through voiceovers performed by four different actors (Rebello). At 0:32:22 to 0:32:44, Marion Crane listens through her open motel window to the far-off sound of Norma berating Norman for inviting her to their home for a late dinner. Hitchcock employs the sound effects of rain and echoing of voices during this scene, thereby utilizing a medium specific expressive form of sound design to obscure any physical attributes of Norma’s character. The only other scene in the film which includes the character in conversation with Norman occurs when he expresses his desire to move her to the fruit cellar (*Psycho* 1960). At 1:26:45 to 1:26:51, the viewer sees Norman carrying Norma in his arms down the staircase in a high angle shot to the cellar. Hitchcock utilizes the cinematic form of expression: mise en scène, with the layout of the shot and set design featuring Norman descending the staircase from a purposely high perspective, distorting any physical tangibility of Norma Bates’ identity. In the widely discussed murder scene of Marion Crane from 0:47:41 to 0:48:40, Hitchcock employs the expressive form of montage to establish her unanticipated death and to further obscure the Norma Bates character. The viewer is unable to identify the attacker as the face is blacked out (*Psycho* 1960). The rapid use of quick cutting and screeching, string music creates a sense of disorientation further obscuring the identity of the attacker. In the source text, Bloch features multiple scenes with Norman and Norma engaged in conversations as conveyed through dialogue (13). Bloch also openly describes the appearance of Mary’s attacker and the circumstances of her demise through frank description and narrative summary lasting a short number of sentences (41). Whereas in the film adaptation, Hitchcock lowers the frequency of these interactions between the mother and the son to two occasions as conveyed through sound design and mise en scène. In addition, Hitchcock obscures the identity of Norma during the shower scene by darkening her facial features and establishing Marion’s demise through the use of a quick cutting montage, as opposed to the abrupt description of the murder in Bloch’s text. As a result of these medium specific changes from Robert Bloch’s novel to Alfred Hitchcock’s film, Norma Bates’ characterization is cinematically altered by obscuring her physical identity. By having the “performer” or lack of a tangible performer in Hitchcock’s adaptation play against the “intertext” of the original character, this creates a source of tension not previously available within Bloch’s novel. The reader of the 1959 text can create their own tangible image of Norma Bates through Bloch’s literary modes of expression. Whereas the viewer is not granted this opportunity due to Hitchcock’s utilization of cinematic medium expressions which purposely limit identification, creating a high degree of suspense as viewers are uncertain of Norma’s tangible attributes. The director utilizes sound, mis en scène and montage which work to obscure identity rather than familiarize, therefore creating medium specific tension through the alterations from text to film.

Ridley Scott also utilizes medium specific changes in his adaptation of Philip K. Dick’s 1968 science fiction novel: *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Scott employs numerous medium specific alterations for his 1982 film: *Blade Runner*, including changes in setting, tone, title and most significantly: character. The protagonist Rick Deckard underwent a complete transformation in Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*. In the 1968 novel, the character of Rick Deckard is portrayed through the literary modes of dialogue and narrative summary. In the opening of Dick’s text, the reader is introduced to Rick Deckard in the midst of his morning routine and in conversation with his wife Iran. The couple discuss the implications of a dial system (called a mood organ) which allows them to program their own emotions: “ ‘Dial 888,’ Rick said as the set warmed. ‘The desire to watch TV, no matter what’s on it.’ ‘I don’t feel like dialing anything at all now,’ Iran said” (Dick 6). Rick and Iran’s disagreement establishes their domestic life as he is portrayed as the husband off to work and Iran is portrayed as the dissatisfied housewife, opting not to dial “anything at all” to alter her mood despite her husband’s insistence. Rick’s domesticated life is further asserted when he expresses his desire to purchase a real animal: ‘I don’t want a domestic pet. I want what I originally had, a large animal. A sheep, or if I can get the money, a cow or a steer or what you [his neighbour] have, a horse.’ The bounty from retiring five andys would do it, he realized” (Dick 13). Rick’s desire to obtain a flesh and blood sheep is what motivates him to track down the five escaped androids, further establishing his socialized domestic pursuits as owning a real animal is a mark of high social status within the futuristic society (Dick). Dick employs this literary mode of dialogue to familiarize the reader with the character of Rick Deckard, his married life and social pursuits allow the reader to sympathize with the protagonist as these characteristics are relatable. In the novel, Rick begins a relationship with the android Rachel from the Rosen Corporation. Their relationship develops to that of a sexual nature as described when she: “toyed with a button of his shirt; in slow, facile twists she began unbuttoning it… ‘Take off your coat.’ ‘Why?’ ‘So we can go to bed,’ Rachel said” (Dick 175). Based off of Rachel’s active pursuit of Rick, ushering him into bed with her, writer Philip K. Dick is also utilizing dialogue to establish their relationship dynamic with Rachel as the dominant partner. Rachel is further cast as the dominant partner when she uses sexual activity to bargain with Rick: “ ‘*Go to bed with me and I’ll retire Stratton.* Okay?... ‘Goddamn it, get into bed,’ Rachel said. He got into bed” (Dick 179). Dick is additionally utilizing the literary modes of dialogue and narrative summary to establish the nature of their physical relationship. Through dialogue, Rachel insists that she will retire (kill) one of the androids for Rick if he has sex with her. Rick feels he cannot bring himself to retire the android Pris, due to her being the exact same model as Rachel and thus through the expressive mode of narrative summary, he agrees to this arrangement by getting into bed (Dick 173). The exchange of sexual activity as initiated by the character of Rachel asserts that Rick is more passive and timid, whereas her character is more assertive and proactive.

In contrast to Philip K. Dick’s novel, director Ridley Scott alters the character of Rick Deckard utilizing medium specificity. He employs the cinematic expressions of sound, mis en scène and editing. In the opening scene from 0:8:03 to 0:8:30, we are introduced to actor Harrison Ford as Rick Deckard standing on an Los Angeles street circa 2019 reading a newspaper (*Blade Runner* 1982). Deckard’s environment is portrayed as dark and moody as epitomized by the use of blue neon lighting, fog effects, with the sounds of incidental street music and crowds passing by; encompassing Scott’s cinematic expressions of mis en scène and sound design. The scene then cuts to Rick’s gazing at an advertisement up above which confidently declares: “A new life awaits you in the Off-World Colonies!” (*Blade Runner* 1982) and then cuts back to a reverse shot of his uninterested reaction to the sign: he continues to read his newspaper. Scott utilizes the cinematic expression of shot reverse shot editing to familiarize the audience with the main protagonist as it establishes his perspective. Through these medium specific alterations, Scott establishes that Rick Deckard is alone and slightly alienated, as we are introduced to him on a dark evening in the futuristic Los Angeles all by himself. Scott additionally employs medium specific changes to the relationship between Rick and Rachel, played by Sean Young. Scott utilizes editing once again to establish the dynamic of their relationship. At 1:11:12 to 1:12:34, Rachel is in the midst of leaving the room after receiving a kiss from Rick, however as she opens the door he violently forces it shut with his clenched fist. He then proceeds to force her against the wall, a reverse shot exemplifying Rachel’s fearful facial expression (*Blade Runner* 1982). Rick then commands that she say: “Kiss me” and “I want you” as he physically forces himself upon her (*Blade Runner* 1982). In the text, writer Philip K. Dick establishes Rick Deckard as a passive, domesticated everyman as he lives a married life coupled with a desire for significant social status. Whereas in the film, Rick lives a more alienated life; being single and with no other motivation behind finding the escaped replicants (changed from androids) besides being forced into it by his former boss (*Blade Runner* 1982). In the text, Rick’s passivity is epitomized by Rachel’s active bargaining for sexual relations, whereas in the film Rick is portrayed as more aggressive by forcing Rachel into non-consensual sex, reversing the sexual dynamic between the two characters. By casting Rick as an isolated bounty hunter who physically forces his love interest into sex, these medium specific alterations create a source of “tension” as Ridley Scott has the “performer” play opposite the “intertext”. The reader of Philip K. Dick’s novel can sympathize more with the male protagonist as marriage and social status are societal commonalities, even if they are futurized. The viewers of Ridley Scott’s adaptation are not as capable of sympathizing with the male protagonist as his isolation and sexual aggression portray him as socially deviant. Scott’s use of medium specific elements including editing, sound design and mis en scène work to intensify Rick Deckard, therefore creating medium specific tension as established by the alterations from text to film.

Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* and Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* utilize medium specific alterations of character to elicit a source of tension not present in the respective source novels. Both Hitchcock and Scott utilize cinematic expressive forms to initiate a level of performance of character that negates the “intertext” of the source and thus creates “tension” (Stam). In the circumstances of Hitchcock’s alterations to Robert Bloch’s novel, this medium specific tension enhances the material as it works to obscure the tangible identity of Norma Bates. This is accomplished through the distinct limitations of utilized cinematic elements including the use of sound design, montage and mis en scène, these alterations allow for the audience to become more questioning of the Mother character’s physical presence. In the circumstances of Scott’s alterations to Philip K. Dick’s novel, this medium specific tension diminishes the material as it works to intensify the character of Rick Deckard. This is accomplished through cinematic elements such as sound design, editing and mis en scène, these alterations portray Deckard as a more aggressive character which impacts the audience’s ability to sympathize with him. Whereas Hitchcock’s cinematic alterations to Bloch’s novel have been praised (Pramaggiore and Wallis), Scott’s alterations to Dick’s novel have been criticized, particularly concerning the submissive portrayal of Rachel and other female characters “who are all replicants, yet their literal objectification is barely explored,” (Maloney). The skewed identity of Norma Bates improves upon the source material, as the narrative is more effective with these alterations given the twisted outcome of the mother/son relationship. The aggressive identity of Rick Deckard does not improve upon the source material, the narrative is less effective with these alterations given Deckard’s aggression leading to the “objectification” of the female character Rachel. These medium specific alterations for creating tension are more effective in *Psycho*, making it the superior cinematic adaptation in comparison to *Blade Runner*. Hitchcock gives us very little which provides us with much more in the way of the suspenseful nature of horror fiction. Scott gives us too much which provides us with much less in the progressive nature of science fiction. Audiences desire to find out why we receive such a limited viewing of Norman Bates’ mother but they don’t desire to witness a future where a lone bounty hunter objectifies a woman.

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