**The *Breathless* State of *Psycho*paths**

In 1960, tremendous stories were popping up left and right: the story of a young man rising through the political ladder to be elected President of the United States, the story of racial tension coming to a head in Greensboro, North Carolina, and a man who could “fly like a butterfly” boxed his way to the top. Among all of these terrific stories, two directors, John Luc Godard and Alfred Hitchcock, released two movies that made history through their storytelling devices. *Psycho* (1960) and *Breathless* (1960) stand as very different testaments to the power of effective storytelling in film.

Although the films were both groundbreaking in their respective genres, the films’ execution of drama is very different. Hitchcock follows an incredibly linear pattern to make a somewhat unlikely event make sense. Alfred Hitchcock doesn’t leave a lot to the imagination in terms of plot: he’s an incredibly skilled director and every shot in his movie has a meaning. His strict command of the camera allows him to explore how the story is conveyed. For example, in the scene where Norman carries his mother down the stairs for fear that she will be found out, the perspective is from an aerial view. The audience truly believes that Norman is carrying a frail woman down the stairs. However, the audience later learns that it is not actually Norman’s real live mother, but rather, her corpse. This is emphasized by Hitchcock’s use of restricted information. If Hitchcock developed the plot by using a straight shot, there would be a total loss of suspense in the film. The story, however, does present some unusual fallacies. Why would such a trustworthy woman make such a compulsive decision to steal? Why would a cross-dressing psychopath run a motel on the middle of the highway? The plot also presents some questions, for example, why would it be raining in the middle of Arizona and California? Hitchcock quells these questions with the linear development of his plot: each scene receives the perfect amount of time, deliberation, and manipulation of the mise-en-scene to make the audience believe that whatever is going to happen to Marion and the rest of the characters happens because it flows into the basic plot structure. For Hitchcock, the plot matters more than the story: the plot is essential in building suspense, while the story only echoes the peril of a confused killer. Through the plot, Hitchcock successfully develops the story into a staple of the mystery-genre.

*Breathless* is unconventional when it comes to plot. For Godard, the story of two independent people moving through life in the same disjoint fashion as the film is shot is more important than the classic linear plot development. There are elements of the traditional dramatic structure: the exposition occurs when Michel shoots a police officer, the rising action of the chase, the climax of Patricia selling him out, and the dénouement with Michel’s death. However, the action doesn’t happen in such a way that the audience can relate to it directly: through the development of witty conversations, the viewers must be actively engaged in the story to see the progress of the plot. Thus, *Breathless* has elements of both linear and nonlinear storytelling. The nonlinear aspects of the film are conveyed in the brevity of the shots. For example, the scenes move illogically from place to place. This can be seen best at the very beginning: Michel wants to go to the French countryside. Then, after shooting a cop, he runs all the way to Paris. The nonlinear plot structure doesn’t make a lot of sense, but the story is still conveyed. Godard’s piece relies so heavily on camera work that it is nearly impossible to eliminate the effects of the technical aspects on the story.

In this way, the duration and frequency of the events in each movie is key to showing how the story should be unraveled. *Psycho* occurs over what seems like a week: Marion takes the money, runs, dies, other people die, and then the bad guy is caught. However, due to the rapid nature of the scenes in *Breathless*, time does not become an issue in Godard’s created world. Certainly, the idea that time is essential to Michel’s escape is an issue, but in several scenes Michel is shown purchasing a newspaper. Unless Paris was publishing newspapers by the hour, the audience can infer that the action happened anywhere between a couple of days to a couple of weeks. The duration of the scenes, quite literally, also helps to build suspense. *Breathless* employs the shock factor: without much rhyme or reason, people get shot and killed to keep the audience entertained. Hitchcock uses a different technique, however, using longer scenes to build suspense. There are several changes in place, but not nearly as many as in *Breathless*. The changes in scene and place in *Psycho*  are deliberate, only used to echo a layer of the story.

The location of the events in the movies shows a direct correlation with how the stories are told. In *Psycho*, the dialogue of the story matches up with the location of the characters: a terrifying house accompanies the suspicious motel in which Marion is killed, the car dealership provides car’s license plates to show proof of where exactly Marion is going, and the jailhouse shows the resolution of the conflict of Norman’s killing days. However, the locations in *Breathless* are less clear, but not necessarily less important. One moment Michel is in a car, another he’s running through a field while Patricia’s running around the streets going to random restaurants and interviewing surprise directors. Michel acknowledges the locations where the characters are going, such as when he asks Patricia to come with him to Rome but she says that she loves Paris. However, Paris echoes this “devil-may-care” attitude: a city of free women and men smoking, sexing, and running amuck. *Breathless*’s location is used to evoke aesthetic appeal, where Psycho uses subtle hints to build the plot.

Although the stories are clearly different in plot development, they share similar points of view. The movies are both told from the third person point of view, meaning that the audience does not have a clear idea of who the narrator is. In *Breathless*, the third person point of view is echoed as the camera follows both Patricia and Michel. There is a clear break, however, in the story, when Michel directly acknowledges the audience and destroys the fourth wall when he is in the car discussing the countryside towards the beginning of the film. The third person allows for the audience to have insight into both characters’ trains of thought. The lack of narration is shown clearly in *Psycho*, as Marion, who the viewer would suppose to be the main character, dies mid-way through the movie. The audience never follows all of Norman’s movements, just the main action. There is a dark hole where Norman goes when the murders occur, a technique used to foreshadow his mental “absence” but also to limit the audience’s involvement in the plot. The information has a heavier restriction in Psycho, however, to increase suspense. Certainly, if Norman’s multiple personalities were acknowledged from the beginning of the story, there’d be no need to see anymore of the story. *Breathless* allows the audience further into the psyche of the characters.

The ends of the movies also share a similar theme, but are executed very differently. The end of *Psycho* shows a gloom and twisted-looking Norman sitting in a jail cell while a voice-over a woman, supposedly his mother, says that she, “Wouldn’t hurt a fly.” The fly in the air lands on Norman, and the movie comes to the credits. Although this seems like a finite end, after all Norman has been caught, the mystery in his eyes as well as the two-thirds frame states that the story is not yet finished. *Breathless* also has the theme of unfinished business, but from a plot perspective alone. Michel’s death happens quickly, and as Patricia moves her thumb to do Michel’s trademark move around her lips, her ignorance towards the French language is brought up once more as she asks, “What is vomit?” Although death is an absolute and the reintroduction of Patricia’s ignorance ties the whole movie together, the close-up on her face leaves unresolved emotions.

Through plot and story development, *Breathless* (1960) and *Psycho* (1960) create beautiful narratives through very different means. Although they are both in black and white, there is nothing black and white about the colorful nature of their storytelling.