PSYCHO LINGO
by Philip Monk

"If you love someone, you don't do that to them, even if you hate them."

I am reading between images of a man's acts and his words. But the words disappear, displaced by the images. My reading must proceed backwards through a series of screens -- from the pure visuality in which madness presents itself, to the split of language that creates the unconscious in the image, back to a madness residing in language itself. This case for origins in language calls for an alternative interpretation of the madness of Norman Bates. Norman's madness is revealed not in what he sees, but in what he says. So, I offer a case history of Norman Bates read through the screenplay, which reveals the language origins of his psychosis.

First, the psychiatrist's interpretation. [In the presentation of this reading, a video clip from Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* of the psychiatrist's summation follows].

Oh! I forgot to say: this reading is dedicated to my mother. "Mother, oh, god, mother! Blood! Blood!" There, we are past the shower scene.

The shower scene seems to be the locus of Norman's madness, but it may only be a lure for us. The shower scene cuts the film in two, or rather links one film to another -- the end of Marion Crane's film to the beginning of Norman Bates's. This division solves the problem of the end of a film answering to its beginning, so that the psychiatrist's concluding analysis explains the murder half way through, not the lovers' tryst in the hotel room that opens the film. Since the two conclusions are in parallel, we might look to the first ending -- Norman and Marion's conversation in the parlour -- for the source of Norman's disturbance. We shall linger in the parlour, where Norman wanted to stay, not in the shower, where he was forced to go.

In the parlour, Norman and Marion converse about their "private traps." Perhaps film is a prison house. In the last moments of Psycho's opening credits, the horizontal stripes of the graphics switch to vertical bars that are briefly superimposed over the opening scene as if to imply the prison its characters inevitably inhabit. As these bars lock into place, they signal a closure, like a curtain -- a shower curtain, perhaps -- coming down between the antecedent text and the succeeding images. This closure separates an outside from an inside which Hitchcock's camera then proceeds to breach, passing through the hotel window into the sordid interior of a clandestine meeting. As spectators, we are let in on the scene through the camera's thrust and "cut," a complicity that makes us guilty as voyeurs (and that prefigures our participation in the murder of the shower scene). But this voyeuristic complicity entails leaving the outside behind and language with it, just as the close of the credits splits language from image. From the beginning of the film, from the moment we pass through the window, we enter a space of madness. This is not yet Norman's madness, which the shower scene has yet to rend in the full scopic violence of his lacerating psychosis, only a little madness.

Marion Crane stems Norman's loquaciousness in the parlour. The shower scene silences it. Norman's madness supposedly is the result of a disturbing vision: his witness to a primal scene (and the murder of his mother and her lover that follows). This vision buries language in him. The murderous rage that resulted is repeated in the shower scene, after Norman is aroused by Marion Crane's disrobing. (Her nakedness reproduces the original primal scene that is signified by what we, not he, saw at the opening of the movie, where we spied on Sam and Marion's lovemaking.) Substituting for Norman's original horror, Marion Crane's screams act to repress memory in the unconscious so that only the visual thereafter remains functional. This is why Marion Crane's eye and scream (the latter displaced by the staccato shrieks of the music) have such a symbolic role in the film's reenactment of Norman's traumatic event. (The private detective Abrogast's scream is silent).

The shower scene completes the passage from language to vision in the film. Its fetishizing effect in the popular imagination has given it an iconic value, a shock value Hitchcock intended in order to suppress language in a mutually binding psychosis. Through this repression of language, *Psycho* makes us mad, and we have yet to recover. I believe Norman's madness is only compounded by vision and can be traced to a language disturbance. Words bridge action, just as talk transfers guilt. To cure Norman, and ourselves, we need to restore what the shower scene sets asunder. Something in Norman's psychosis is triggered by his conversation with Marion Crane. Norman says, "We all go a little mad sometimes. Haven't you?" to which Marion Crane, posing as Marie Samuels, answers to her situation, "Yes, sometimes just one time can be enough." Norman goes mad (again) soon after this exchange because of something that the double character Marion Crane/Marie Samuels says, not because of what she does.

Norman's madness is a consequence of words and acts not matching. His attack follows, not from his spying on Marion Crane undressing alone, but from what he sees as women's duplicity, once again confirmed for him when Marion unconsciously slips back to her real name.

My resort to a linguistic explanation of madness is not the same as that which the psychiatrist offers at the end of the picture for Norman's vicious attack -- that it resulted from his sexual desire for Marion Crane and the psychotic complications of his doubling of character that ensues -- "the mother killed her." In her conversation with Norman, Marion's mismatch of name to the false guarantee of her signature in the motel register would be observed by him as a lie, a "fal...fal...fal...falsity" as Norman elsewhere stutters to her. (We should be alerted, through the psychopathology of the stutter, that the unconscious is speaking here). Marion Crane could fool him -- not that she was trying -- but not his "mother," his other self, who murders her. What gives Norman the right to act is Marion Crane's seeming duplicity, her breach of trust of the openness of

their conversation. On the contrary, Norman does not lie about his mother; everything he says about her to Marion Crane, in fact, is true about the stuffed dummy she is, but we don't realize so until the end of the film.

When Norman says "My mother, what is the phrase? She isn't quite herself today," the truth of the statement, and consequently the question of trust in the speaker, cannot be settled. Either we take the statement at face value as Marion Crane would have. Or, having now seen the movie, we know its meaning to be either "My mother is other than herself, that is, she is dead," or, "My mother is other than herself, namely, she is me." Truth and ambiguity, literalness and duplicity inhabit the same statement as the sentence's own little madness. Norman is not ironical; he himself must take the phrase literally; moreover, he cannot read his own deceit, only that of others -- or, rather, only his "mother" can read their deceit. (Norman must delegate to his mother the right to decide who is being deceitful, for reasons that we will see). Norman must have recourse to what is already a phrase -- "What's the phrase?" -- to express ready-made, what he cannot acknowledge to himself: his split subject. The doubling of language keeps the subject doubled within it and maintains ready-made a little death in life. But who and what made Norman double?

A different, linguistic explanation of Norman's disturbance would make him a candidate for the double-bind theory of schizophrenia worked out in California in the years immediately preceding Psycho's release in 1960. Is it a happy coincidence that the author of this theory is named Bate/son, Gregory Bateson?

Norman's mother had already made him psychotic (in the words of the psychiatrist, "he was already dangerously disturbed"), and she naturally became the first victim of it. The double-bind theory recognizes the child as a victim of the mother. There is no single traumatic event, no primal scene, only a pattern of communication that the mother sets up and controls. Schizophrenia is a meta-communicational dysfunction in which the child is unable to distinguish message types. A primary negative injunction is accompanied by a secondary negative injunction of a higher order conflicting with the first, both enveloped within a tertiary negative injunction that forbids questioning the double-bind and thus escaping this trap of language.

Norman kills Marion Crane, as revenge upon his mother, because of the trap of language. His conversation with Marion already portrayed the background of his psychological disturbance; but if language makes Norman mad, we need to examine, briefly, its dynamics within use -- in that this disturbance is provoked by a conversation with Marion Crane, not his mother.

A pure example of the double-bind is found in Norman's contradictory phrase "If you love someone, you don't do that to them, even if you hate them." Other expressions revolve around substitutive levels of meaning and metaphor and issues of truth and falsity only insofar as these are the logical terms for what is really a question, for Norman, of the literal and the deceptive. Such as: "I hear the expression 'eats like a bird' is really a fal...fal...fal...falsity;" and "People always call a madhouse 'someplace'."

Literalness and duplicity are not two phrases or phases of a linguistic utterance, but inhabit the same phrase. Norman's problem is that he must maintain the literal level while his mother manipulates the other. Within every statement is a trap; behind every statement is a deception. The former is Norman's dilemma; the latter is the inquisitorial position Norman's mother commands. Norman must maintain this contradictory dichotomy, he is bound in its trap: everything he says makes sense in the universe he must inhabit -- he does not need to erase the crime from his mind (as the psychiatrist claims), but to continue to deal with his mother's contradictory injunctions.

The psychiatrist's explanation of Norman's split personality is sometimes seen as an external solution to the film, as a verbal add-on. But this linguistic reflex is necessary. To slice language off the image, as if with a censor's scissors, is only to displace it elsewhere -- otherwise known as the unconscious. The split that produces the psychotic unconscious has its neurotic parallel in the extemporizing of internal speech that we know as guilt. Marion Crane could acknowledge her guilt; Norman Bates must suppress his. The split-off voice has an essential role in *Psycho* where it functions as a traditional voice-over, but also as an index of kinds of madness, major and minor. A fixture of *film noir* (of which *Psycho* is a late version), the voice-over is only used sparingly here: seemingly as a narrative device of plot furtherance the two times Marion Crane, speeding away from her crime, imagines the dawning realization on those whom she has left behind that she has stolen $40,000, and again at the conclusion of the film when, fully absorbed into the mother half of himself, Norman's "mother" talks-and smiles-to herself. Talking to one's self is a sure sign of psychosis. Norman talks to himself through the ventriloquistic displacement of his mother's dummy and his own transvestitism. Is *Psycho* suggesting that Marion Crane is also a little mad when she "talks" to herself? Is it, moreover, Marion Crane's pleasure that makes her mad -- and Norman's victim -- when smiling to herself (the only time during the voice-over of her anxious flight), she imagines the duplicitous outrage of the oilman whose money she stole?

We all go a little mad sometimes. Our madness is the pleasure that the master of suspense, Hitchcock, manipulates as a suspension of language in vision. The voice-over (or, rather, the voice behind the image) is a clue to the fact that there is an unconscious of the image as well as an unconscious of the voice operating in *Psycho*. We think we see Norman's madness displayed, but it is the suppression of voice that more fully instantiates it for us -- and in us. We do not escape this Hitchcockian trap, and interpretations that persist in repressing language are still caught in Norman's madness.

What dilates before us when we see this film? Is it Norman Bates's madness, or the unconscious of film that presents and speaks itself -- or yours, or mine? Did I say that this was about my mother? It's not about my mother.

[Philip Monk is a writer, art critic and curator of the Powerplant Art Gallery in Toronto].