



Expect the Unexpected

Psycho and the Types of Planting and Payoff

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ABSTRACT: Storytellers commonly employ a narrative device, termed “planting and payoff,” to choreograph audience expectations. Formalist methods within the humanities help us understand the structure of the device, and empirical research in psychology helps us understand the pleasures that attend it. A single instance of planting and payoff, however, may lead to different aesthetic responses, depending on the perceiver’s ability to cope with incongruity between the plant and the payoff. The aesthetic pleasure one derives from the planting-and-payoff device is largely a factor of a narrative’s structural incongruity (too much incongruity leads to confusion; too little leads to boredom) and the perceiver’s capacity for coping (too much capacity leads to boredom; too little leads to confusion). *Psycho* illustrates each of the ways in which storytellers employ planting and payoff to generate aesthetic pleasure.

KEYWORDS: planting and payoff, aesthetics, pleasure of narrative, expectation, *Psycho*, twist films, cognitive science

You know the public always likes to be one jump ahead of the story; they like to feel they know what’s coming next. So you deliberately play upon this fact to control their thoughts.

—Alfred Hitchcock to François Truffaut

By recruiting the human tendency to prepare mentally for future events, storytellers enlist a device known as “planting-and-payoff” to choreograph our

expectations and enhance an artwork's aesthetic value. *Planting* is a preparatory narrative device that anticipates a future plot outcome. The outcome—the *payoff*—typically resolves one or more storylines left dangling by the plant, or else it draws on planted information to fulfill a narrative pattern.

In another essay, I argue that planting and payoff excite a variety of cognitive effects—some of them contradictory—that help explain the device's power as a storytelling technique (Berliner, "Expect the Expected"). I will not offer evidence here for these effects or their contributions to the pleasures of narrative, but I want to review the effects so that I can address this essay's primary question: How do the different uses of the planting-and-payoff device generate distinct aesthetic responses and appeal to individual aesthetic preferences?

So let us review the device's cognitive effects by looking at a prototypical case of planting and payoff from the film *Die Hard* (1988). Here, police detective John McClane tapes a gun to his back (Figure 1) and then fires it at criminals holding his wife hostage (Figures 2 and 3). We can identify at least eight individual effects (noted in italics) of the planting-and-payoff device.

The shot of the taped gun (Figure 1) constitutes incomplete plot input, causing us to form a hypothesis about McClane's future actions and *focus-ing our attention* on plot information that will test, inform, or confirm that hypothesis (Roese and Sherman 100–101). We *reach to understand* the story in the hope that we might complete the input. When McClane pulls the gun from behind his back and shoots (Figures 2 and 3), his actions *release the tension* created by the plant, enabling us to fill the gap in our understanding and achieve some mental closure. By planting and paying off, *Die Hard* enables us to *make a connection* between incoming information (McClane grabs a gun and shoots) and information in memory (a gun is taped to his back), enhancing *processing fluency* by easing the assimilation of new information (Reber et al). Inasmuch as McClane's actions conform to our expectations, we enjoy the pleasures of *successful prediction* (Huron 7), and, inasmuch as they do not, we enjoy the pleasures of *incongruity-resolution* (Berliner, *Hollywood Aesthetic*, 60–64; Morreall 91). Such routine uses of the planting-and-payoff device generally do not evoke *artistic appreciation*, which tends only to occur when our forecasts go awry and we become conscious of a predictive failure.

Some of the foregoing cognitive effects seem more intense than others. *Processing fluency* and *successful prediction* likely afford us "calm" pleasure, whereas *reaching for understanding* and *incongruity-resolution* potentially generate "exhilarated" pleasure (Armstrong and Detweiler-Bedell 322). But



Figures 1–3 · Planting (Figure 1) and payoff (Figures 2 and 3) in *Die Hard* (1988).

how do storytellers employ planting and payoff to manipulate the intensity of feeling? When does the device amplify our aesthetic response and when does it bore, bother, or vex us? And how might storytellers tailor the device to different aesthetic preferences? Examining types and variations of

planting and payoff, this essay sets out to explain the relationship between each use of the device and its resultant aesthetic response.

All variations, I shall argue, fall into five main types, which I have ordered according to the severity of the incongruity between the audience's expectations and the actual narrative outcome:

1. *Planting and Absolute Payoff* (congruity between expectation and outcome),
2. *Planting and Near Payoff* (slight incongruity, with assimilation),
3. *Planting and Payoff in an Alternate Schema* (moderate incongruity),
4. *Planting and Distant Payoff* (severe incongruity, with successful accommodation), and
5. *Planting and No Payoff* (severe incongruity, with unsuccessful accommodation).

I have devised these five types for purposes of illustration. In truth, we should regard congruity (which affords easy assimilation) and severe incongruity (which leads to extensive or unsuccessful accommodation) as end points on a continuum, with innumerable grades in between. A single use of the planting-and-payoff device may furthermore straddle more than one type, and different viewers may experience the same use of the device in a different category, depending on each viewer's capacity to cope with incongruous outcomes. But my typology will enable us to understand the primary variations of the device and to examine the relationship between the degree of incongruity and aesthetic pleasure. In general, greater incongruity corresponds to increased arousal, cognitive effort, and affective response (either positive or negative). Ultimately, I shall argue that the intensity and valence of one's affective response to the planting-and-payoff technique stems largely from two factors: the structural incongruity between the plant and the payoff and one's individual coping potential. The greater our capacity to cope with disruption of our expectations, the more we enjoy structurally incongruous outcomes.

My primary case study will be Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), which offers instructive examples of all five types of planting and payoff, some of which have earned the film intensive scholarly attention and artistic appreciation. But my *Psycho* examples also illustrate the usefulness of my analytical framework in explaining the ways in which storytellers manipulate expectations to generate pleasure: Many of the film's variations on the planting-and-payoff device have never been addressed in the vast scholarly

literature on *Psycho*—among the most examined films in film studies—yet we shall see here how they nonetheless contribute to *Psycho*'s aesthetic value.

Before we examine types of planting and payoff, however, we must first understand a distinction psychologists make between two cognitive responses to incongruous input: assimilation and accommodation.

ASSIMILATION, ACCOMMODATION, AND AESTHETIC PLEASURE

When a payoff differs from our expectation, several psychological activities come into play. At a biological level, the incongruity excites autonomic nervous system (ANS) arousal. At the cognitive level, we attempt somehow to process the new information, which may reaffirm our existing schemas (mental structures for organizing information) or cause us to update them. Jean Piaget identified two different types of cognitive processing: assimilation and accommodation. *Assimilation* is the integration of new information into an existing schema, whereas *accommodation* is the more effortful process of modifying our schema in light of information that we cannot assimilate. Assimilation demands little mental effort, because of the congruity of information, whereas accommodation demands more extensive processing as we revise our knowledge structures to adapt to incongruous input. In practice, assimilation and accommodation work in concert to varying degrees since each constitutes an effort to process information input. William Gaver and George Mandler note that “any new inputs assimilated into a schema may cause some accommodation, while new input causes an accommodation precisely to allow its assimilation” (265). The degree to which we invoke each process, however, will vary in different circumstances.

Our *Die Hard* example illustrates the difference between the two processes. The shot of a gun taped to McClane's back (Figure 1) generates an expectation that he will use the gun somehow in the future. When he pulls the gun from behind him and fires (Figures 2 and 3), we easily assimilate the new information because it largely conforms to our expectations; we need only process McClane's specific actions. If, however, McClane had used the taped gun for a purpose we cannot assimilate (for instance, to shoot his wife), we might have to modify our schematic understanding of the story in order to accommodate the incongruous input. Whereas assimilation provides continuity with our existing knowledge structures, accommodation requires that we change them.

Many factors determine our emotional responses to a scene; however—all other factors being equal—emotional intensity, cognitive psychologist George Mandler argues, corresponds to the degree to which new input differs from our expectation. “If we assume that the intensity of the emotion is a function of the degree of ANS arousal and that the latter depends to a large degree on how interrupting the eliciting event is, then emotional intensity depends on how much of a discrepancy (or incongruity) exists between what is encountered and what was expected” (202). *Assimilation*, on the one hand, leads to relatively little arousal (because disruption is minimal) and therefore a low degree of affective intensity. Easy processing likely results in a positive (though mild) evaluation (Reber et al). The congruity between expectation and outcome generates familiarity, “the source of a great many of our likes and preferences” (Gaver and Mandler 268). *Accommodation*, on the other hand, leads to greater arousal and a more intense affective response. When disruptive information requires deep structural changes in our knowledge, then we experience more emotional “heat” (Gaver and Mandler 269).

If incongruous input necessarily leads to greater arousal and emotion, then why do we differ in our emotional responses to a given work? Would the disruption not be the same for everyone? Can Mandler’s theory of incongruity and emotion account for individual aesthetic response? To help us answer these questions, let us examine Mandler’s model of the perceiver’s response to an incongruity between expectation and outcome (Figure 4). Mandler lays out five cases, each of which corresponds to a different level of incongruity, arousal, cognitive effort, and affective intensity.

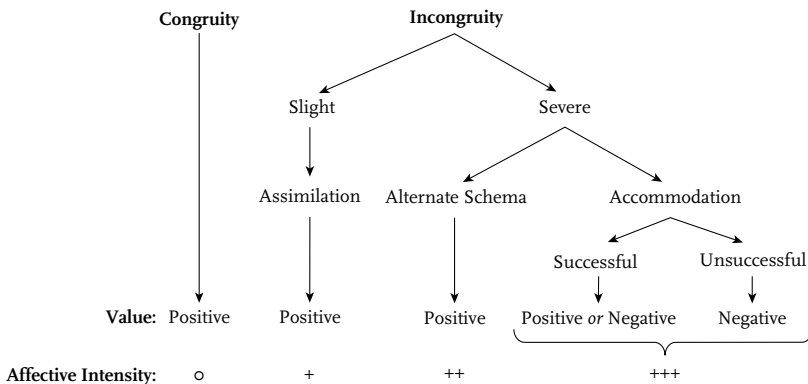


Figure 4 · Based on Gaver and Mandler (268).

We can turn to planting and payoff to illustrate the aesthetic applications of the model because the device elicits different responses depending on the level of incongruity between the perceiver's expectation and the plot outcome. So let us imagine five hypothetical viewers responding to the planting-and-payoff device:

1. *Viewer 1* processes the payoff without any effort (Mandler's first case, "congruity," on the far left of Figure 4). Because the plants pay off exactly as she expects, her affective response is relatively cool. She experiences little (or no) arousal or pleasure because of the input congruity.
2. *Viewer 2* experiences slight incongruity between the expected and actual payoff (second case from the left) as well as some emotional "heat." She engages in simple assimilation, experiences minimal arousal and effort, and enjoys mild pleasure.
3. *Viewer 3* switches from her default schema to one that enables her to process the incongruous payoff (third case). Because of the initial disruption of expectations and delayed understanding, she experiences intense ANS arousal (leading to intense emotion), which is pleurably relieved when she eventually activates the alternate schema.
4. *Viewer 4* successfully accommodates the payoff by restructuring her knowledge (fourth case). For her, the plants do not pay off until she has devised a schema that enables her to process information severely incongruous with her narrative expectations. We would expect her to feel even more intense arousal than *Viewer 3* because of the degree of incongruity and the effort required to resolve it. Arousal and effort may lead to intense pleasure or displeasure (or both), depending on *Viewer 4's* capacity to cope.
5. *Viewer 5* cannot accommodate the payoff (fifth case), finds the entire situation baffling, and experiences intense arousal and displeasure, along with feelings of stress and helplessness.

These five hypothetical viewers may be experiencing the same use of the planting-and-payoff device, yet their responses vary because of differing expectations and coping capacities. *Viewer 1*, we can say, experiences Planting and Absolute Payoff (congruity between expectation and outcome). *Viewer 2* experiences Planting and Near Payoff (slight incongruity, with assimilation). *Viewer 3* experiences Planting and Payoff in an Alternate

Schema (moderate incongruity). Viewer 4 experiences Planting and Distant Payoff (severe incongruity, with successful accommodation). And Viewer 5 experiences Planting and No Payoff (severe incongruity, with unsuccessful accommodation). Indeed, we should view the aesthetic effects of planting and payoff not only in relation to the narrative's objective properties (the amount of structural incongruity between the plant and the payoff) but also in relation to the perceiver's subjective experience (her individual coping potential).

Several scientific studies offer empirical evidence that the pleasures of art depend on both objective properties of the artwork and an individual's subjective experience. Keith Millis found that subjects enjoyed abstract paintings more when given titles that increased an individual's subjective understanding. Gaver and Mandler found that "psychological complexity increases with stimulus complexity and decreases with experience" (274). Ronald Heyduk found that the degree to which someone liked a musical composition depended on (1) how complex it is, (2) one's preferred level of complexity, and (3) how often one has heard the composition. Heyduk exposed subjects repeatedly to a composition that was at, above, or below their preferred level of complexity. Subjects who listened to a composition more complex than their preferred level liked it more the more they heard it, and subjects who listened to compositions less complex than their preferred level liked it less the more they heard it.

These studies suggest that one of the factors that determines which category of planting and payoff we encounter—and the corresponding intensity and valence of our emotional response—is our prior experience with art, which affects the ease with which we process information. Such experience may take the form of familiarity with a specific artwork or expertise with artworks in general. Numerous empirical studies, for instance, have demonstrated that art experts prefer more complex and novel art, whereas novices prefer more simple and ordinary art (Axelsson; Hekkert and Wieringen; Silvia and Berg; Smith and Melara; Winston and Cupchik).

But why do art experts prefer greater complexity and novelty? The reason is not what one might think—it is not that experts necessarily prefer greater challenge. The reason is chunking.

Experts (in anything) group units of memory into patterns, called "chunks," enabling them to more easily encode, store, and retrieve information (Chase and Simon). Lisa Smith and Jeffrey Smith propose that an art expert's knowledge base (what they term "aesthetic fluency") enables

the expert to process complex and novel art more fluently than novices. Novices become overwhelmed by difficult-to-process artworks, whereas experts cope with them more easily. Paul Silvia and Christopher Berg, for instance, demonstrated empirically that experts consider confusing movies less confusing, and more interesting, than novices. Because experts chunk information, seeing patterns that novices do not, they can more easily cope with greater complexity and novelty. Hence, the same artwork demands less cognitive activity from experts than from novices. Everyone, it seems, wants moderate challenge from art.¹ However, it takes greater structural incongruity for experts to feel the same level of challenge that novices feel with more congruent works. Hence, a narrative that exhilarates the novice may bore the expert, and a narrative that exhilarates the expert may baffle the novice.

We can view the perceiver's level of aesthetic pleasure as a factor of an artwork's structural incongruity (too much incongruity leads to confusion; too little leads to boredom) and the perceiver's capacity for coping (too much capacity leads to boredom; too little leads to confusion). Because this formulation accounts for each perceiver's subjective appraisal of an artwork, it helps explain why one person finds an instance of planting and payoff dull, another finds it baffling, and third finds it exhilarating (Berliner, *Hollywood Aesthetic*, 190–92). We can often attribute those differences to familiarity, to expertise, or to some other factor that affects a person's capacity to cope with the device.

TYPES OF PLANTING AND PAYOFF

So far, we have looked at the planting-and-payoff device mainly from the point of view of the audience, studying its cognitive and emotional effects. We have not yet considered the perspective of the storyteller, who creatively enlists the device to manipulate audience expectations. Indeed, storytellers must not only control the structural features of their narratives; they must also attempt to predict the effects of their work on their intended audience. And when storytellers are working in a mass art form, like Hollywood cinema, their choices must appeal to millions of viewers, some with different coping potentials.

Alfred Hitchcock alluded to the power of manipulating expectations in the quotation at the top of this essay, and *Psycho* illustrates the filmmaker's mastery of all sorts of planting and payoff. Not only does the film's immediate and enduring popularity testify to its mass appeal, but its inventive uses of planting and payoff make it an emblematic text for studying the aesthetics

of the device. Among the many impressive things about *Psycho* are how well it withstands repeat viewings and how it has delighted both film experts and novices alike. Indeed, although the remainder of this essay speculates about the effects of the different uses of planting and payoff on hypothetical first-time viewers of the film, my examples likely fall into different categories for different viewers, affording each use of the device multiple potentials for aesthetic pleasure. Hence, in a variety of ways, *Psycho* illustrates the aesthetic capacity and range of the planting-and-payoff technique.

Planting and Absolute Payoff

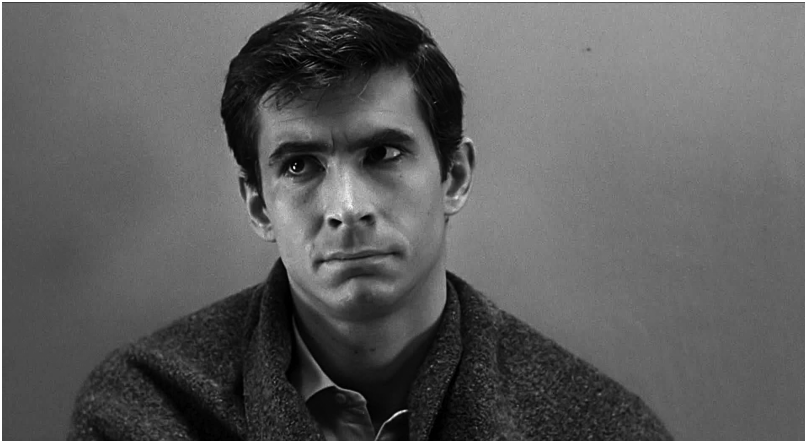
We begin with the most common type of planting and payoff in mainstream narratives, which we can call *Planting and Absolute Payoff* because of the congruity between expectations and outcome. This type of the planting-and-payoff device requires little or no assimilation on the part of the perceiver and, hence, typically elicits just mild pleasure. Arousal comes only from outcome delay and from any suspense that a plant itself may generate. Nonetheless, Planting and Absolute Payoff has several aesthetic benefits. It focuses attention on pertinent story information, enables the viewer to readily connect different plot events, and releases tension generated by any temporal gap between the plant and the payoff. Moreover, it facilitates the processing of story information by avoiding plot disruption, thereby affording the viewer easy assimilation, immediate understanding, successful prediction, and an experience of familiarity, acceptability, and appropriateness.

Psycho offers us many examples of Planting and Absolute Payoff, some routine but some uncommonly clever. Routine examples include the hints that Marion might steal the “forty thousand dollars cash” that her boss tells her to put in the bank; a shot of Norman reaching for one room key for Marion, then changing his mind and reaching for another; and the shot of Mother’s bedroom door slowly opening just before she kills Arbogast, the private detective hired to find Marion. The more clever examples of Planting and Absolute Payoff are the “softer” ones. Soft plants discreetly prepare viewers to receive later plot information without generating any specific expectations, creating subtle congruities and repetitions between plot events. For example, the scene in which Sam (Marion’s fiancée) and Lila (Marion’s sister) check into the Bates Motel in order to find Marion replays several of the most specific plot elements of the scene in which Marion sells her car in order to elude the police. In both scenes, our primary figures of identification are

trying to deceive the proprietor of a business. Both scenes make an issue about luggage and exchanging money. Sam's "First time I've ever seen that happen" (which he says to Norman about not having to pay for his room in advance when he has no luggage) echoes the car salesman's line to Marion, "First time the customer ever high pressured the salesman." And both scenes create tension by sustaining the audience's anxiety that our protagonists will get caught in their lies. The car-selling scene helps prepare us for the motel check-in scene: Using similar plot elements, the scenes encourage us to make connections between events that have only weak causal links.

Perhaps the most ingenious example of a subtle narrational echo is the film's repeated use of voice-over to signal a character's thoughts. Here, rather than repeating and varying plot information in different scenes, the movie repeats and varies a storytelling device. We first encounter the voice-over device when Marion is driving. As we watch her behind the wheel (Figure 5), we hear Sam's voice, as though in her head, questioning her ("Marion, what in the world? What are you doing up here?"). In a later scene, we hear her imagining the voices of a policeman talking to the car salesman; the other secretary in her office talking with their boss, Mr. Lowry; and Lowry talking with Mr. Cassidy about his missing \$40,000. These repeated uses of voice-over narration come off as fairly conventional; the audience simply hears the character's private thoughts. At the very end of the film, however, the same device receives a more inventive treatment when we watch Norman "thinking" in the voice of his mother (Figure 6). Here, the filmmakers have used voice-over not just to represent the character's thoughts but also to signal his split personality. The film, however, has readied us for this novel variation by introducing voice-over in Marion's car-driving scenes. Hence, when the Mother's voice seems to come out of Norman's mind, it sounds at once strange (a female voice emanating from a male face) but also appropriate because we have already seen a more conventional form of this disparity when the voices of Sam, Lowry, Cassidy, the policeman, and the car salesman seem to come out of Marion's mind (male voices emanating from a female face). The early conventional uses of voice-over prepare us for the more anomalous final one.

Planting and Absolute Payoff takes advantage of our desire to make connections between different parts of a plot, including both hard causal connections (a door opening and a murder) and soft incidental ones (different moments of voice-over). Mandler says about such encounters that "positive value" comes from the congruity between the input and our activated



Figures 5 and 6 · Marion and Norman as they “think” in the voices of characters of the opposite gender.

schema, which results in “a phenomenal experience of acceptability and familiarity” (200). With *Planting* and *Absolute Payoff*, aesthetic value comes from the harmony between our expectations and the evidence of the world, affording us feelings of rightness and proper fit.

Planting and Near Payoff

Planting and *Absolute Payoff* gets boring, monotonous. The congruity of expectation and outcome affords too little arousal and cognitive diversity to create much pleasure. Incongruity, by contrast, leads to processing disruption and greater emotional intensity. If we can assimilate incongruous

information, Mandler argues, then we can “expect judgments of positive value” that are “slightly emotionally tinged” (202). Slight incongruities afford the perceiver the positive emotional benefits of mild surprise-arousal and, eventually, calmness and understanding.

Planting and Near Payoff affords multiple aesthetic benefits. A slight incongruity between expectations and outcome leads to mild surprise—demanding more cognitive resources than *Planting and Absolute Payoff*—while still enabling assimilation into existing schemas (Bargh and Thein; Stern et al.; Wilson et al.). According to psychologists Neal Roese and Jeffrey Sherman, surprise “spurs greater behavioral effort aimed at problem solving” (105; see also McDonald and Hirt; Schwarz; Taylor). If the artwork rewards our problem-solving efforts, then we enjoy all of the aesthetic benefits of *Planting and Absolute Payoff*, as well as the greater emotional intensity that comes when we *reach to understand* a work and achieve *incongruity resolution*. Slightly gappy, irregular, or imperfect narratives give the mind some work to do: We have to fix them in order to understand them.

Psycho offers us several examples of *Planting and Near Payoff*. For instance, Norman’s discovery that Marion has lied to him about her name leads to a slightly different outcome from the one we expected. After signing the Bates Motel registry as “Marie Samuels,” Marion lets slip in conversation that her last name is “Crane.” Norman, we see, soon discovers the ruse and smiles slyly (plant), leading the viewer to expect that he will somehow exploit her deception, perhaps to steal her money or report her to the police (expected payoff). The plant does not pay off, however, until long after Marion’s death when Norman says to Arbogast, “She might of fooled me, but she didn’t fool my mother.” The line fulfills the narrative pattern but not quite in the way we expected.

An even more subtle example of *Planting and Near Payoff* comes at the very end of the film. In an expositional speech, a psychiatrist explains that he “got the whole story but not from Norman. I got it from his mother.” Mother, he says, killed Marion and Arbogast, as well as two girls. Viewers, however, might experience some temporary surprise and confusion when they encounter slight incongruities between the psychiatrist’s explanation and Mother’s monologue in the very next scene: “It’s sad when a mother has to speak the words that condemn her own son, but I couldn’t allow them to believe that I would commit murder. . . . in the end [Norman] attempted to tell them that I killed those girls and that man.” Her lines include slight discrepancies from expectations created by the psychiatrist’s speech. First, the psychiatrist said that he did not talk to Norman at all (“Norman Bates no longer

exists”), whereas Mother now says that Norman tried to convince the psychiatrist that she killed Marion and Arbogast. And second, the psychiatrist said that Mother *did* kill Marion and Arbogast, but Mother now says that Norman did it. So she must be lying. But to whom, herself? Viewers, I imagine, can readily process the incongruous information using some creative problem solving. Indeed, film commentators’ silence on these particular plot discrepancies, despite extensive scholarly attention to *Psycho*’s narrative, suggests that we unconsciously assimilate them into existing schemas. Still, we must correct the story, just slightly, if we want to make it make sense.

Planting and Payoff in an Alternate Schema

We have not yet discussed the most celebrated example of incongruity and misdirection in *Psycho*: When the film kills off its only star actor after only forty-seven minutes of screen time, it employs a device that we can call *Planting and Payoff in an Alternate Schema*. For many viewers, this is one of the most aesthetically exciting types of the planting-and-payoff technique, and this study’s psychological account helps illuminate the device’s cognitive mechanics and attendant pleasures.

Planting and Payoff in an Alternate Schema occurs when a narrative presents us with incongruous information that we cannot assimilate into our default schema. To relieve the stress of confusion, we search for a different schema (guided by plot cues within the artwork, typically) that will eliminate the incongruity and restore consistency to the story. If the alternate schema successfully regroups information in a way that fits the available plot evidence, we experience the excitement and relief that come when a new understanding pops into view (Aha!). Planting and Payoff in an Alternate Schema does not require deep structural changes in our knowledge (we need not form a new schema to experience it), but it does tend to result in a more intense affective response than the two other types of planting and payoff that we have studied so far. The initial discrepancy between expectation and outcome and the delayed congruity lead to greater disruption and arousal, intensifying emotion as well as the joy and comfort that come from sudden understanding.

Psycho uses the device in several ways, each a bit different in its aesthetic effect. The film’s famous shower scene is deeply unsettling, not only because of its shocking violence but also because it demands that we change our understanding of the direction of the narrative: The scene guides us to activate a story schema in which the woman whom we previously considered

the film's protagonist is dead. Film commentators have frequently remarked that the scene comes at an unexpected time—in the middle of another storyline in which Marion might return the money she has stolen. The shower scene suddenly renders that entire storyline obsolete, an outcome that, by most accounts, dumbfounds the audience. Robin Wood, for example, writes that we have become so engrossed in Marion's story and so secure in her potential salvation that "we can scarcely believe it is happening; when it is over, and she is dead, we are left shocked, with nothing to cling to, the apparent centre of the film entirely dissolved" (146). After Marion's surprising death, viewers must shift to an alternate schema in which her theft is just an opening act in the story of her murder.

The filmmakers have further concealed the plot twist with a now-celebrated casting gimmick. "What if we got a big-name actress to play this girl?" Hitchcock said to screenwriter Joseph Stefano during pre-production. "Nobody will expect her to die!" (Rebello 59). Hitchcock understood that Janet Leigh's star status would lead viewers to expect that she would survive the film, or at least most of it. Robert Kapsis says that the shower sequence "sledge-hammered five decades of movie convention which had it that the star never died (if at all) until the last reel" (58). Stefano said that he and Hitchcock liked Janet Leigh in particular for the role because she had "no association with this kind of movie" (Rebello 59).

Even starting the plot with Marion Crane (rather than Norman Bates) is a misleading plant, encouraging us to assume unconsciously that she will remain the primary focus of the narrative. Robert Bloch's novel *Psycho* begins with Norman, but Stefano suggested that they wait to introduce Norman, who first appears twenty-seven minutes into the film. Hitchcock's agent, Ned Brown, said, "Hitch was fascinated by the idea that the story starts out as one thing—the girl's dilemma—then, after a horrible murder, turns into something else" (Rebello 35). Hitchcock later explained that he wanted the audience first to focus on Marion's theft. "It seems as if she's decided to go back to Phoenix and give the money back, and it's possible that the public anticipates by thinking, 'Ah, this young man is influencing her to change her mind.' You turn the viewer in one direction and then in another; you keep him as far as possible from what's actually going to happen" (Truffaut 206). After the shower scene, the viewer switches to a schema in which Norman, not Marion, is the film's primary focus.

Viewers encounter the movie's final twist when they realize, as Norman attacks Lila in the fruit cellar, that Mother is long dead and that Norman, dressed as his mother, has committed the murders. Before the revelation, however, viewers encounter numerous hints and incongruities that simultaneously guide and impede their efforts to grasp the full story. We never clearly see Norman-Mother before the fruit cellar scene—clever editing and lighting in the shower scene (Figure 7) and a high angle shot during Arbogast's murder (Figure 8) conceal her face from us—but the film seems



Figures 7 and 8 · Clever cinematography hides the mother's face during the two murders, both concealing story information and also hinting at a mystery.

obviously to be hiding something about her. Later, Sheriff Chambers asks Lila and Sam, “If the woman up there is Mrs. Bates, then who’s that woman buried out in Greenlawn cemetery?” The line suggests some mystery about the mother that the available plot evidence cannot yet explain. Because *Psycho* is the first movie to resolve a mystery by revealing that a character has a split personality, audiences in 1960 would not have defaulted to that schema to eliminate the incongruity. Finally, Norman’s taxidermy, which the movie introduces as just a creepy hobby, eventually explains how he preserved his mother’s corpse. The movie hints at the twist (“She’s as harmless as one of those stuffed birds”), but the plot cues are too subtle at that point to activate a Mother-is-a-stuffed-animal schema. We eventually switch to that alternate understanding of the mother when it better explains the available plot information.

Since *Psycho*, we have seen a wave of films that plant and payoff in an alternate schema, particularly in the last twenty-five years. Such “twist films” include *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962), *La Jetée* (1962), *Charade* (1963), *Planet of the Apes* (1968), *Soylent Green* (1973), *No Way Out* (1987), *Jacob’s Ladder* (1990), *The Usual Suspects* (1995), *Primal Fear* (1996), *The Game* (1997), *Wild Things* (1998), *Fallen* (1998), *The Sixth Sense* (1999), *Fight Club* (1999), *Memento* (2000), *Unbreakable* (2000), *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), *The Others* (2001), *Mulholland Drive* (2001), *A Tale of Two Sisters* (2003), *Primer*, (2004), *The Machinist* (2004), *The Village* (2004), *The Prestige* (2006), *Timecrimes* (2007), *Triangle* (2009), *Shutter Island* (2010), *Source Code* (2011), *Enemy* (2013), *Coherence* (2013), *Gone Girl* (2014), *Predestination* (2014), *Arrival* (2016), *Tully* (2018), and more. But the trend dates further back, including such films as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), *Mildred Pierce* (1945), *And Then There Were None* (1945), *Diabolique* (1955), *Witness for the Prosecution* (1957), and Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958).

Planting and Payoff in an Alternate Schema is a difficult strategy for a storyteller, requiring shrewd misdirection that ensures that an audience neither predicts the correct outcome nor feels cheated afterward. But the device is so popular and aesthetically exciting, I propose, precisely because it does not require deep structural changes in viewers’ knowledge but nonetheless offers a moderate level of incongruity—not so intense that the work alienates mass audiences but not so mild that it bores them either. Ultimately, Planting and Payoff in an Alternate Schema sparks relief and delight when, in an instant, previously disconnected plot information fits together perfectly.

Planting and Distant Payoff

Screenwriting gurus regularly stress the importance of paying off plants and tightly connecting plot events. Here are some sample passages:

Sometimes various story points will be introduced and then left hanging and unresolved. . . . It doesn't work. Things that are set up have to be paid off. (Field 277–78)

And your plant must pay off. If you condition the audience to expect something to happen the expectation must not be frustrated. (Herman 59)

In great films, all elements feel connected: every aspect, character, incident, thematic concern—from the main exposition to the final resolution—relates to each other and to the whole. (Cowgill 229)

The gurus are wrong. In many great films, events feel somewhat disconnected, pieces seem missing, and some pieces seem not to belong. *The Godfather, Part II* (1974) contains so many disconnected pieces that many reviewers at the time of the film's release considered the plot incoherent. Stanley Kauffmann complained about the film's many "gaps and distentions" (22), and Vincent Canby called it a "mess" (II19). Yet the movie soon grew to become one of the most celebrated films in one of the most celebrated decades in American cinema, in part because it creates intriguing puzzles for viewers to solve (Berliner, *Hollywood Incoherent*, 55–82). David Lynch's persistent ability to obtain generous budgets to make truly indeterminate films and TV shows testifies to the aesthetic value, and commercial value, of narratives that do not "feel connected," that leave story points "hanging and unresolved," and that frustrate expectations.

Talented storytellers can manage the disconnected pieces of a plot using a device we may call *Planting and Distant Payoff*. Here, the connection between the plant and the payoff does not automatically pop into view but rather requires creative work on the part of the viewer, who must develop a new schema, or structurally revise an existing one, in an effort to accommodate a severe incongruity in the narrative. If one cannot assimilate incongruous information within existing knowledge structures or resolve an incongruity by activating an alternate schema, then successful narrative processing requires deep structural changes in one's knowledge.

Such effortful processing thwarts some of the easy pleasures associated with the planting-and-payoff device. Here, we do not experience a satisfying *release from tension*: Narratives that enlist Planting and Distant Payoff resist closure and never afford the audience an entirely fulfilling rest. We experience neither *processing fluency* nor *successful prediction*: These narratives instead elicit surprise and confusion, preventing us from confidently forecasting the direction of the story and avoiding a phenomenal experience of familiarity, acceptability, and appropriateness. Moreover, they may hinder viewers' efforts to *see connections* between different parts of the plot: They force us instead to fabricate the connections ourselves, often through strenuous mental activity and linkages outside of causality and story logic. Their narrative incongruities will likely lead to high levels of arousal, so affect will be intense, although the experience can be either positive (if we can cope) or negative (if we cannot). Either way, Planting and Distant Payoff creates stress, as we attempt to adapt to an environment that resists our efforts to master it.

The device does, however, enable passionate, even exhilarating, aesthetic experiences unavailable within more classically unified narratives. Art cinema regularly traffics in these sorts of experiences. *L'avventura* (1960) and *Persona* (1966), like much sixties-era art cinema, thwart viewer expectations and demand strenuous cognitive work. Narratives that plant with a distant payoff require that we *reach for understanding* through athletic mental activity, but they rely more on our capacity for free association than logical reasoning; we use imagination to make their stories make sense. "Part of the delight we feel in this use of our imagination is the feeling of liberation it brings," humor theorist John Morreall says about encounters with incongruity (91). We get to problem solve without the burdens and limitations of good sense. We rely instead on guessing, casual reasoning, and other patterns of thinking that the real world normally discourages and treats as dysfunctional. Narratives that plant with a distant payoff seem impossible to master because they cannot be known too well. Instead, they stretch our mental capacities and nudge us toward greater understanding, even as they prevent us from fully achieving it. We may never, in fact, understand such narratives—their incongruities may prevent us from understanding them—but we feel that we could and that, if we did, they would offer us deeper meaning.

A mainstream film like *Psycho* will use Planting and Distant Payoff more temperately than an art film would, weaving it into more aesthetically unified storytelling norms. Still, *Psycho* judiciously employs the device in the form of “red herrings,” which are conventionalized versions of the Planting and Distant Payoff technique. Red herrings are deliberately misleading plants that set false expectations and guide viewers toward false conclusions. They do not pay off directly, but viewers can typically accommodate a red herring by actively ignoring it, reshaping it, or rethinking its structural function in the narrative. Truffaut remarked on *Psycho*’s many misleading plants when he said to Hitchcock, “I noticed that throughout the whole picture you tried to throw out red herrings to the viewers” (204). Indeed, many of the film’s plants have distant payoffs that require us to resolve expectations that the movie refuses to resolve for us.

One extended storyline—involving Marion, a policeman, and a car salesman—never amounts to much. The scene in which Marion, in an effort to avoid criminal detection, swaps her car for a different one does not even help her hide from the policeman after he follows her to the car lot. The scene plants an expectation that the policeman and the car salesman might ultimately detect her crime, and the lack of closure in those scenes suggests the middle, not the end, of a plot line. The screenwriter, I suppose, could have fabricated a way to return the policeman to the story—perhaps Mother could kill him too—just for unity’s sake, but the car-selling scene is the last time we see either the salesman or the cop, whose storylines remain loose ends. We might consider Marion’s murder a distant payoff for her crime, but that would be *our* fabrication; the movie does not help us to that conclusion.

Psycho, moreover, sometimes seems strangely focalized in inappropriate ways, fixating on plot elements that barely seem to matter, generating misleading expectations about the direction of the story, and leaving us to sort out their meaning on our own. The two most interesting examples involve the money and a fly.

The money storyline constitutes the most obvious red herring in the film. In her room at the Bates Motel, Marion carefully folds the cash into a newspaper. Why train on this action, why have her perform it all, if the money storyline will soon become obsolete? That is a typical red herring. Less typical, however, is the movie’s persistent fixation on that storyline even after Marion’s death, a kind of nostalgic preoccupation with the money that lingers after the film has rubbed out its significance. The camera, for

instance, tracks directly to the folded newspaper right after Marion's murder, signaling its continued relevance. The film makes a point of showing us that Norman fails to notice the newspaper (as though he would have cared about the money if he did) when he scours the room after the murder. The camera again trains on it when Norman suddenly observes the newspaper, without realizing what is in it, and haphazardly throws it into the trunk of Marion's car before driving it into a swamp. Later, Arbogast, Sam, and Lila pursue it as a possible motive for Norman, keeping our interest in the money alive. It is clear why these characters care about the money (they do not know what kind of story they are in), but why does the narration itself seem to care so much about it for so long? The money plot pays off only distantly when, in the film's penultimate scene, the psychiatrist casually dismisses its importance. "These were crimes of passion, not profit," he says, shaking his head derisively, as though it is ridiculous to ask about the money, as though the narration has not fixated on it throughout.

The unsettling final scene in Norman's cell continues the pattern of inappropriate focalization, unsettling in part because the scene does not offer the conventional closure we expect of a Hollywood ending. Norman-Mother sits wrapped in a blanket and delivers an internal monologue that only Norman and the audience can hear: "They're probably watching me. Well, let them. Let them see what kind of a person I am." The film cuts to a shot of a fly crawling on the character's hand (Figure 9). "I'm not even



Figure 9 · A shot of a fly on the hand of Norman-Mother.

going to swat that fly. I hope they are watching. They'll see. They'll see, and they'll know. And they'll say, 'Why she wouldn't even harm a fly.'" The film's focus on the fly seems bizarrely incidental, and no first-time viewer of *Psycho* would expect the film to end this way. Instead, one would likely expect the film's last events to somehow summarize or emblemize the story or else resolve an unfinished storyline. But Mother's "Why she wouldn't even harm a fly"—which the voice actress says with an upward lilt, as though in the middle of a statement—gives the ending a strangely trivial focus. The line seems, if not irrelevant, somewhat distant from our concerns at that point. Viewers, I assume, impute some resonance to Mother's line, the last words of the movie, but doing so requires effort. Initially, at least, the line feels off-topic. Even the film's final shot of Marion's car being pulled from the swamp cannot quite erase the feeling of irresolution and unfulfilled expectations since the car, like the fly, now seems beside the point.

Psycho's use of Planting and Distant Payoff does not require as much effort and imagination as the uses we find in art films like *L'avventura* and *Persona*. *Psycho* is, after all, designed for a mass audience. But studying the film's more challenging uses of planting and payoff demonstrates how the device can guide viewers to rethink their conception of a story, causing them to restructure their understanding of the narrative's meaning and adapt to an unanticipated narrative focus.

Planting and payoff, we can see, is an extremely versatile narrational device, affording storytellers a wide range of aesthetic benefits. When taken almost to its incongruent extreme, as with Planting and Distant Payoff, the device can lead us to exhilarating aesthetic experiences. As the device moves us closer to our own personal boundary line between coping and not coping with the challenges it poses—provided we do not cross that line—we stretch our mental capacities and reach toward greater understanding. Planting and Distant Payoff offers exhilarated pleasure to those viewers elated by the prospect of expanding and reshaping their knowledge.

Planting and No Payoff

But what happens if we cannot cope with the challenges of the planting-and-payoff device? What if a plant does not pay off? Many viewers feel alienated by films such as *Un Chien Andalou* (1929), *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), *Lost Highway* (1997), and other narratives that make it exceedingly

difficult to connect expectations to plot outcomes. Unable either to assimilate or accommodate narrative events, some viewers may give up the search for understanding them. Confusing films like these are too stress-inducing for those viewers who search for but fail to find any payoff in them at all. “We are not tempted to analyse the crazy pavement,” art historian Ernst Gombrich says about artworks that overload our cognitive systems (9). Viewers experiencing *Planting and No Payoff* may leave the theater feeling intense emotion (a result of their failed efforts to connect incongruous plot input), but they probably did not enjoy themselves.

Any of the examples of *Planting and Distant Payoff* analyzed in the previous section could, for some viewers, constitute *Planting and No Payoff*, since each of those challenging variations of the planting-and-payoff device approaches the boundary line between coping and not coping. Art films are not for everyone, and even some mainstream films, like *Psycho*, put pressure on viewers’ ability to connect plot information. We can easily imagine the stress and frustration these narratives would cause if a viewer could not find even a distant payoff for their plants.

A variety of empirical data suggests that people find artworks interesting and pleasing when they appraise the works, on the one hand, as challenging and, on the other, as comprehensible (Silvia; Berlyne). Humor research offers additional support, testifying to the pleasure that results from incongruity, provided perceivers experience some resolution, even if the resolution is illogical (Jones; Shultz; Shultz and Horibe; Suls). And Daniel Kahneman finds that two factors predict subjects’ retrospective evaluation of an episode: (1) the intensity of the peak emotion recorded during the episode (in the case of aversive episodes, the worst moment) and (2) a positive final emotion. All of this research suggests that experiences of incongruity, confusion, and intense stress lead to pleasure when they are followed by resolution, comprehension, or positive emotion. By contrast, the absence of resolution, comprehension, or positive emotion leads to more negative appraisals, the consequence of coping difficulties.

Many great artworks, like *Psycho*, manage to target the line between coping and not coping, a difficult feat given that the line differs for audiences with different coping potentials. When an artwork crosses our own individual line, we are likely to retain feelings of stress and helplessness. But if it approaches that line without crossing, then emotion will likely grow more intense and pleasurable. “Exhilarated pleasure,” Thomas Armstrong and

Brian Detweiler-Bedell argue, results from the prospect of “understanding particularly challenging stimuli when the potential to realize such understanding . . . is tangible but distant” (312). If we agree with their assessment, then we will inevitably proceed to the conclusion that great storytelling shares something important in common with garbled storytelling: Both make a story difficult to grasp. When the prospect of understanding a story becomes *intangible*, and we give up the search for meaning, then pleasure will diminish and may even turn to displeasure. We are not tempted to analyze the crazy pavement.

CONCLUSION

My examples of the different types of planting and payoff may fall into the wrong categories for some readers. Norman’s discovery of the “Marie Samuels” deception, which I categorized as Planting and Near Payoff, may for some constitute an instance of Planting and Absolute Payoff or Planting and Payoff in an Alternate Schema. The category, I have argued, depends on both the plot’s structural incongruity and a viewer’s subjective experience, which may be influenced by prior viewings, art expertise, and other factors. Formalist methods within the humanities help us understand the structures of artworks, but it behooves us to turn to research in the social sciences to understand the workings of the human mind. We should at least know whether our assumptions about aesthetic experience accord with the most reliable psychology research. Some readers may object that aesthetic judgments should not involve the scientific recording of subjective responses; however, I am arguing only that aesthetics, as a response-dependent property of artworks, does not inhere entirely within a work but rather in the interaction between the work and the psychology of its perceivers. And if we want to make progress in understanding the aesthetic value of artworks—and of narrative devices such as planting and payoff—then we must engage that interaction.

Recall my earlier formulation: Aesthetic pleasure, I argued, is a factor of the narrative’s structural incongruity (too much leads to confusion; too little leads to boredom) and the perceiver’s capacity for coping (too much leads to boredom; too little leads to confusion). Aesthetically successful storytellers work like quasi-scientists, manipulating expectations in order to, as Hitchcock said, control the thoughts of the public. To achieve their intended results,

storytellers must not only determine the span between the plant and the payoff; they must also gauge the ability of their audience to bridge the distance.

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NOTE

1. Numerous empirical studies demonstrate that people prefer moderate disruption. For example, Berlyne's studies of aesthetic judgments of paintings, music, and literature found that people perceive small deviations from past experience as boring, large deviations as unpleasant, and moderate deviations as pleasing. Bharucha's studies of music appreciation found that "a moderate amount of violation of expectations is generally preferred over always fulfilling expectations or always violating them" (221).

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