



HORROR E TERROR EM *PSICOSE*: O ROMANCE E O FILME¹



HORROR AND TERROR IN *PSYCHO*: ROMANCE AND MOVIE

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RESUMO | INDEXAÇÃO | TEXTO | REFERÊNCIAS | CITAR ESTE ARTIGO | O AUTOR
RECEBIDO EM 23/09/2014 • APROVADO EM 23/09/2014

Abstract

In 1959, American writer Robert Bloch published the novel *Psycho*, his most famous work. The story called Alfred Hitchcock's attention and he produced one of the most famous films of all times. Even though the novel and the film have the same story, they have different plots and explore different aspects of gothic fiction: horror and terror, respectively. Thus, this paper discusses the difference in plot and in the creation of effects (horror and terror) to the readership or audience.

Resumo

Em 1959, o escritor americano Robert Bloch publicou o romance *Psycho*, o seu trabalho mais famoso. A história chamou a atenção de Alfred Hitchcock e ele produziu um dos filmes mais famosos de todos os tempos. Mesmo que o romance e o filme tenham a mesma história, eles têm enredos diferentes e exploram aspectos diferentes da ficção gótica: horror e terror, respectivamente. Assim, este trabalho discute a diferença no enredo e na criação de efeitos (horror e terror) para os leitores ou audiência.

Entradas para indexação

KEYWORDS: Robert Bloch. *Psycho*. Hitchcock. Plot. Horror.Terror.

PALAVRAS CHAVE: Robert Bloch. Psicose. Hitchcock. Enredo. Horror. Terror

Texto integral

Introduction

The Gothic Literature produced in the United States and England has been going through many changes since the eighteenth century. As David Punter (1996) argues, along the years the interests and fears of a society are constantly undergoing transformations. Likewise, the Gothic has undergone significant changes but it is possible to notice that characteristics of gothic fiction written in other periods are still an influence to the gothic fiction produced in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As Punter (1996, p.182) states: "It is even obvious how the architectural emphases and settings of Ann Radcliffe and Mathew Lewis have persisted into the modern ghost story...". Another important aspect to consider is the fact that, throughout the years, the Gothic and Psychoanalysis have exerted mutual influence once the literary text became an important means of expression of our dreams, wishes, anxieties, and fears. (MASSÉ, apud PUNTER, 2000). Through literature, writers have been able to explore psychological aspects and make them explicit to readers. Consequently, as Michelle Massé claims,

Freud and others in psychoanalysis's first generation drew upon literature both for examples of psychoanalytic insight and as prior statements of what they themselves were struggling to understand. (MASSÉ apud PUNTER, 2000, p. 229).

Massé (apud PUNTER, p. 229) affirms that Freud acknowledged that the writers of the "popular culture" were the ones that had the most productive materials for psychoanalytic investigation. In fact, the number of enthusiasts for texts of popular culture grew increasingly once the content of the stories started to be similar to daily situations already faced by the readers.

Many Gothic writers are known for dealing with deep psychological aspects in their works since the eighteenth century. Robert Bloch is a twentieth-century American writer who decided to follow this path. Robert Bloch was born in Chicago on April 5, 1917 and his first story entitled "The Thing" was influenced by

H.P. Lovecraft who was his inspiration and became his literary mentor by encouraging him to send his stories out for publication. In the beginning of Bloch's career, he started to build his identity as a writer of gothic fiction by working with supernatural horror and weird fiction. Later, he started to show interest in working with human psychology, too. Bloch sold his first professional stories to *Weird Tales* when he was seventeen years old. As Benjamin Szumskyj (2009, p. 8) states, "Bloch felt that the human race was its own greatest creation, and in his stories, we can see that beneath the veil of fiction, a stark realism is hard to deny." In Bloch's own words (apud SZUMSKYJ, 2009, p. 9), "Fear is the main thing. Only it has to be a fear that is close to reality, something that people can recognize as part of the world around them. The more familiar, the stronger it is."

Robert Bloch wrote over four hundred short stories such as "Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper" and "The Scarf". He also wrote novels, among which *Psycho* is one of the most famous. *Psycho* was published in 1959 and was inspired by the actions of serial killer Ed Gein from Wisconsin. In an interview in 1985, Robert Bloch informed that he was living 29 miles away from Wisconsin when Gein's crimes were discovered.

Psycho had some importance at the time of its publication because it was the first of Bloch's novels which strongly presented a different style of writing in a period when most of his works were based on a Lovecraftian style; that is, Bloch, just like Lovecraft, usually made much use of the supernatural in his fiction. According to Les Daniels (apud JANICKER, 2009, p. 124), "*Psycho* has been singled out as especially noteworthy in this regard because of its 'significant impact on the tale of terror through its emphasis on psychological rather than supernatural oddities'". Despite the popularity of the novel at the time of its publication, David Punter (2004, p. 240) claims that the film *Psycho*, based on Bloch's novel and directed by Alfred Hitchcock, has become better-known than the novel itself².

According to Stephen Rebello (2013, p. 34) "Quarenta e seis longas-metragens e três temporadas de sucesso na televisão tinham deixado Hitchcock em guarda contra a ameaça de se repetir.". The director was searching for something different, something he had never done before in his films. Peggy Robertson, his loyal assistant, was responsible for collecting material to the director. In one of her searches for material, she found the book *Psycho* by Robert Bloch. The more she read reviews about the book, the more she was certain that this novel seemed to be a material that would interest her boss. As Rebello states:

Robertson era uma assistente bem sintonizada com o fato de seu chefe reagir melhor a materiais obscuros do que aos clássicos de autores de mistério mais famosos. Psicose começou a impressionar cada vez mais. (REBELLO, 2013, p. 37).

Robertson was right: Hitchcock loved the story. In his own words (apud REBELLO, 2013, p. 37), "Acho que a coisa que mais me atraiu e o que me fez decidir fazer o filme foi o inesperado do assassinato no chuveiro, que veio de repente, de lugar nenhum.". At that moment the decision was made: *Psycho* would be the next film by Hitchcock. His next step was to present his idea of the film to the

Paramount managers. However, Paramount did not accept Hitchcock's new project very well:

O entusiasmo do diretor por uma propriedade "inviável" deixou Balaban, Weltner e outros homens da grana da Paramount em apoplexia executiva. Qual era o problema com Hitchcock e seu ridículo caçaníqueis sobre um maluco que adora uma faca e se veste como sua velha e querida mamãe?(...) "Eles estavam bem descontentes com a ideia", admitiu o escritor Robert Bloch num clássico exemplo de eufemismo. "Herbert Coleman, produtor associado de Hitchcock, contou-me que a Paramount decididamente não queria fazer o filme. Eles não gostavam do título, da trama, de coisa nenhuma. Quando Hitchcock insistiu, disseram: 'Bem você não vai conseguir o orçamento que está habituado para fazer uma coisa assim'. Ou seja, nada de Technicolor, nada de Jimmy Stewart, nada de Cary Grant, Hitchcock respondeu: 'Tudo bem, eu dou um jeito.'" (REBELLO, 2013, p. 41. Italics in the text).

Even though Hitchcock was forced to count on a low budget, he decided to create an inexpensive film that when ready would seem as one of those movies that cost millions. As a matter of fact, Hitchcock's *Psycho* is considered a masterpiece to date and it is true that the film has been much more popular than Robert Bloch's novel. In Hitchcock's own words, "*Psycho* all came from Robert Bloch's book." (apud ZUMSKYJ, 2009, p. 103).

Since Hitchcock himself acknowledged that his film *Psycho* was entirely based on Robert Bloch's book, it seemed interesting to ask the following question: why has the film become more popular and better received by critics than the novel itself? To answer this question, it is first crucial to point out similarities and differences between the novel and the film. Both the novel and the film have the same story: Norman Bates is a man who commits horrible murders but is convinced that the person who is really responsible for those crimes is his mother, Norma Bates, whom he has already murdered when the narrative starts.

However, the novel and the film differ in what regards the plot. For instance, the film starts with a conversation between Marion (Mary in the novel) and Sam, whereas, the novel opens with Norman talking with his mother, Norma. Also, Bloch's novel presents detailed descriptions of all the characters, which results in hints, especially about Norman, which lead us to believe that he is a suspect of the horrible murders. Apart from that, the novel *Psycho* presents more violent and bloody scenes, as we can perceive in this passage:

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, 1959, p. 41.).

When it comes to the film, the famous shower scene is not so violent as the murderer does not behead Marion, but stabs her instead. Thus, it is possible to argue that Bloch's *Psycho* is a horror novel since it explores physical actions whereas Hitchcock's *Psycho* is a terror film once it emphasizes psychological events.

In view of the formal aspects presented above, the aim of this paper is to discuss how the different plots built by Robert Bloch and Alfred Hitchcock caused different effects (horror and terror) to the readers of the novel and the audience of the film.

1. Plot in Psycho

The analysis of plot in Psycho (the novel and the film) will consider the first part of the narrative, that is, up to the shower scene. In fact, this first half of Psycho presents the most important differences to be analysed.

1.1. Plot in the novel Psycho

As mentioned in the previous section, the novel and the film have similarities and differences in their plots. In this section, we intend to analyze the construction of plot in the novel Psycho. Before we move to the analysis, it is important to understand what plot is. According to Samira Nahid de Mesquita (1986), plot is the organization of events of a story. It is possible to find plot in films, short stories, novels, etc. As Mesquita explains, a well-built plot organization allows the author to make a story be more appealing to the readership.

The plot in the first half of the novel Psycho is organized as follows:

Beginning:

The story opens with Norman arguing with his dead mother, Norma:

...You never listen to me, do you? It's always what you want and what you think. You make me sick!" "Do I boy?" Mother's voice was deceptively gentle, but that didn't fool Norman. Not when she called him "boy". Forty years old, and she called him "boy": that's how she treated him, too, which made it worse. If only he didn't have to listen! But he did, he knew he had to, he always had to listen. "Do I boy?" she repeated, even more softly. "I make you sick, eh? Well, I think not. No, boy, I don't make you sick. You make yourself sick. (BLOCH, 1959, p.12. Italics in the text.)

As it is possible to notice, mother and son do not have a pleasant relationship. In fact, Norma seems to be a strict mother that has complete control of her only son and treats him as a child. Furthermore, this passage leads us to believe that Norma Bates is alive. In fact, the revelation of Norma's death happens only at the end of the story. Thus, in this part of the narrative, we do not know about her death yet, which makes us understand these events as real rather than a result of Norman's problematic psychological condition.

Sequence of the narrative up to the shower scene:

In a rainy evening, an attractive blond woman named Mary arrives at Bates Motel looking for a room to stay for the night. Once there, she meets Norman Bates, who runs the place. Norman seems to be a man who does not know how to talk

with a woman, as can be noticed in the passage in which he invites her for dinner in his house:

Thank you very much, Mr. --- "Bates. Norman Bates" He backed against the door, bumping his shoulder. "Look, I'll leave you this flashlight for when you come up. You probably want to get out of those wet things first." He turned away, but not before she caught a glimmer of his reddened face. Why, he was actually embarrassed! (Bloch, 1959, p. 31. *Italics in the text.*)

During dinner, Mary makes Norman feel angry when she suggests that he should put his mother in a mental institution:

Wouldn't you perhaps be fulfilling that duty to her, and to yourself as well, if you arranged to put her in an - institution?" "She's not crazy!" The voice wasn't soft and apologetic any longer; it was high and shrill. And the pudgy man was on his feet, his hands sweeping a cup from the table. It shattered on the floor, but Mary didn't look at it; she could only stare into the shattered face. (BLOCH, 1959, p. 36. *Italics in the text.*)

Thereafter, Norman seems to be a little calmer and Mary decides to thank him for the hospitality and goes to her room. Extremely embarrassed because of the way he acted in front of Mary, Norman goes to his motel office and begins to drink excessively. Once again, Norman's personality changes and he starts to behave aggressively. He uses rude language, especially when through the hole in the wall of his office, he sees Mary undressing:

...And as she straightened up, yes, she was going to do it, the dress was coming off over her head, he could see the bra and panties, she musn't stop now, she mustn't turn away. But she did turn away, and Norman almost called out to her, "Come back here, you bitch!" but he remembered just in time...(BLOCH, 1959, p. 47).

He observes her until she goes to the shower. Norman begins to feel dizzy with the alcohol he drank and decides to sit down: "It was coming from inside his head, and he fell back in the chair. I'm drunk, he told himself. I'm passing out."(1959, p.48. *Italics in the text.*) After a while, Norman wakes up and listens to the sound of the shower coming from Mary's room. In an attempt to see if everything is fine, he decides to check the room, but unfortunately, he finds Mary dead in the shower.

As it is possible to notice, the story of the novel *Psycho* is focused on the character Norman Bates. The narrative begins on an ordinary day in Norman's life, and, with the progress of the story, the reader discovers more about his personal issues, such as his troubled relationship with his mother, his shyness, his drinking problems and bipolarity. At the point of the narrative when Mary is killed, many hints about his personality have already been given to the reader, which allows the reader to understand that Norman is a person who would have been able to commit such atrocity.

Thus, it is possible to conclude that the reader is made to follow Norman's perspective from beginning to end, whereas Mary is only introduced after some chapters. She is presented as a quiet woman, who does not seem open to talk about her personal life; hence, during the dinner with Norman, she is the character that asks more questions. Therefore, in the novel *Psycho*, Mary plays the role of just another one of Norman Bates's victims.

1.2. Plot in the film *Psycho*

The plot in the first half of the film *Psycho* is organized as follows:

Beginning:

The film opens in Phoenix, Arizona, with Marion lying in the bed of a hotel room talking with her boyfriend Sam:

Sam: "You never did eat your lunch, did you?" Marion: "I better get back to the office. These extended lunch hours give my boss excess acid."
Sam: "Why don't you call your boss and tell him you're taking the rest of the afternoon off?" "Friday anyway, and hot." Marion: "What do I do with my free afternoon?" "Walk you to the airport?" Sam: "Well we could laze around here a while longer." Marion: "Checking-out time is 3:00 pm." (HITCHCOCK, 1960, 00:03:16 - 00:03:40).

Sam lives in Fairvale and has been working very hard in a hardware store to pay his father's debts. He plans to marry Marion after having organized his life and made enough money for start life with her. Marion lives in Phoenix, and works as a secretary to Mr. Lowery in a company.

In the following scene, we see this situation: after signing a contract of forty thousand dollars, Mr. Lowery asks Marion to put the money in a safety deposit box in the bank. Marion does not seem to feel very well and asks her boss if she can go home after putting the money in the bank:

Marion: "The copies, Mr. Lowery, if you don't mind, I'd like to go right on home after the bank. I have a slight...". Cassidy: "You go right on home. Because me and your boss are going out and get yourselves a little drinking done. Right?". Mr. Lowery: "Of course. Do you feel ill?". Marion: "Just a headache." (HITCHCOCK, 1960, 00:10:24 - 00:10:38).

However, instead of going to the bank, Marion goes straight to her house with the money and starts to pack. She leaves Fairvale and when she arrives in California she goes to a car shop to trade her car for another. After that, she continues driving, but a heavy rain starts hindering the view of the road. Some

minutes later, she sees the sign of the “Bates Motel” and decides to stop there for the night.

Sequence of the narrative up to the shower scene:

A man with an umbrella arrives and helps Marion to come in. This man is Norman Bates, who is in charge of the motel. Norman Bates seems a friendly, polite and self-assured man. Seeing that Marion is hungry, he invites her to have dinner at his house next to the motel:

Norman: “Well, if you want anything just tap on the wall. I’ll be in the office.” Marion: “Thank you, Mr. Bates.” Norman: “Norman Bates. You’re not really gonna go out again and drive up to the diner, are you?” Marion: “No.” Norman: “Well, then would you do me a favour? Would you have dinner with me? I was just about to myself. You know nothing special, just sandwiches and milk. But I’d like it very much if you’d come up to the house. I don’t set a fancy table, but the kitchen’s awful homey.” Marion: “I’d like to.” Norman: “Alright. You get yourself settled and take off your wet shoes and I’ll be back as soon as it’s ready.” Marion: “Okay.” Norman: “With my trusty umbrella”. (HITCHCOCK, 1960, 00:30:19 - 00:31:01).

While Marion is in her room, she hears Norman arguing with his mother, who does not sound happy with the idea of her son having dinner with a strange woman in her house “No! I tell you no! I won’t have you bringing strange young girls for supper!” (00:32:23-00:32:29). Then, Norman takes dinner to the motel “It might be nicer and warmer in the office.” (...) “Eating in an office is just too officious. I have the parlour back here.” Marion: “All right.” (00:34:33 – 00:35:00).

As it happens in the novel, during dinner Marion suggests the mental institution for Norman’s mother. However, Norman’s reaction is completely different in the film as he keeps calm and only becomes more serious:

Marion: “Wouldn’t it be better if you put her someplace?” Norman: “You mean an institution? A madhouse? People always call a madhouse “someplace”, don’t they? Put her in someplace. Marion: “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it to sound uncaring.” Norman: “What do you know about caring? Have you ever seen the inside of one of those places? The laughing and the tears and the cruel eyes studying you. My mother there? But she’s harmless.”. (HITCHCOCK, 1960, 00:40:49 – 00: 41:33).

Once again, Marion apologizes to Norman and goes to her room. With a serious expression on his face, Norman looks through a hole in the wall for a few seconds and spies on Marion undressing herself. After that, he goes back to his house and sits all by himself in the kitchen.

Considering the beginning of the film Psycho, it is possible to infer that the audience would believe, in a first moment, that the story is about Marion. The

reason for the audience to have this impression comes from the fact that the film opens with Marion and, up to the middle of the narrative, the audience follows her life, her relationship with Sam, her concerns, the theft of forty thousand dollars and so on.

Therefore, the audience is made to follow Marion's perspective up to the shower scene. As Béla Bálazs affirms:

No cinema, a câmara carrega o espectador para dentro mesmo do filme. Vemos tudo como se fosse do interior, e estamos rodeados pelos personagens. Estes não precisam nos contar o que sentem, uma vez que nós vemos o que eles vêem e da forma que vêem. (Bálazs (apud XAVIER, 1983, p. 85).

Thus, in the following scene, when Marion is murdered in the shower, she is not seen as just another of Norman's victims, once she seems to play the role of the protagonist who would not die unexpectedly in the middle of the story. In fact, by the time when Norman appears in the film sequence, the audience is already much involved with Marion and would consider Norman as a complete stranger. Moreover, if in the novel, Norman Bates is a rude, aggressive and shy man, in the film he is polite, friendly, calm, and self-confident. Thus, it is possible to infer that the film viewers would not easily feel suspicious of Norman as having been able to murder Marion.

Final Comments

Based on the discussion above, we can notice that the novel and the film explore different gothic effects exactly because they have different plots for the same story. The gothic effects are horror and terror. In order to discuss this issue, it is important first to understand what horror and terror are and what the difference between them is.

Since we are dealing with horror and terror, it is noteworthy considering Ann Radcliffe's ideas about these gothic effects. Radcliffe (1764 -1823), one of the first and most important writers of gothic fiction in England, was also one of the first to define the boundaries between horror and terror. According to her (1826, p.150), "Terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life, the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them." Following Radcliffe's idea, Robert Miles (2000, p. 41) explains the difference between horror and terror in more detail:

An explicit representation of threat induces horror, whereas terror depends on obscurity. The difference turns on materiality. Terror is an affair of the mind, of the imagination; when the threat takes a concrete shape, it induces horror, or disgust. (MILES apud PUNTER, 2000, p. 41).

The consideration of the different means of creation of horror and terror in gothic fiction is important for the discussion of plot and its artistic effects in

Psycho, the novel and the film. As a matter of fact, in the beginning of the novel, the first shocking scene is described from Norman Bates's perspective, who is alone and reading a book:

The drumbeat for this was usually performed on what had been the body of an enemy: the skin had been flayed and the belly stretched to form a drum, and the whole body acted as a sound box while throbbings came out of the open mouth – grotesque, but effective. Norman smiled, then allowed himself the luxury of a comfortable shiver. (BLOCH, 1959, p. 10).

Later, in the very violent shower scene, in which Mary is beheaded (see Introduction above), Norman needs to get rid of the body. It is possible to notice that in the novel this scene presents full descriptions of Mary's bloody body:

He found the butcher knife almost at once; it was under the torso. He dropped that into the hamper immediately. There was an old pair of gloves in his coverall pockets; he had to put them on before he could bring himself to touch the rest. The head was the worst. Nothing else was severed, only slashed, and he had to fold the limbs before he could wrap the body in oilcloth and crowd it down into the hamper on top of the clothing. (BLOCH, 1959, p. 56).

It is evident that the novel presents many scenes of physical violence, of blood and mutilated bodies. Therefore, it is possible to classify Bloch's Psycho as a horror novel, especially because of the disgust caused by the materiality of the scenes that strike the reader's imagination. As discussed in section 1.1., in the novel the reader is made to follow Norman's perspective, who is the murderer. Thus, the reader is surrounded by blood and violence.

On the other hand, in Hitchcock's Psycho, the audience follows Marion's perspective along the first half of the film (see section 1.2.). As a consequence, the difference in perspective causes a change in the organization of the events in the narrative and, understandably, in the effect created by the story. In the film, up to the middle of the narrative, the audience follows Marion fleeing because she stole money from the company where she worked. The first apprehensive scene happens when she is leaving the city and finds her boss, to whom she had lied, on the street. However, he seems not to believe that Marion is in the car, and walks on. After that, she continues driving but she starts to feel very tired and decides to stop at a road shoulder and sleep. On the following day, a police officer wakes her up, and finds her behaviour very suspicious. Nevertheless, he decides to let her go:

Police officer: "You slept here all night?" Marion: "Yes. As I said, I couldn't keep my eyes open." Police officer: "There are plenty of motels in this area. You should've... I mean, just to be safe." Marion: "I didn't intend to sleep all night. I just pulled over. Have I broken any laws?" Police officer: "No, ma'am." Marion: "Then I'm free to go?" Police officer: "Is anything wrong?" Marion: "Of course not. Am I acting as if there's something wrong?" Police officer: "Frankly, yes." Marion: "Please, I'd like

to go.” Police officer: “Well, is there?” Marion: “Is there what? I’ve told you there’s nothing wrong, except that I’m in a hurry and you’re taking up my time.” Police officer: “Now, just a moment. Turn your motor off, please. May I see your licence?” Marion: “Why?” Police officer: “Please.” (HITCHCOCK, 1960, 00:15:08 – 00:16:03).

The audience continues to follow her journey until the moment when her plans of going back and returning the money fail once she is killed by Norman. From this moment on, the anxiety to discover what will happen to Marion is replaced by an anxiety to discover who killed Marion, since Norman Bates is a very mysterious man but not a suspect in the film. Actually, the film viewer is led to suspect of Norma Bates as the murderer of Marion because in the moment when Marion is stabbed in the shower, it is possible to see the silhouette of an old lady. After that, the audience can not see but only listen to Norman’s terrified voice when he starts to shout that his mother is covered in blood. However, everything changes back again when, near to the end of the film, the town sheriff reveals that Norma Bates died ten years ago: “Sheriff: Norman Bates’ mother has been dead and buried in Green Lawn Cemetery for the past ten years.” (01:23:55 – 01:24:01). Consequently, Hitchcock’s Psycho can be considered a terror film because of the anxiety created along the development of the story. In fact, psychological torture is developed in the film since it does not present so violent and bloody actions as we find in the novel.

To conclude, one can affirm that thanks to a very well-built narrative approach focused on psychological torture, Hitchcock created a more surprising and intriguing story. In fact, part of the success reached by the film also comes from the fact that, some features of Norman’s personality are not revealed until the end of the story whereas in the novel Norman’s problematic psychological condition is already suggested in the very first chapter and stressed in the sequence of the narrative. Thus, it is possible to understand that Hitchcock’s Psycho had such a remarkable reception by critics and the audience in general whereas Bloch’s novel did not manage to create a stronger impact as a literary work.

Notas

1 This article is a revised version of the Final Undergraduate Paper developed under Prof. Dra. Maria Eulália Ramicelli’s supervision, as part of the requirements to graduate in the Curso de Letras Inglês e Literaturas de Língua Inglesa at Universidade Federal de Santa Maria.

2 As Stephen Rebello (2013, p.30) argues, “entre os entendidos da literatura mainstream, Psicose, uma obra de gênero, era visto com menosprezo.” Psycho, therefore, had a very different reception by common readers and literary critics.

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Para citar este artigo

FORRATI, Tatiana Aparecida; Horror e Terror em *Psicose*: O Romance E O Filme. **Miguillim – Revista Eletrônica do Netlli**, Crato.

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