Unity & Duality, Mirrors & Shadows: Hitchcock’s “Psycho”

When Marion Crane first enters the office of the Bates Motel, before her physical body even enters the frame, the camera initially captures her in a mirror that is prominently placed on the wall opposite the lens. Norman Bates briskly enters behind her and for a split second is seen sharing the space in the mirror with Marion. The mirror reflection of Marion has already been established through earlier shots to represent the guilty immoral half of her duality. As she enters the office, the mirror “captures” this half of her, trapping it in the alternate realm of Norman’s world. His appearance in the mirror alongside Marion not only suggests that Norman also possesses a guilty immoral half, but also signifies that his and Marion’s immoral sides are now linked – trapped together in an unknown destiny.

Throughout “Psycho” Alfred Hitchcock cleverly uses mirrors and mirror images, as well as shadow images, to signify characters’ duplicity, false identities, distorted realities, and fractured personalities while exploring the film’s structural oppositions of unity and duality – suggesting that all people possess varying levels of both good and bad, of moral and immoral behavior. In this shot, the audience is aware of Marion’s duplicity, having already witnessed her theft of $40,000, but knows nothing yet of Norman’s duality. The fleeting moment when they are both reflected in the mirror is the film’s first hint that Norman may also have a dual nature. The scenes that follow this dual entrance of Marion into Norman’s dual world are important to the film not only in respect to their narrative content (Marion meeting Norman and their paths becoming linked), but are important for their use of film form. Hitchcock’s mise-en-scène, camera positioning, and editing techniques work to highlight the film’s structural opposition of unity and duality as shown through each characters’ mirror or shadow images, and, ultimately, through their mirroring of each other.

Following Marion into the office, Norman moves quickly to assume his spot behind the check-in counter. As he crosses the screen, his back momentarily obstructs the camera’s view, effectively blocking and then, with his continued movement, removing the sight of his reflected double and denying the audience any extended meditation on his duality. Once Marion and Norman settle into place on opposite sides of the counter, Marion’s
double remains visible in the mirror to her left; a continual, uneasy reminder for the audience of her duplicitous behavior. However, Marion will not look into the mirror herself since she is unwilling or unable to face her immoral self.

To fully understand the film grammar of the mirror motif in "Psycho," it's important to examine how Hitchcock has used a variety of mirrors in the first thirty minutes of the film to establish Marion's split from a unified to a dual identity. In the opening hotel scene, as she examines herself in a mirror after her illicit lunchtime meeting with Sam, the mirror is off camera. Marion's identity begins in a position of relative unity. She hasn't yet taken the immoral path of thievery, so Hitchcock does not utilize her mirror double at this point. The first time we are shown Marion's mirror image, and the only time that we see her willingly look at her own double, occurs in Marion's apartment. She gives herself a conflicted look, turns her gaze downward, and then turns to look at the envelope of cash resting on the bed behind her. Deciding that she will "take the money and run," she turns her back on her mirror double and walks away from it – symbolically walking away from her moral self. Her unity is now visibly split. From this point on, Marion will be unable to confront the repressed reality that follows her via her mirror reflection, causing her worldview to distort and leading her to behave in increasingly irrational ways.

As night falls during her drive out of town, Marion inexplicably chooses to sleep in her car on the side of road, despite the fact that she's a woman alone with $40,000 cash in her purse. The next morning, when a sunglasses wearing cop leans in her car window and questions her about there being "anything wrong," Marion will be forced to face her reflection in the lenses of the law that confront her, but will deny the moral "wrong" of her dual identity reflected back at her and choose to continue on her irrational immoral path. Her muddled thinking next leads her to trade in her car, even though the cop has followed her and could easily track the new vehicle. Her grasp of reality has become distorted beyond rationality. In the bathroom of the car lot she encounters another mirror as she furtively takes from the stolen cash to buy the new car. Hitchcock frames the shot from a high angle with Marion's profile to the mirror, creating a visual discomfort for the audience that corresponds to Marion's distorted reality. The mirror reflection of her profile fractures her body into two halves and relates to her worsening moral behavior. She's gone from taking the money to spending the money, causing a further crack in her personality that is symbolically represented by her fractured mirror double.

When she finally arrives at the Bates Motel and faces Norman in the motel office, the screen is split in two by a table lamp on the far side of the counter next to the wall mirror. Marion’s profile remains visible in the mirror on her side, but Norman’s side of the wall is bare except for a framed wall thermometer that seems to stick in his back as he comments to Marion, “Dirty night.” At this moment the thermometer appears to take Norman’s temperature; the image registering the heat of his desire for Marion while his words hint at his unclean thoughts.
and foreshadow the “dirty” events that will soon unfold. Marion signs in using an alias, strengthening her commitment to her dual nature by giving her deceitful half a name, a new false identity. She is now shown from a front side angle with the office window behind her. The window’s inner sheer white curtains frame Marion’s right side while its outer heavy black drapes frame her left – a visual reference to her dual (and dueling) moral and immoral sides. A folded newspaper is seen jutting from the top of her purse that sits on the counter next to her. Ironically, the word “Okay” is all that can be seen of the paper’s headline.

The check-in complete, Norman grabs Marion’s bags and leads her to her room: cabin 1. When he enters, he comments on the room being stuffy as he unbuttons his coat and opens the windows. The room may be stuffy from it’s infrequent use, but more likely it’s a result of Norman’s sexual desire uncomfortably heating up as he occupies the intimate space of a bedroom with Marion. Pausing outside the bathroom door after opening the windows, Norman highlights the room’s amenities to Marion. There is no mirror in this shot to reflect Norman, but his distinct shadow (an alternate kind of mirroring) falls on the wall to his side, creating a dark and mysterious alternate Norman. Hitchcock will employ this shadow double to expose Norman’s suppressed ulterior motives. As Norman leans forward to demonstrate the softness of the mattress, his shadow double’s face lands on a framed picture of a bird hung on the wall to the side of the bathroom door. This is the same bird picture that becomes unquestionably linked to Marion when it falls off the wall after her death. Seen here, the shadow double of Norman appears to almost kiss the bird as the physical Norman touches the mattress, suggesting his double’s immoral ulterior thoughts. Further importance is given this bird when Norman next motions to the “hangers in the closet” and causes his shadow double to point right to the bird picture. His dual shadow self may already desire to possess Marion like he possesses the stuffed birds that “hang” on the walls in his parlor.

Norman starts to leave, but stops in front of the open door and invites Marion to dinner up at the house. They stand facing one another in a composition that is very similar to the previous scene in the office, with Norman in profile on screen right and Marion in profile on screen left and, once more, with a mirror (this time a dresser mirror) in the background that, yet again, reflects Marion. As they talk, Hitchcock proceeds to cut back and forth between single shots of each that maintain their screen placement in exact opposite positions. Within the reverse composition of the shots, Norman and Marion now appear to be mirroring each other, implying a shared duplicity.

Starting when she first turned her back on her mirror double in her apartment, Marion has repressed and denied half of herself, causing her world to fracture and putting her on the path to meeting Norman, the epitome of repression and denial. On this journey, she’s been presented with many mirrors, many chances to face her dual nature. Norman now acts as a new kind of mirror for Marion – one final chance for her to see the reality of her fractured identity. Establishing Norman as being a reflection of Marion means that there’s some element of him
that she possesses. Could Norman possess the reflection of herself that she will need to face in order to solve her own duality and unite her fractured identity? Will she recognize her own dual nature, as reflected in Norman’s struggle with his own fractured identity, in time to save herself from the increasingly duplicitous and potentially dangerous path she is on? Not yet, given that Marion’s reflection, her duality, remains visible on screen in the mirror within her frame. It remains there for her (to her side, ignored and unacknowledged) and is not yet reflected back to her in the mirror of Norman. Only later, in the parlor scene, will Marion see her reflection in Norman and realize their sharing of “private traps.”

The reverse composition shots of Marion and Norman mirroring one another contain a noticeable difference in the framing of their backgrounds. Norman’s shot is devoid of a mirror. To the front of Norman the wall is bare, supplying no mirror reflection or shadow double to represent his duality. However, Norman is standing in front of the room’s open door and the room’s number, the number “1,” is visible between his profile, which occupies the left side of the door, and his shadow, which falls on the right side. Marion is positioned with her double trapped in the internal frame of the dresser mirror, but her physical self has no internal framing. This seems to imply that she still has some freedom, some choice between her dual personalities. In contrast, both Norman and his shadow double are trapped within the internal framing of the open door with a symbolic “1” between them. This “1” can be read to symbolize Norman’s mother as the one coming between the moral and immoral Norman, controlling them both. It can also be read to symbolize the unity of Norman’s duality, his mother and son personalities that will merge by the film’s end. Alternately, it can signify Norman as being “the one,” the murderer of the film.

Will Marion’s unity be restored by the film’s conclusion? Will Norman play a role in resolving her duality? Hitchcock may have already supplied the answers in the earlier shot where this essay began – Marion captured in the mirror with Norman.

As previously noted, when Norman crosses the screen, his back momentarily obstructs the camera’s view, effectively blocking and then, with his continued movement, removing the sight of his reflected double. However, a frame by frame examination reveals that Norman’s reflection has already stepped almost completely outside of the mirror’s frame before his back fully obstructs the camera’s view of the mirror. Therefore, his continued movement actually results in removing Marion’s mirror double from view. Her fractured double enters the mirror – Norman’s mirror, so his fractured world – and he joins her for moment before his other half wipes out the both of them. This split second of screen action foreshadows the relationship of the characters. Norman will bring Marion’s duality to a resolution, but she will skip becoming “1” and go straight to “0.”
The scenes where Marion and Norman first meet, and their dual natures first encounter and begin to mirror one another, provide wonderful examples of Hitchcock using mise-en-scène, camera set-ups, and editing to communicate the film’s themes of unity and duality, of false identity and fractured personality. His masterful use of film form provides valuable narrative content that reveals hidden depths of the characters and deepens the suspense of the story. Marion’s reoccurring mirror double creates a disquieting reminder of her duality and her continued path away from her moral self. Norman’s shadow double creates a sinister presence that suggests dangerous ulterior motives lie just below his outward nervous puppy dog manner. Their initial shared moment in the mirror tells us that they share a certain duplicitous nature and an uncertain destiny, while the eventual mirroring of Marion in Norman leads us to believe that he will somehow affect her duality and alter her course. After their initial meeting, the narrative appears to be taking another turn, but where it’s heading, we can’t be certain. The continued duality of Marion and the implied duality of Norman tell us that appearances can’t be trusted and nothing is as it seems.

Written by: Bryan Powers - http://bryanpowersfilms.blogspot.ca/