

Identical Twins x 3

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CINEMA IS ABOUT creating images in motion. It reflects the essential denotation of an image as an optical reproduction of an object, scene, movement, gesture. It's about visual representations of our perceptions and ourselves. It's a medium through which directors project their visions, actors reincarnate themselves in ever new impersonations, and viewers watch the screen images as reflections of mimetic (or fantastic) reality. So far, it has been technology's greatest gift to the human imagination, a remarkable mirror of life-like illusions.

Filmmakers naturally exploit cinema's fundamental reproductive nature, its inherent double-ness, often deliberately exploring questions of identity and reliability of our perceptions and judgements to engage us in fascinating games of visual deception and intellectual manipulation. Those themes typically involve mistaken identities, lookalikes, impostors, and alter egos, as well as incubi and body snatchers in their horror and sci-fi varieties. The protagonists live double (as in, say, *Europa, Europa* and more generically in any film about a split personality), see double (*Don't Look Now, Obsession, Body Double*), play a double (*Return of Martin Guerre, Passenger, Olivier, Olivier*), *Jesus of Montreal, Kagemusha*), or become their own doubles (as in *Stepford Wives* or *Body Snatchers* series). Such films are about the duplicated, duplicitous, divided, and deceived selves, and that mixture can be especially potent when it becomes an essential part of films about identical ("monozygotic") twins where being and having a double seem(s) most natural, and yet fraught with most perverse and bizarre possibilities.

Among the films of the last three decades, three in particular (not that there is much competition in that category), each representing the best of its decade and written by the director himself, offer most fascinating testimony to the cinematic fertility of the phenomenon of identical twins, Nature's most intriguing masterstroke.

In Brian De Palma's early *Sisters* (1973), the identical twins are also, or rather have been, spinally conjoined Siamese since one has died on the operating table following a surgical separation two years prior to the film's present action. Even though the circumstances and reasons for the twins' separation are not fully revealed until almost the end of the film, we learn early on that Danielle's twin Dominique is very much alive, emotionally embodied in her better, surviving half. We meet Danielle Breton, now an aspiring French-Canadian model and actress, on the episode of Peeping Toms tv show that opens the film. De Palma uses that opening sequence to establish his typically voyeuristic point of view, initiate the plot, and introduce his cinematic and thematic concerns. On the show, Danielle "plays" a blind girl undressing in a locker room unaware she is being watched by Phil, a young black playing her partner. As gifts for participation on the show, Danielle receives a cutlery set, from which she will use a knife after her "transformation" into Dominique to kill Phil following their night of passionate sex. Phil, on the other hand, receives a dinner for two in a fancy restaurant that sets them up for a fateful date. Phil as the show's peeping tom will soon be replaced by Grace Collier, the snoopy reporter who witnesses the bloody murder from her apartment window. To represent that transition in the camera's point of view, De Palma brilliantly uses split screen during and after the murder sequence to allow Grace to see the murder but not the clean-up and the whereabouts of the body. Inevitably, with no cooperation from the police, Grace takes charge of the investigation and thus the direction of the film's story. As a result, her perspective becomes increasingly and uncomfortably ours (because we know more than she does) culminating in her and our entrapment in the clinic for the mentally disturbed where we as Grace become victims of mind-altering drugs and hypnosis and experience her nightmarish hallucinations that reveal the truth of Danielle's past and her present condition, none of which Grace herself will remember.

The opening TV show also introduces the pattern of deceptions that defines the film's dramatic development and its pessimistic ironic character. In a way, Danielle, who plays a blind girl on the show, is metaphorically blind about being subconsciously controlled by her possessive evil twin. Outwardly she has seemingly settled into her "singular" new identity. She has done all she could to suppress her past -- she has changed her name from Bianchon to Breton, moved from Quebec to New York where she lives by herself monitored

only by her doctor-lover-ex-husband-husband Emil. But as we soon discover, her identity is very fragile, her wholeness only tentative, her integrity illusory. During the night with Phil, she resorts to alcohol to desensitize Dominique only to have her strike back as a morning hangover. Even as Danielle, she keeps twin sets of clothes in her closet. Moreover, her sexuality is desperate and aggressive as evidenced by scratch marks on Phil's back. That morning, before the murder, she actually talks in French with her sister in another room trying to pacify Dominique's seething anger and resentment (de Palma conveys her split personality with two shadows reflecting off the glass door). Furthermore, to function as herself, Danielle requires regular medication, and that morning her last two pills are accidentally swept into the bathroom sink by the unsuspecting Phil.

Poor Phil, ironically the only likable character in the movie, is most cruelly misled. He first chases away Danielle's doctor, the only person who could have saved him, taking him for Danielle's stalking ex-husband. He also trusts Danielle really does have a twin sister in her apartment. Finally, he serves her the birthday cake next to the knife she will kill him with (birthdays of twins figure dramatically in all three films).

Grace's professional ambitions to break the case also lead her astray. Cops will not believe her story, claiming there was no murder because there was no body, dismissing her as an unstable frustrated feminist. They are clearly blinded by their resentment of her negative coverage of their work. Paradoxically, at the end of the film, after "Dominique" kills her doctor-husband and the police need Grace's cooperation, she can only mindlessly repeat what she has been told under hypnosis: "It has all been a ridiculous mistake. There was no murder because there was no body." At the same time, it is her persistent investigation and final victimization that ultimately explain Danielle's mystery. Grace initially assumes Danielle has a twin sister and that she is alive and only later finds out she died from complications of surgical separation. She also believes the man she meets in Danielle's apartment to be Danielle's husband, but what she does not know yet is that he has also been her doctor, the surgeon who separated her from her sister, and the man who now manages an experimental clinic for the mentally ill. When she follows Danielle and her husband to their mansion, she does not know it is a medical facility and has no idea her investigation has just led her into a trap. Unaware she is dealing with disturbed patients, she is prohibited from calling the police by a hysterical woman obsessed with germs who won't let her touch the phone. The woman's screams eventually bring in Danielle's husband, the head of the clinic, who cleverly pretends Grace is some Margaret, their new patient. Pacified with a potent drug injection, Grace is then placed on the bed next to Danielle's. The climactic, phantasmagoric sequence that follows Grace's drug-induced hallucinations (in which she sees herself as Danielle's cast off sister) combined with flashes of reality reveals that the twins' separation was decided by Emil, the chief surgeon who fell in love with Danielle and made her pregnant and had to protect the unborn child from Dominique's jealous rage. The surgery not only kills Dominique but also Danielle's child and her chances for another pregnancy.

In the midst of this tangled web of deceptions stands Danielle, the object of the viewers' morbid fascination. Denying her involvement in both murders, she remains trapped by her rejected, vengeful, indestructible twin. Dominique lashes out at the men who violate Danielle's inviting body stabbing them in the crotch and mouth that contain the organs of male sexual penetration. She strikes against men Danielle wants to escape to (Phil) and escape from (Emil). Danielle can never be free of Dominique's complementary self. Her attempts to liberate herself from her obsessive and oppressive doctor-husband-lover turn him into a victim of his own experiments and leave her evil twin sated with revenge, the only victor of the story. After all, the investigation comes to an abrupt halt. In the closing shot of the film, the detective (played by Charles Durning), hired by Grace to follow the moving company truck containing the couch with Phil's corpse, ends up perched on the telephone pole watching the couch sitting outside the abandoned train depot somewhere in Canadian countryside and still stubbornly refusing to admit it has no addressee and no return address.

In his masterfully disturbing existentialist horror *Dead Ringers*, David Cronenberg's focus is decidedly psychological rather than dramatic. The story of the Mantle Brothers, identical twin gynecologists, is based on the actual case of Stewart and Cyril Marcus who were "found gaunt and already partially decayed in their New York apartment amidst a litter of garbage and pharmaceuticals." The autopsy showed that Stewart had died several days before Cyril (the headline in one of New York dailies ran "twin docs found dead in posh pad"). It took Cronenberg seven years and three aborted attempts to enlist Hollywood's financial backing before he completed it mostly independently. Marcus twins became Mantle (deliberate play on "mental"),

and the setting was moved to Toronto.

Like De Palma's sisters, Elliot and Beverly are orphaned early (so they have no family to rely on), and even though they are not Siamese, they are so inseparable they feel and ultimately die as ones. Their co-dependence obliterates any possibility of individual autonomy. They share everything, on every level, professionally, socially, and personally: their fame, their research, their clinic, their patients, their apartment, their women, their feelings. When Elliot tells his brother he should have been present at the ceremony recognizing their scientific contributions, Bev simply answers, "I was."

Their twinship is not a stereotypical tension between the good and the bad. Elliot and Beverly are more like a seasoned couple who have settled into their complementary roles and now can't be complete in themselves. Elliot is their public persona: assertive, confident, sociable, dominant. Bev (whose very name denotes femininity) is private, shy, sensitive, and vulnerable. Bev is objectively more successful -- he does hard research and treats most patients, but he does not feel successful because he let his brother represent his accomplishments in public, receive grants and recognitions, lecture at a university. It is Elliot who lives the high life, who first fucks their patients even though he is clearly incapable of relating to women emotionally. Bev gets the scraps off the table, the leftovers. He enjoys their success and pleasures second-hand, vicariously through his brother. The dynamics of their relationship, its delicate balance proves to be fatal with the appearance of a TV actress Claire Niveau (obviously a play on "clear and new"), their new patient. What makes her irresistibly attractive to both gynecologists is her "inner beauty": her uterus contains not one but three cervixes in three different compartments. Being themselves a biological anomaly they are naturally drawn to hers. However, while Elliot enjoys her merely physiologically (to spice things up she is sexually masochistic) and clinically, Bev gets emotionally attached. To Elliot, Claire is a fascinating female specimen, a sexual find; to Bev, she becomes the woman he falls in love with. Since they specialize in the treatment of infertility ("we do women"), Elliot cynically comments she is absolutely "safe" to play with, but his brother's infatuation with her is anything but safe.

Trouble begins when Bev breaks the rules and refuses to share details of their intimacy with his brother. Even before Claire discovers she has been sexually served by both, she diagnoses Bev as "mildly schizophrenic." After she meets both and then becomes emotionally involved with Bev, she tells Elliot, "You are very different" (in both singular and plural), rejecting his assumption that she can't love only one of them. Claire naturally does not realize she can't have Bev without Elliot without destroying both. With Bev torn between his need for Claire and his biological dependence on Elliot, the twins can no longer be one. Bev's condition begins to deteriorate when, in an effort to suppress his guilt about betraying his brother, he resorts to drugs he originally prescribed for Claire. His self-division is later illustrated when he shows up drunk at a banquet celebrating the brothers' achievement, interrupts his brother's speech, staggers onto the podium, claims he is Elliot and blurts into the mike, "I do everything for the bimbos except sticking it in." At night while asleep with Claire, Bev has a frightening nightmare in which Claire tries to bite off the umbilical cord connecting him with his twin. He wakes up in sweat and without relating the dream asks Claire not to let him experience it again. Meanwhile, Elliot, still hoping his brother's affair will not last long, experiences his separation anxiety by entertaining himself with twin call girls, one of whom he asks to call him Elliot and the other to call him Bev.

Bev's real crisis comes when Claire has to leave him for a few weeks to go shoot a movie on the West Coast. With Elliot gone on the lecture circuit, Bev, left in Claire's apartment, can't handle being alone and rapidly develops a severe depression only intensified by a drug dependency. He has no appetite, neglects his medical practice, and withdraws into himself. While performing a surgery in the hospital, he can't control his shaking hands. In the clinic, we see him sitting on his chair in a fetal position or shooting drugs. In his deranged state, to dissociate himself from Claire, he makes himself believe she has betrayed him and calls her gay assistant who he assumes is her lover to inform him that he has been fucking a mutant.

When Elliot returns and, horrified, realizes the extent of Bev's emotional and mental deterioration, he puts him under a personally supervised detox program. Bev, however, can't function without drugs and pops pills behind his brother's back. His condition takes another downward turn when he concludes his female patients are getting deformed (accusing one of having sex with a Labrador retriever, claiming that another's body "was all wrong") and commissions from a local artist a set of crude, bronze gynecological instruments

to treat them. When he tries to use those instruments during the surgery, and then collapses on the patient snatching away her oxygen mask, he almost causes her death from internal bleeding. Predictably, following the incident, the brothers' practice is suspended and their clinic closed. In his last desperate attempt to save themselves, Elliot, unable to "cut himself loose" as his assistant-lover urges him to do, decides he needs to get "synchronized" with Bev, i.e. to bring himself to his level. Ironically, at this point, Claire returns and nurtures Bev back to health. A week later, in spite of Claire's desperate objections, Bev, worried he has not heard from his brother, leaves promising he will come back. Their roles become reversed when he finds Elliot in the helpless, pitiful condition he was in himself. As they proceed to synchronize their final steps, they celebrate their last birthday gorging on the cake. With Elliot's limp, drugged body lying on the gynecological chair, Bev takes his instruments previously applied to "mutant women" to separate himself from his brother. After slitting his brother's stomach open and letting him bleed to death, he manages to leave the apartment, dials Claire's number from a phone booth, but can't bring himself to speak to her. Instead, he returns to his dead brother to die beside him thus prophetically recreating the circumstances of the death of the original Siamese twins whereby the surviving brother died from fright, unable to go on living alone.

If *Sisters* and *Dead Ringers* innovatively adapted established genres, a thriller and a psychological drama respectively, then Alan Rudolph, a Hollywood auteur-outsider like De Palma and Cronenberg, turns his *Equinox* into a genuinely mutant film which he himself chose to call an "urban fairy tale." Of the three, *Equinox* is most stylized, academic, metaphysical, and atmospheric. In its design, it resembles *Sisters* in that its plot is held together by the character of an amateur female reporter and an aspiring writer investigating the separate fates of twin brothers whose mother, now homeless and old, dies at the beginning of the film. Unlike De Palma's, Rudolph's point of view, however, is deliberately objective and omniscient. Moreover, although Sonya, the writer, may be scripting the story we are watching, her detective work doesn't advance the plot, which Rudolph unfolds independently of her investigation. As a result, we always know more than she does, including the film's conclusion. In a way, Sonya follows our discoveries, always a step behind, to record what we have already seen happen.

Rudolph's formal and thematic treatment of the idea of identical twins is also unconventional and certainly artistically most creative. His twins, Freddie and Henry, simply don't know of each other's existence because they were separated when still infants. This convenient conception allows Rudolph to introduce the brothers' lives as two alternating, gradually interweaving plots until they come together at the end of the day of the climactic fall equinox, when night and day are equal.

To represent that day-night, light-dark dichotomy, Henry and Freddie are initially complete opposites, both in their personalities and lifestyles. Henry was fortunate to have been adopted by a family of a former vaudeville performer, now an owner of a car repair garage, where he works for his father (Henry's adoptive mother has been dead for a while). His brother Freddie Ace is a genuine orphan, pretty much on his own since he was twelve until he got "adopted" by the local mafia. Unlike his brother, though, he is a father to his own set of twins and a husband to a perfectly dumb blonde who is also a compulsive gambler. The first half of the film keeps their lives completely apart so that we get the impression we are watching two different films in one -- a gangster story on one hand and a romantic drama on the other. Freddie is assertive, confident, proud, and aggressive -- Henry, defensive, pathologically shy, emotionally inhibited, socially inept. The former lives in a spacious modern apartment, the latter rents a small place in a rundown tenement building in a bad neighbourhood occupied by thugs, prostitutes, drug dealers, and other misfits.

As the film progresses, however, the brothers' personalities undergo very revealing changes. Freddie becomes moody and reflective. He shuns his wife's advances, reads books, reexamines his life, turns introspective. His brother, on the other hand, begins to come out of his shell. He stands up for Rosie (Marisa Tomei), the hooker next door, pushing her brutish pimp down a flight of stairs. He even gets enough courage to confess his affection for Beverly (Lara Flynn Boyle), his friend's sister, who he was afraid to talk to or see. It's ironically Beverly, herself a vulnerable, fragile loner, often seen reciting Emily Dickinson's poetry and referring to herself in third person, who notes that Henry is schizophrenic when she tells him, "You have to face the real you." He seems to agree admitting that things are making me aggressive" and feeling as if "my whole life is happening without me."

Before the two plots converge in the Villa Capri restaurant where the twin brothers, for the first and also last time, will face each other and acknowledge their complementary counterparts, Rudolph will foreshadow their fated confrontation by making the two plots sporadically but suspensefully connect with each other. In one such instance, Richie, the one-handed gangster, will see Henry sitting at a table in Villa Capri with Beverly and her brother thinking it is Freddie, his partner and rival. In another, Freddie's wife out shopping with her twins almost bumps into Henry in the street, but the contact is so momentary she has no time to react to the shocking recognition.

The twinning pattern pervades the entire film from its title and mise-en-scene through its editing and imagery to its overall design and theme. The twins are born on Spring equinox and live their separate lives until the final fall equinox brings them together for a brief tragic moment. As their brief meeting draws inexorably near, each twin feels something "pushing and pulling inside" him, a bursting anxiety to break away from his current life and environment. Then, just as the day turns into night, one of them, perhaps ironically, perhaps quite expectedly, dies liberating the other to live an autonomous new life ("equinox", by the way, is also the code name of a secret bank account that will make him incredibly rich, all part of a flimsy and very leaky fairy-tale background, fortunately of perfectly negligible consequence to my analysis, but certainly the film's frustrating liability -- use as footnote). Other examples include a shot of boy twins on the city bus at the beginning of the film, whom Henry doesn't notice as opposed to the boy twins in the diner by the Grand Canyon at the end of the film who trigger his climactic epiphany. Even a small detail such as Beverly's apartment number being 222 significantly contributes to Rudolph's twinning game by implying she is the third divided character, serving as Henry's truly twin spirit who would and, as the film clearly foreshadows, will make his life complete. Not surprisingly, the director chose to shoot *Equinox* in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul serving as the fictitious Empire City.

Predictably, *Equinox* employs a few images of mirrors to catch Freddie and Henry pondering their own reflections, but far more originally the film also mirrors its images to serve as transitions connecting the separate twin plots, neatly punctuating the film's rhythm. Rudolph, for example, shifts from Freddie beating up Richie to Henry watching an instructional self-defence video, or from Freddie's confident lovemaking with his wife to Henry's awkward sexual experience with Rosie. There are many such counterpoints in the film's editing.

The last images of the film suggest Henry's integrated self. His instinctive journey of self-discovery has only begun as he stands looking down at the breathtaking grandeur of the Grand Canyon awed by Nature's spectacular creations and the supreme paradoxes of human destiny. He has learned the mystery of his identity and his new life is about to unfold. It's a morning of a new day and we know Beverly will not have to pretend he called her and he will not hang up when he does call her. His twin plots resolved and his story thus concluded, Rudolph ends with a coda imposed over the film's credits showing Sonya composing her story about the twins, a twin but different narrative, more a romance novel than an urban fairy tale," complementing rather than competing with the film we have just watched. What a wonderfully self-reflexive meta-functional frame for a story of parallel yet converging and interdependent lives of twins!

The above discussion forcefully demonstrates the fertility of the cinematic use of the subject of identical twins for creating complex and fascinating human dramas, intricate explorations of identity, and for exercising remarkable stylistic and formal ingenuity. Besides the connections and distinctions already suggested in the course of my analysis, we can now draw more general conclusions. If *Sisters* is about one twin's despair to separate herself from her parasite internal twin, then *Dead Ringers* is about both twins' fear of separation. Both films end tragically, the former with an emotional victory of the dead twin embodied in the surviving one, the latter, with the death of both. Only in *Equinox* where the twins lived their lives independently of each other, unaware of each other's existence, the surviving one has a chance to integrate the other to complete his self. In all three films, however, the identical twins are not comparable psychologically (even though in real life they typically are, which makes their phenomenon less attractive from a dramatic standpoint) but rather complementary opposites, perfectly co-dependent unless one can symbiotically internalize the other. Psychologists could not disagree with such a conclusion.

Author Information

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