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Aug 16, 2019

The Unstable Identity in *Purple Noon*

Purple Noon, a 1960 French-Italian film directed by René Clément, tells the story of the talented criminal, Tom Ripley, who is sent by Philippe's father to take Philippe home. As Philippe refuses to go back with Tom, Tom kills Philippe and steals his identity. In his becoming Philippe, Tom murders Philippe's friend Freddy who finds out about his crime, makes Philippe the murderer and fakes his suicide; finally, as Tom, he falls in love with Philippe's fiancée, Marge. Under the theme of taking others' identities, the film begins with Tom and Philippe using a white cane and sunglasses to pretend to be blind and fool a woman in Rome. The film makes the scene objective by applying neutral shots, in which we see Tom turns his back to the camera, gazing at the woman who is helping Philippe cross the road. Without the characters' facial expressions showing their emotional status, the fact that the woman falls for Phillippe's faked blindness is objectively depicted and made granted. Regarding the film's opening with an easy yet successful trick, it seems that identities are like masks that one can switch between by changing physical features, just as how Philippe and Tom use the white cane to signify blindness. However, over the course of the film, we find that Tom's sexuality is conspicuously vague in the film's love narrative. His imitating Philippe ultimately makes his true self resemble Philippe. Making use of multiple formal features, the film convinces us that, unlike masks which are supposed to be singly put on, the real identity per se, is unstable and is the result of multiple identities functioning simultaneously.

In the film's narrative, heterosexuality is denoted by a love triangle between two men and one woman. One way that the film constructs the love triangle is by putting Marge on the top and the two men at the bottom: both Tom and Philippe love Marge and want to get her. Although the film's romantic narrative structure is classic, its presentation of heterosexuality is inadequate. In Marge and Philippe's case, Tom is made the main force that interrupts their heterosexual scenes. At the scene when the film first introduces Marge and her romantic relationship with Philippe, Tom unexpectedly takes up the camera and shifts away our focus from the couple. When Philippe kisses Marge who is angry about their trip to Rome, in a level pan the camera turns to Tom's foot stepping on the sofa arm. We lose our focus on the couple as the camera continues to portray Tom playing the guitar in another bottom-up pan. Tom's terrible playing and interruption agitates Philippe, who, in a cut to his close-up, jolts Philippe's foot and tells him to leave. The camera zooms out as Tom starts to leave, and the scene is unceremoniously ended once Tom walks out the room. Not only Tom's action stops Philippe from kissing Marge, but the film's narrative perspective on Tom also puts less emphasis on Marge and Philippe's heterosexual relationship. Even during Tom's walking out, the couple who resumes to kiss is put at the corner of the frame and blocked by the sofa, which more visually obviously decenters them. Later, Tom's peeping through the boat's entry door at the couple also breaks Philippe and Marge's intimate space. While Philippe and Marge stick their face together in a close-up that applies a warm, gentle color, Tom's face appears in the door's gap on a dark, black ceiling. The contradicting colors create a strong visual contrast that puts Tom against the couple. His cold gaze breaks the aesthetic space of Marge and Philippe's heterosexual intimacy and creates a sense of suspense. In addition, although Tom is gazing at Marge and Philippe, the film doesn't use eye-line matches to show us his view: Tom is peeping from the ceiling but the camera only shoots Marge and

Philippe from their front.¹ Since the film uses neutral shots that don't specify Tom's view, we are not presented with Tom's personal opinion toward this relationship. Thus, while we can instinctively regard Tom as the third person in the love triangle who also loves Marge and disapproves her being with Philippe, it seems that the film's presentation also challenges us to consider Tom as a rigorous opposition of heterosexuality itself.

Heterosexuality, as defined by Steven Seidman in his book *The Social Construction of Sexuality*, is "an identity based on sexual attraction for the opposite sex" (Seidman 47). The fact that Tom ends up being with Marge may justify his heterosexuality if we consider that Marge, who is Tom's opposite sex, turns out to be the object of Tom's love. However, in Tom and Marge's relationship within the heterosexual love triangle, their sexual attraction is invalid, and their romantic relationship is unrealistically presented. The film incorporates a high artifice when it presents the result of Tom being with Marge. At the end of the film, the film unprecedentedly uses a tilted camera to shoot Marge's house where Tom is with her. The walls and windows are irregularly framed, the bizarre look of which implies that the development of their relationship is un-



Figure 1: the tilted camera

likely. When they come out the door, the camera suddenly zooms in and focuses on their hands

¹ In another example, similarly, in its extreme close-ups of Marge kissing with Philippe on the deck, the film pulls the audience out of their intimacy space by turning to Tom being alone on the other side of the boat, eating bread and salami. Although Tom seems to be looking at the couple, the film doesn't use eyeline matches to specify his view.

holding together. Among other neutral and static shots, this abrupt, jarring close-up creates a visual shock. It seems that the film is using the camera to tell us how surprising and peculiar their holding hands is. With such an unnaturalistic, artificial presentation to narrate that Tom ends up with Marge, the film reduces the validity of Tom's heterosexuality even when it is constructing its result. On the other hand, Tom and Marge's sexual attraction is never externalized, which also makes the result of them being together unreliable. When Tom, Marge, and Philippe are having lunch in the boat, the heterosexual composition (in which the film groups and puts each couple with the third person in a set of shot reverse shot) is visually overshadowed by the characters' clothes colors: both Marge and Tom are in red, while Philippe is in blue (see below).



Figure 2: Tom and Marge in red

Being in the same color, Marge and Tom are visually made similar. In his book *Heterosexuality in Question*, Stevi Jackson provides the ideology of differentness, “vive la différence,” as a notion that “sexual attraction itself depends on woman and men behaving two separate species” (Jackson 77). Because of the similarity that the film constructs between Tom and Marge, Tom failed to be a species significantly different from Marge, or more generally, the sex of women.² Hence, his attraction to the opposite sex is minimized, and we find the sexual attraction between

² Tom's similarity to Marge is further manifested by his “womanliness”, which is evinced by his attachment to womanly things. He is wearing a necklace all the time; he is the one who keeps the green earring left by the woman in Rome. The fact that he hides the earring in Philippe's pocket for Marge to find it and start the fight well proves that he understands women on their own terms.

Tom and Marge absent. At this point, we are challenged to come up with a new structure for the love triangle: Philippe in blue is at the top of the triangle, while Tom and Marge who are both in red are at the bottom level competing over him. The film demonstrates this new structure by putting Tom and Marge in the same shot composition: When Tom and Philippe are playing pokers on Tom's bed, the camera shoots Marge staring at them through a grid of the ladder; it does the same for Tom when Philippe and Marge are arguing on the other side.



Figure 3 & 4: Tom and Marge in the same camera composition

By putting Tom and Marge in the same position, the film makes it clear that when Philippe is either Tom or Marge, the other becomes the third person in the love triangle. The two distinctive ways to interpret the film's love narrative obscure the dominating sexuality in the film, as we are gradually led to discover Tom's homosexuality with Philippe.

In his article *Anal Rope*, D. A. Miller uses the concepts of connotation and denotation to read the homosexuality within that film. He cites Roland Barthes's explanation of connotation to be "a kind of secondary meaning 'whose signifier is itself constituted by a sign or system of primary signification, which is denotation'" (123). Denotation and connotation can also be used for us to better speculate the homosexuality between Tom and Philippe in *Purple Noon*. Although we see that Philippe, together with Tom, fools around with girls in Rome, Marge only asks Philippe, "why do you go to Rome with him (Tom)? Are you bored with just being with me?" Marge offers a state of Philippe not "just being with" her, which implies the fact that he is also

“being with” Tom. Since Marge never asks about the girl that Philippe played with, it seems that she sees Tom as a greater threat to their relationship and is more jealous of him rather than the girls. When Tom keeps Philippe’s death from Marge and tells her that he hasn’t heard from him, he says, “It’s not like we are bosom buddies.” Marge angrily replies, “don’t lie to me.” Apparently, Marge means to say that Philippe must have contacted him. However, we can also read it as a literal rejection to Tom’s words, which signifies that Tom and Philippe are just as close as bosom buddies. One might think that Marge’s implication is out of her jealousy to Tom and Philippe being too close friends, which takes away Philippe’s time being with her. However, Philippe’s friend Freddy, as an uninterested third party, has also suggested Philippe’s unusual relationship with Tom. When Freddy visits Tom’s apartment, he spots him wearing Philippe’s clothes and shoes. Freddy is surprised, saying “He lends you his shirt now, huh? Even the same shoes! Unbelievable!” What Freddy has found are strong proofs of Tom stealing Philippe’s identity, which later leads him to find out about Tom’s crime. The fact that he doesn’t become suspicious right at the moment connotes that he assumes it to be comprehensible. Instead of suspicion, Freddy’s exclamation likely shows his assumption of Tom and Philippe’s romantic relationship; he is only surprised that their intimacy is developing so fast. As Miller further states, connotation tends to “instigate a project of confirmation” (125). Once we have spotted a sense of homosexuality in Tom and Philippe’s relationship, we find it easier to understand the film’s disconnection to its heterosexual scenes. Given Freddy’s and Marge’s underlying affirming attitudes toward Tom and Philippe’s romantic relationship, we see a clearer indication of Tom’s homosexuality.

Tom’s sexuality is unpredictable and flexible, for we have spotted both heterosexuality and homosexuality in his interaction with different characters. Perhaps to put it more properly, the

film has depicted Tom as a queer person. In the “Queer and Now” introduction of her essay collection *Tendencies*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick states that “queer involves the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, laps and excesses of meaning that occur when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically” (8). Tom is queer because his sexuality is flexible depending on who he is with, or who his sexual object is. Various plausible interpretations on the scene that Tom kisses the mirror evinces that Tom is queer. As Tom puts on Philippe’s clothes, he looks at himself in the mirror. Imitating Philippe’s saying “Marge, my love, my angel,” he kisses the mirror. The mirror creates a doubling of Tom’s image as the film applies a high-angle close-up that makes clear of both Tom’s profile in front of the mirror and his front reflected in the mirror. Since Tom is an aggregation of multiple identities at the moment, the film plays with his roles before and behind the mirror. First, heterosexually, from Tom’s line that calls Marge’s name, we can think that he is imagining himself kissing Marge as either Philippe or Tom. Second, homosexually, Tom is kissing Philippe as the mirror reflects his appearance dressed as Philippe. As Tom continues to say, “my love for Marge blinds me”, it becomes that he is kissing himself since now the name of Marge becomes a third person noun. According to Calvin Thomas et al. in the book *Straight with a Twist: Queer Theory and the Subject of Heterosexuality*, “if one’s sexual object is of the same gender of oneself, then one has “failed” adequately to discern self and other, to erect the proper barricades between identification and desire: homosexuality thus becomes defined as a “regressive” or developmentally “arrested” function of autoeroticism or narcissism” (14). Tom uses his imitation to entertain himself, which adequately shows his autoeroticism; his kissing himself can doubtlessly be regarded as a manifestation of his narcissism. Both his autoeroticism and narcissism establish the pattern of his homosexuality that is described in

the book. In challenging the audience to make different interpretations, the flexibility of Tom's sexuality becomes self-evident.

Some might think that Tom's crime evinces his choice over the two sexualities – he kills Philippe and dumps his body in order to commit to heterosexuality. This counterargument again physicalizes identities as masks, for Tom's switching between Tom and Philippe now becomes a manifestation of his criminality. In the last part of the film, however, the film leaves clues to show that even after Tom goes back to be himself, he begins to resemble Philippe in a way that he isn't aware of. When Tom blends Philippe's features into his own character, we see another form of homosexuality within his heterosexual performance with Marge. Ever since Philippe says the line of "Marge, my love, my angel..." this line has become a mark of Philippe's identity that Tom borrows three times throughout the film. The first two times show the process of how Tom assimilates Philippe's features, laying the basis for the third time which demonstrates that he is not able to get rid of it when he returns to himself. Tom repeats Philippe's line for the first time after Philippe says it to Marge. The camera is put in front of the mirror to show Tom's dual images so that we could see how he picks up Philippe's signature actions and adjusts his imitation in his personal practice (he doesn't know that Philippe is nearby). In the second time, upon Philippe's request, Tom again says the line and points up his index finger to imitate Philippe. He turns his body to show his profile to the camera and shifts his eyes to another direction as if he is performing to some imagined audience. As he voices over Philippe's close-up of a complicated look, we know that Tom has mastered his imitation. Just when we think that Tom has gotten rid of Philippe's identity after he fakes his suicide and shows up as Tom, he whispers the line for the third time at Marge's bedside. The scene uses a neutral shot to put Marge on the

center of the frame lying on her bed. Tom, unlike the first two times being the focus of the camera, is put at the corner with his face hidden in the shadow. As the same line strikes us to recall Philippe, we can't tell whether Tom is intentionally imitating. Has this line become Tom's own expression after he gets used to saying it? Later, when Tom is caressing Marge's hair on her bed, the film uses an extreme high-angle close-up to shoot Marge but completely excludes Tom from the scene. By only showing his hands moving around Marge's head, the camera composition adds a touch of mysteriousness to the man's identity. The same high camera angle applied on the same gesture of Marge kissing with Tom as when she had with Philippe further reveals Tom's resemblance to Philippe. Based on the fact that Tom no longer needs to imitate Philippe, we tend



Figure 5: Marge with Philippe



Figure 6: Marge with Tom

to believe that Tom is being himself at the moment, and thus that he must have blended Philippe's characteristics into his true self. Finally, we come to realize that even for the talented criminal Tom, he is not capable of manipulating his identities freely. In the process of him imitating of others, his true self is affected and adapted to the roles he once played. His unconscious change results from the fact that one's identity per se, is unstable in terms of its flexibility and adaptability. Moreover, as homosexuality incorporates an idea of homo-ness, or sameness, we are able to read the whole process of Tom and Philippe's homogenization as another manifestation of their homosexuality. Even Philippe's role plays little part in the latter part of the film,

their similarity creates a bond between them, which operates implicitly under Marge and Tom's heterosexual performance.

Going back to the first scene that Philippe and Tom pretend to be blind to get the woman, we can't help noticing the film's exaggerated presentation of how Tom and Philippe kiss the woman in thirst and later rudely push her off the carriage. Perhaps at the very beginning, we already see a moment of heterosexuality and homosexuality altering on the carriage, which naturally hints us to follow the film's focus on Tom's vague, unstable sexuality.

Work Cited

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