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Film Review: Marion

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Marion¹. Ry Russo-Young, 2005 (Super 8)/2006 (DVD), Helavanna Productions, New York City, 7 min.

Reviewed by Betty J. Glass²

Russo-Young made a fearless choice for her third short film, *Marion* – a deconstruction of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), "... perhaps the most terrifying film ever made" (Wood 2002:142), "... possibly the single most influential film of the past half century" (Boyd and Palmer, 2006: 13), and among the "... most frequently taught and critically revered films." Moreover, *Marion* focuses on *Psycho*'s shower sequence, "... one of the most analyzed sequences in all American film" (Williams, 2004: 167, 178). Released two years after Russo-Young's 2003 graduation from Oberlin College, *Marion* has enjoyed a positive reception, winning the Jury Award for Best Experimental Short at both the 2005 International Chicago Film Festival and the 2006 SXSW Film Festival and winning First Prize at Italy's 2006 Potenza International Film Fest for Best Emerging Vision.

Marion re-presents three scenes from *Psycho*, using three actresses to portray Marion in split screen format, while one actor plays boyfriend Sam Loomis in all three versions, and one actor plays the presumed Norman/Mother attacker in all three shower scenes. The filmmaker's goal was to deconstruct conventional narrative structures. Given the time constraint alone, vast amounts of Hitchcock's background information are eliminated from *Marion*'s stark storylines. Thus, viewers are left to their own devices concerning the identity and motivations of the mysterious killer who attacks all three Marions. Missing, too, is the signature Bernard Hermann score so effectively intertwined with *Psycho*'s imagery. (Universal's 1999 Collector's Edition DVD of *Psycho* includes "The Shower Scene with and without music" and "The Shower Scene's Storyboards by Saul Bass" among its Special Features.)

Like *Psycho*, *Marion* is filmed in black and white. Its first scene is the hotel tryst, with original dialogue from *Psycho* including Marion's plea for marriage and Sam's speculation that she is considering breaking off their relationship. Neither location nor date is provided. Deconstruction begins with two of the Marions dressed in black lingerie and a Hispanic woman cast as Marion #3 (right-hand screen). Moreover, the couples' interactions are different. Scene 2 depicts Marion packing in her bedroom, already fully clothed. We do not know what color lingerie any of them now wear. Marion #1 (left-hand

¹ This short film is also available through Indiepix Films as an educational DVD edition, which includes Special Features (2007; \$200.00).

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screen) leaves behind the unexplained envelope of cash, while Marions #2 (center screen) and #3 pack the cash in their suitcases, rather than the large handbag employed in *Psycho*.

Scene 3, the shower sequence, begins with each Marion entering the shower stall and being attacked by an unidentified, knife-wielding intruder. The Hispanic Marion #3 soon succumbs to the assault, as in the original *Psycho*. Marion #1, however, manages to wrest the knife from her attacker and kill him with it. She then leaves her shower and rescues Marion #2 by killing her attacker. Marion #1 then leaves Marion #2 without saying anything and goes to Marion #3's shower stall. While Marion #1 is repositioning Marion #3's body, Marion #2 enters and kills her, then steps past the two dead Marions to stand inside the shower stall, dropping the knife.

Needless to say, these seven minutes can be mined as a mother lode (pun intended) for classroom discussions and film critique assignments, because viewers cannot help bringing along the cultural baggage of 48 years of *Psycho*'s presence in film history. Was Marion #1 going to start over somewhere else, without Sam and without the money? What was the relationship between the three Marions? Was Sam three-timing the Marions? Given Russo-Young's background as the child of a lesbian couple, what autobiographical strands (so often a part of Hitchcockian criticism) can be woven into the interactions between the Marions? Is homophobia a factor in the initial attacks by the unidentified assailant? Does Marion #2 mistakenly assume Marion #1 killed Marion #3? In surviving her 'punishment' for her sexual choices, has Marion #2 successfully overturned the patriarchal goal of men's control of women?

Unlike *Psycho*, *Marion* does not provide the audience with an alternative character for transference of sympathy and identification. At best, a viewer can latch onto one of the three Marions during the first or second scenes, only to experience consternation while trying to comprehend a specific Marion's actions and fate in scene 3. Is Marion #2, the sole survivor, normal? Indeed, as film critic Robin Wood observed about Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), *Marion* leaves its viewers with a "... sense of bewildered desolation, [a] sense of helplessness, ...[w]e are stunned, the bottom is knocked out of the world, we cannot at all see where the film is going, what possible sequel this event can have: all is chaos" (Wood 2002: 117).

Marion enhances the gender shock Hitchcock introduced with *Psycho*, while capturing the essence of deconstruction with the unanticipated outcomes of the three Marions' decisions and actions. Russo-Young's Marion #2 embodies the "final girl" of Carol J. Clover's feminist analysis of slasher films, a sub-genre launched by *Psycho* (Clover, 1992). Only remnants of Hitchcock's motifs appear in *Marion*, but *Marion*'s information gaps invite informed debate, bringing contemporary awareness of gender studies and a generation of feminist theory to an analysis of the weltanschauung depicted in *Psycho*.

Repackaged by Indiepix in 2007 for educational audiences, the accompanying Special Features, including a "Making of *Marion*" documentary and an interview with Oberlin College professor Ryan Brown, were not seen by the reviewer.

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