

# Distorted Reality and Disintegratifon of Self in *Psycho* and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*

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## Abstract

In the light of psychoanalytic criticism, this paper is to discuss distorted reality which stems from psychological disorders of the characters, their fragmented minds due to their impotency to form a strong neuroplasticity of brain in *Psycho* and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Both films illustrate the outcomes of a neurotic mind, split personality and derealization of the external world and being alienated from reality, which results in reproduction of reality through dreams, hallucinations and illusions. These dreams, hallucinations and illusions are a kind of defense to their guilt and inability to face reality and overcome trauma. Reality is manipulated due to their impotency to achieve to discover their true selves. Real self is distorted into fragmentations causing multiple personality disorder and schizoid cases.

**Keywords:** *Psycho*, Alfred Hitchcock, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, dissociative identity disorder, distorted reality, neuroplasticity, trauma.

## Öz

### DR. CALİGARİ'NİN MUAYENEHANESİ VE SAPIK FİMLERİNDE ÇARPITILMIŞ GERÇEKLİK VE BENLİĞİN ÇÖZÜLMESİ

Bu çalışma, *Sapık* ve *Dr. Caligari'nin Muayenehanesi* adlı filmlerde, karakterlerin güçlü bir nöroplastisite yapılandırmasından mahrum olmalarından dolayı, psikolojik bozukluklarının ve bölünmüş kişiliklerinin bir ürünü olarak ortaya çıkan çarpıtılmış gerçekliği psikanalitik kuram ışığında tartışmayı amaçlar. Her iki film, nevrotik bir zihnin, parçalanmış kişiliğin, dış dünyaya ve gerçekliğe yabancılaşmanın sonuçlarını ifade eder ki bu da gerçekliğin rüyalar, halüsinasyonlar ve yanılsamalar ile yeniden şekillendirilmesiyle sonuçlanır. Bu rüyalar, halüsinasyonlar ve yanılsamalar, onların suçlarına, gerçekle yüzleşememelerine ve travmalarını yenememelerine karşın geliştirdikleri bir tür savunma mekanizmasıdır. Gerçeklik olgusu, karakterlerin kendi gerçek kişiliklerini keşfetmeyi başaramadıklarından manipüle edilir. Gerçek kimliğin parçalanması çoklu kişilik bozukluğu ve şizofren durumlarla sonuçlanır.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** *Sapık*, Alfred Hitchcock, *Dr. Caligari'nin Muayenehanesi*, çoklu kişilik bozukluğu, çarpıtılmış gerçeklik, nöroplastisite, travma.

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*We have what we seek, it is there all the time,  
and if we give it time, it will make itself known to us.*

*Thomas Merton*

In the light of psychoanalytic criticism, this paper is to discuss distorted reality which stems from psychological disorders of the characters, their fragmented minds due to their impotency to form a strong neuroplasticity of brain in *Psycho* and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Both films illustrate the outcomes of a neurotic mind, split personality and derealization of the external world and being alienated from reality, which results in reproduction of reality through dreams, hallucinations and illusions. These dreams, hallucinations and illusions are a kind of defense to their guilt and inability to face reality and overcome trauma. Reality is manipulated due to their impotency to achieve to discover their true selves. Real self is distorted into fragmentations causing multiple personality disorder and schizoid cases.

*Psycho*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock in 1960, is a psychological horror film, which is divided into two structures in terms of narration. The first part deals with the life of a secretary, Marion, who is not satisfied due to low income and cannot marry her beloved Sam Loomis. This part of the film sheds light on class conflicts and the destruction that money and capitalism cause. Cassidy is the embodiment of capitalism. The fact that Cassidy behaves as if he could buy everything with his money triggers Marion to steal money that her boss gives her to put in the bank. Hence she sets out her journey however she is forced to stay at the Bates' motel due to dense rain. Her entrance into the motel occupies the second part of the film. This part deals with her meeting with Norman Bates, a psycho.

Marion's entrance into the motel is a kind of liminality which derives from the Latin word *limen* which means threshold. Stomer explains liminality as "...a state of profound transition, the experience of being outside of chronological time and conventional space" (2003: 216). Marion sets off her journey to exchange her dissatisfied and poor life with a prosperous one to reach her aim. The motel is desolate and it seems as if time has stopped there. She is out of chronological time and conventional space in the motel since metaphorically, her entrance into motel resembles to entrance to underworld which is not conventional space and time. Turner asserts that "liminality is frequently likened to death,... to invisibility, to darkness..." (1995: 95). Her entrance into the motel is a kind of threshold between life and death. Marion is killed by Norman Bates, who has two personalities and suffers from trauma.

Distressed mind of Norman and his psychoneuroses stem from maternal deprivation that he cannot overcome, which results in disintegration of mind and trauma. It seems that Norman cannot enable neuroplasticity of his brain:

The more active two neurons are the stronger the connection between them grows: thus, with every experience, your brain rewires its physical structure. In fact, how a person uses his or her brain helps determine how the brain is organized. It is this flexibility, this 'plasticity' that helps the brain rewire itself once it has been damaged, helping a person recover lost or damaged functions in the wake of stroke... (Turkington and Harris 2001: 140).

Brain has the power of learning and adapting to situations and emotions and this flexibility and organization have role in shaping personalities. The fact that Norman cannot recover his loss and anxiety is related to weak connections between the neurons. Plasticity that enables an individual to recuperate from disorder is damaged for Norman who is dissolved between two personalities: Norman as himself and Norman as his mother. When Marion comes to the motel, she personally meets Norman but hears the screams of the mother who is portrayed as a psychotic person or a mad woman to be sent to asylum.

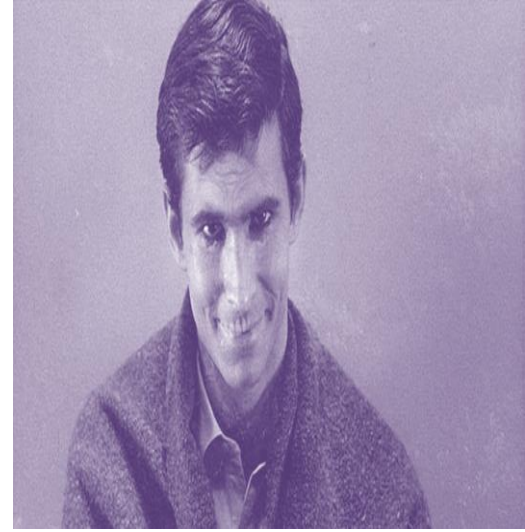
The relationship between Norman and supposedly alive mother is based upon jealousy and Norman acts as a devoted son who covers up the murders. When Marion comes to the motel, she firstly sees that a shadow of a woman is near the window (27:45), which cinematically refers to the fact that Norman's self as a mother is the dominant one. When Marion asks for a room, Norman decides to give Room 3 but he changes his mind and gives Room 1, near the office. He wants to keep her close so that he can peep through the hole. When he invites Marion to the office to eat something, Norman says that he likes stuffing the birds (36:00). The act of stuffing dead bodies foreshadows the end of the film. While he is talking to Marion at the office, the camera angle shows Norman to be placed between two stuffed birds, which refers to his two personalities: himself as a dutiful son and his delusional side that prompts him to kill (Figure 1).



*Figure 1: A scene from Psycho*

Norman's conversation with Marion portrays his distress about his entrapment at the motel and his anxieties about his mother. Norman says: "[s]ometimes... when she [the mother] talks to me like that... I feel I'd like to go up there... and curse her... and-and-and leave her forever! Or at least defy her! But I know I can't. She's ill" (39:00). The psychological disorder that Norman cannot overcome is the death of his mother on whom he feels desperately dependent. The fact that Norman depicts his mother as ill literally refers to his trauma and dissociative identity disorder. Norman implies that he struggles to get rid of one of his selves but he cannot overcome. He says: "it's not like my mother is a maniac or a raving thing. She just goes a little mad sometimes. We all go a little mad sometimes. Haven't you?" (42:30). When Marion advises him to send his mother to asylum, Norman accepts the fact that she is ill but he also feels threatened and thus he kills Marion. Norman is distorted between two identities to deal effectively with his trauma. Norman defines this struggle by saying "[w]e are all in our own private traps clamped in them, and none of us can ever get out. We scratch and we claw, but only at the air, only at each other, and for all of it, we never budge an inch" (38:00). As Balaev asserts that "...trauma creates a speechless fright that divides or destroys identity" (2008: 149).

Norman, alone and introverted, has lost his interest in present and future since he is stuck in the past and memories of his mother. Guntrip explains that "...[a]n inner psychic world has been set up duplicating an original frustrating situation, an unhappy world, in which one is tied to bad objects and feeling therefore always frustrated, hungry, angry, and guilty, and profoundly anxious, with constant temptation to seek transient inner relief by projecting it back into the external world" (1992: 22). When Norman is caught by the police, the psychiatrist explains the case of Norman. After the death of his father, Norman and his mother cling to each other so much that they live as if there was no one else in the world. Norman expresses possessiveness by saying that "a boy's best friend is his mother" (37:15). However, when his mother falls in love with another man, Norman perceives him as an enemy and his mother as a betrayer. He feels that he is left alone and not loved by his mother any longer. Norman cannot cope with tension of love, dependence and jealousy. As an outcome of Oedipus complex, Norman encumbers himself with rage and he kills both his stepfather and his mother. He shows his frustration not only killing the stepfather but also the mother.



The end of the film reveals that his mother has already been dead. Norman wears his mother's clothes and wears a wig and hence he is the embodiment of his mother in order to keep the illusion of her being alive. Mother becomes the dominant personality of Norman. Dr. Fred Richmond explains the process:

At times he could be both personalities, carry on conversations. At other times, the mother half took over completely. Now he was never all Norman, but he was often only mother. And because he was so pathologically jealous of her, he assumed that she was jealous of him. Therefore, if he felt a strong attraction to any other woman, the mother side of him would go wild (50:30).



Hitchcock demonstrates Norman's turning into his mother and his two personalities clashing in him through Norman's disturbing smile at the end of the film. While he is smiling, his mother's skeleton appears on his face in transition.

Another film that illustrates depersonalization, distressed mind resulting in split personality and disintegration is *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. The movie, written by Carl Mayer and Hans Janowitz and

directed by Robert Wiene in 1920, is a German silent film based upon horror and expressionism. Expressionism is an early 20<sup>th</sup> century movement which begins with painting through which distorted images, shapes and forms are used in order to show emotions, feelings and inner world and it is widely spread to literature, music, architecture and film. It comes out as a need to express inner world, disillusionment of the First World War and the existential angst. People experience the world as a distorted and horrific place which threatens the existence of people who have lost their belief in those accepted values so far and lost the possibility of comprehending the meaning of life. Rather than a realistic representation of what they see, they represent how they see the world and how the outcomes of the war affect them by using extreme visuals which may not be pleasing to the eye. Emotional impact or response used as a means of film industry to show existential angst.

Film as an art form has tendency to represent the era and reflect the social, political and economic issues of the time when it is produced. The film, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, portrays a postwar society in Germany. It represents a macrocosmic and microcosmic relationship between the political world and a self who suffers from its upheavals, chaos and tyranny of it. Dr. Caligari, a hypnotist, manipulates Cesare, a somnambulist, by awakening him for his own benefits. While Dr. Caligari awakens him, Cesare says that his master is calling him. The connotation of master refers to government or political ideology. As a representative of power, Dr. Caligari, an opportunist and political tyrant, exploits Cesare and demands strict devotion and reliability from him. Cesare is the victim of the system and ideology. The fact that Dr. Caligari controls Cesare is a kind of political alienation and results in dictatorship. Rather than to serve people, dictatorship threatens people to become their master by exploiting anxieties of them for its own purposes. In the film, the act of exploiting refers to emptying self for evil purposes through controlling mind.



*Figure: 2 Scenes from The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*

The film deals with madness, divided self and the threshold between sanity and insanity as Hitchcock also demonstrates in *Psycho*. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* represents the divided self of Francis stemming from his imagination/fantasy about violation of power for evil deeds by Dr. Caligari who manipulates Cesare, a somnambulist. It is a two-dimensional silent film and the setting, Holstenwall, is portrayed as a painting since the houses, fair, streets, and rooms are drawn with distorted shapes, forms and sharp angles. (Figure 2). Such a distortion and usage of light and shadows refer to distortion of mind and its blurring situation in expressionistic way. These drawings create horrific atmosphere and setting as in Alan's room which is proportionless since there is a huge chair and the angles of the house is shapeless. Streets are not drawn with proper lines but it is depicted with light and shadow.

Francis and an old man who are illustrated as gloomy characters with painted big dull eyes sitting in a yard, a horrifying setting, talk about what they have lived so far. The old man says "[t]here are spirits, they are all around us" (02:18), which corroborates suspense of narration and uncanny. Jane enters and passes in front of them as if she is in a kind of trance since her eyes do not look at the screen. She is wearing a white dress and light is upon her. Even though Francis says that Jane is her fiancée, there is no eye contact between them, which creates mystery about their relationship. The man sitting with Francis does not show any kind of reaction to the things Francis tells. The scene changes into a fair and narration continues with flashbacks through Francis' memories. With the usage of light and shadow techniques, Dr. Caligari, a cynic character, enters the scene as a grotesque body that seems huge with big head, scary eyes and big hat.

Alan and Francis attend the fair and are enthralled by Dr. Caligari's mysterious words about Cesare, who has slept for 23 years. When Cesare gets out of the wooden box as he is hypnotized in a trance situation, he is frightening with his grotesque body with painted big eyes and lips (18:25). The prophecy of Cesare about Alan who is going to be murdered until dawn frightens Alan and Francis. Alan is smothered and the shadow of the murderer is seen on the wall, which is a distortion of reality due to Francis' distressed mind. Their struggle is a like shadow play representing a fight between good and evil. Alan begins to investigate the murderer like a detective and he wants to bring order to the chaos of his distressed mind.

Francis pursues Dr. Caligari into an asylum in which Jane and Cesare are patients. The events and the research at the asylum reveal that Dr. Caligari is the director of the asylum and his specialty is somnambulism. Francis attacks Dr. Caligari and the assistants shut him up in a room. Dr. Caligari explains that he has found the reason for Francis' delusion. His delusion and neurotic situation stem from the book he has read about mystic Dr. Caligari

who travels to Italy and commits murders under similar circumstances through somnambulist Cesare. Francis becomes so obsessed with this book that he makes up the entire story.

Francis says that “[t]he frightful is always in our midst”, which refers to distortion of mind resulting in neurotic situation. The film transforms frightfulness and distressed psychology into expressionistic form. Freud asserts that “[n]eurotics turn away from reality because they find it unbearable; the most extreme type of this turning away from reality is shown by certain cases of hallucinatory psychosis which seek to deny the particular event that occasioned the outbreak of their insanity” (1995: 301). Plasticity of brain helps neurons to rewire in order to recover damage however neurotic characters in both films Norman Bates and Francis cannot achieve to overcome traumatic experiences and hallucinations. The films show the line between sanity and insanity and reality is revealed at the end of the films. Norman Bates is shown as a dutiful son however he commits murders due to his dissociative identity disorder. Throughout the film, while Francis is shown as a sane man and is perceived so by the other characters, Dr. Caligari is shown as a mad man. “I won’t rest until I get to the bottom of these dreadful deeds” (28:00). Getting to the bottom of these murders and to investigate them are to face his own self and restless mind. He is searching for his own self. Asylum can be resembled to brain and the entrances, exits, rooms and cells are the parts of his distressed mind that he runs in and out (Figure 3).



*Figure 3: Asylum scene from The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*



In order to get rid of psychological breakdown and restore order into their chaotic situation, Norman and Francis try to find a way by reproducing their own realities that they want to believe in. Norman's devotion to her mother shows the fact that he feels "...overwhelmed by the external world and is in flight from it both inwards, and, as it were, backwards, to the safety of the womb" (Guntrip 1992: 44). His desire to be with his mother refers to his insecure ontological self due to her mother's love for stepfather, which is a threat to him. Francis' making up story or manipulating reality is a kind of defense to outside world that he cannot comprehend.

To conclude both films reflect the outcomes of the release of the unconscious, mysteries, illusions, fears, and confusions of the mind. Disruption of the conscious and unconscious, alienation of people from realities and real world cause disintegrated and fragmented selves suffering from distressed minds that create multiple personality disorders and illusions. As the pain of not being able to realize the real world / outside world and not being able to overcome illusions increases, people suffer from traumatic actions and psychological breakdown.

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