

Of Two Minds

A review of the film



Peacock

(2010)

Michael Lander (Director)

Reviewed by

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The great poet W. H. Auden maintained through his work that all art is ventriloquism and that every person, ergo every artist, develops continually and is shaped by his or her environment. This helps explain why *Peacock*, overtly about the “split personality” of the main character, is not named after him/her, but after the seemingly calm town where he/she lives, Peacock, Nebraska, in the 1950s.

This “apple pie” place has a duplicity of its own. It shows little curiosity about John Skillpa, who endured horrible childhood abuse, barely hinted at in the film, by his reclusive mother until various protagonists find something to gain from him. He is then put under literal and metaphorical siege. The event that sets this change in motion is a derailed train caboose that crashes into the Skillpa backyard and suddenly reveals Emma, a person nobody knew about before.

Emma is a mysterious, withdrawn woman who, with a penetrating and methodic eye, surveys the world through a gap in the closed curtains from inside her dark house. John is her counterpart, a neurotic and socially phobic man who needs things to go exactly the way he is used to. He relishes the sandwiches and little notes that Emma leaves for him and keeps his childhood and adult treasures in a small box. Auden wrote in his poem “The Common Life” that “every home should be a fortress” (para. 15), and described the house as an extension of the self (Auden, 1963).

Accordingly, the derailed train car shatters not only the material but also the psychological fences that have kept this harmonious habitat “in one piece.” The outside world conveniently assumes that John and Emma are husband and wife when encountering one or the other, and they become what they least wanted to be, the center of attention of the townsfolk. The mayor of Peacock wants to use the incident for political propaganda and needs the Skillpas’ permission to stage a demonstration in their garden. This brings about the first conflict. Whereas John wants the train compartment out of his garden as soon as possible so that he may return to the life he knows, Emma, though with initial reservations, starts relishing the attention she draws and her life outside of the house.

A battle for power ensues, further exacerbated by the appearance of Maggie, a sweet young woman forced by poverty to occasional, casual prostitution. She was once brought to John by his own mother who made the two perform unspecified “terrible acts” together while she watched. These acts produced a little boy, unbeknownst to John. Maggie comes to him for financial support, with which John’s mother had earlier bought her silence and which John seems willing to provide, while Emma plans to place Maggie under the care of the mayor’s wife and local well-doer.

The movie continues with the struggle for dominance between John and Emma and the mutual thwarting of plans and intentions. Emma starts to resemble more and more John’s cruel mother, to the point where she wears the dress that had been hanging in the closet since his mother died. In the most disturbing moment of the film, Emma makes John and Maggie’s son pose for a picture in exactly the same way in which John’s mother had taken his picture many years earlier. The implications are obvious: John’s son is destined to endure the abuse that John did, but this time it will be Emma who delivers it. Or perhaps this cycle will be broken, depending on whether some level of caring and morality can survive in the midst of all the pain and abuse.

When the film is in the sphere of the intimate, showing hints of the society that has conveniently ignored the child abuse and prostitution in its midst, it excels. It accurately shows that people with dissociative identity disorder (DID) generally have a very avoidant and constricted, rather than histrionic, personality (for a review see Cardeña & Spiegel, 1996). It also depicts how the main identities of someone with DID may differ dramatically, as thoroughly described in the classic case of Morton Prince (1900–1901) and in more recent work (e.g., Putnam, 1989).

It also reveals that an identity that may have originally developed out of a need to protect the child psychologically from ongoing abuse can identify with the aggressor (Freud, 1946) and become a “persecutor” identity while another one remains a victim (Liotti, 2009). Finally, it suggests how abuse and unresolved trauma in the caregiver may lead to disorganized attachment in the infant and later inappropriate parenting and the intergenerational transmission of this pattern. Thus, misery “deepens like a coastal shelf,” to quote another great poet (Larkin, 1988, p. 142), unless therapeutic or spontaneous insights break the cycle (Madigan et al., 2006).

However, we are hesitant about fully recommending the film because *Peacock* makes an unnecessary and unconvincing turn toward the Hollywood cliché of the murderous multiple personality (think of *Psycho*, *Dressed to Kill*, and *Raising Cain*). In this, the director of *Peacock* follows other films such as *Altered State of Consciousness* that imply that psychological reality is not real unless there is some physical change, such as becoming an ape in *Altered State of Consciousness* or, in the case of this and other films, producing corpses to show that an identity has been eliminated.

Despite this flaw, the extraordinary versatility, subtleness, and depth in Cillian Murphy’s performance, supported by an outstanding cast that includes Ellen Page, Susan Sarandon, and Keith Carradine, make *Peacock* stand out. This film reminds us, following Auden’s parable, that sometimes a house or a self must be split asunder to reveal its rotten foundations.

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