

Borges' and Hitchcock's Double Desire

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“Every day in the mirror, he’ll see the man who killed his brother.” This is how, on 25 June 2008, journalist Elaine Keogh from the *Irish Independent* summarized the words of Defence Counsel Derek Kennealy SC, after the jury had returned a guilty verdict in the case of his client Aodhan Donlon, who had stood before the Central Criminal Court in Dundalk, Co. Louth accused of murdering his twin Colm with a chopping knife the year before.¹ “Every day for the rest of his life when he looks in the mirror, he will see the man who killed his twin brother who he loved deeply” is apparently what Mr Kennealy really said, in a statement faintly echoing some famous lines by Oscar Wilde from *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*: “Yet each man kills the thing he loves/By each let this be heard...”² Yet given the fact that Aodhan and Colm were identical twin brothers, products of an unexplained natural clon-

1 Keogh, E., “Every Day in the Mirror, He’ll See the Man who Killed his Brother”, in *Irish Independent* (25 June 2008). Accessed 18 September 2009: www.independent.ie/national-news/every-day-in-the-mirror-hell-see-the-man-who-killed-his-brother-1420588.html

2 Wilde, O., *De Profundis, The Ballad of Reading Gaol & Other Writings* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2002), 116.

ing event—although some scientists would no doubt dispute the idea that monozygotic twins are clones, on the grounds that they stem from sexual reproduction, involving sperm cells, and are not genetically engineered—which compelled them to share the same DNA, neither the newspaper journalist nor Mr Kennealy himself seems to have dared to state the real and much more tragic consequence of Donlon's act. Every day, for the rest of his life, when looking in the mirror, he shall not only see the man who killed his brother, but much more dramatically and disturbingly, and precisely because his brother was also his identical twin, he shall actually see the man he killed! When looking in the mirror, he shall involuntarily bring to life the copy of himself that he himself is responsible for destroying, thus demonstrating how he carries within himself the power of a double annihilation: that of murdering the identical other outside himself, and that of undoing this very act of murder in the pure maintenance of his own existence. If Donlon killed the thing he loved and, as Wilde's ballad professes, if "The kindest use a knife, because / The dead so soon grow cold", with his "bitter look" the murderer shall also have to love the thing he killed, because he himself shall make the dead stay warm.³

Undoubtedly, it all started long before the invention of mirrors, with Romulus and Remus, the rivalrous twin sons fathered by Mars with the vestal virgin Rhea Silvia, to whom Roman mythology has attributed the founding of the eternal city. Quarrelling over the best location for erecting the city-walls, the twins decided to rely on an auspicious. From the top of his mount, Remus allegedly saw six vultures. In his own place of choice, Romulus allegedly saw twelve, yet some would have said that Remus saw the birds first and that Romulus did not see any birds at all. "When Remus knew of the deceit, he was enraged," Plutarch contended, "and as Romulus was digging a trench, where his city's wall was to run, he ridiculed some parts of the work, and obstructed others. At last, when he [Remus] leaped across it, he was smit-

3 Wilde, O., *De Profundis, The Ballad of Reading Gaol & Other Writings*, 116.

ten... and fell dead there."⁴ And so it is believed that Romulus struck down his twin brother, although in disclosing that it could also have been one of Romulus' companions Plutarch did not seem to be a hundred per cent sure. When they agreed to have a battle, Romulus and Remus were clearly no Tweedledum and Tweedledee, who when they saw "a monstrous crow, as black as a tar-barrel;... [it] frightened both the heroes so, they quite forgot their quarrel."⁵ Remus dead, Romulus built his city, created the Senate and the Legions, ordered the abduction of the Sabines in order to increase population and became the first King of Rome. And the rest, as they say, is history.

"They say that if you meet your double, you should kill him or that he will kill you. I can't remember which, but the gist of it is that two of you is one too many." This provocative injunction, articulated by the voice-over in Johan Grimonprez's *Double Take*, suggests that killing one's identical other is nothing more, nothing less than an act of self-protection or even self-preservation, which takes away the constant threat of victimization at the hands of one's counterpart, while releasing and restoring agency in the singular subject, from the moment the latter becomes a murderer. "Colm had punched him [his twin brother Aodhan] twice on the side of the head," the *Irish Independent's* journalist reported, before Aodhan stabbed him twice in the back with the chopping knife.⁶ The stabbing, then, was a self-defensive reaction rather than an unprovoked attack, which may explain why the jury accepted the plea of manslaughter and Aodhan got away with a mere three-and-a-half years imprisonment. When they agreed to have a battle, Colm and Aodhan were clearly no Tweedledum and Tweedledee either; they may have agreed to have a battle over who had spoiled the rattle, but they never quite forgot about their quarrel. Unfortunately for Aodhan

4 Plutarch, "The Life of Romulus", in *The Parallel Lives*, trans. B. Perrin, vol. 1 of the Loeb Classical Library, ed. J. Henderson (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1914), 118.

5 Carroll, L., "Through the Looking Glass". Accessed 18 September 2009: www.sabian.org/Alice/lgchap04.htm

6 Keogh, E., "Every Day in the Mirror, He'll See the Man who Killed his Brother".

Donlon, Rome had already been built and Ireland was not directly in need of another major city. But at least he got noticed. Borrowing from Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and *Mao II* in his 1997 "film-essay" *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, Grimonprez supported the cinematic narration with the lines "Get killed, and maybe they will notice you" and "Men have tried throughout history to cure themselves by killing others. The dier passively succumbs, the killer lives on."⁷ If these lines, when taken together, seem contradictory, they can nonetheless be realized simultaneously when the other is the killer's identical counterpart. Kill your double, cure yourself, live on and they will notice you.

Why are doubles, identical twins, "enantiomorphs" or other types of duplicates simultaneously fascinating and terrifying, generally terribly fascinating for an observer and often ferociously terrible for the one who is being doubled or twinned? Some hundred years ago, the honourable Professor Sigmund Freud attempted an answer which, however much it may have elucidated the question, did not seem to have alleviated the affect generated by the subjective experience nor, for that matter, the actual occurrence of the experience as such. In the third chapter of his celebrated 1901 volume *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Freud wrote: "One cannot help having a slightly disagreeable feeling [*leicht unangenehmen Empfindung*] when one comes across one's own name in a stranger. Recently I was very sharply aware of it when a *Herr S. Freud* presented himself to me in my consulting hour."⁸ Years later, in his famous 1919 essay "The Uncanny", Freud reported a peculiar incident while travelling on the train: "I was sitting alone in my *wagon-lit* compartment when a more than usually violent jolt of the train swung back the door of the adjoining washing-cabinet,



Double Take, 2009

7 Grimonprez, J., *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* (1997); DeLillo, D., *White Noise* (New York: Viking, 1985); DeLillo, D., *Mao II* (New York: Scribner, 1991). See also Bernard, C., "Supermarket History: Interview with Johan Grimonprez about his film *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*", in *Inflight: What to Do with a Stolen Boeing 777*, J. Grimonprez (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2000), 68–72.

8 Freud, S., "The Psychopathology of Everyday Life", in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 6, ed. J. Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1960), 25.



and an elderly gentleman in a dressing-gown and a travelling cap came in. I assumed that in leaving the washing-cabinet, which lay between the two compartments, he had taken the wrong direction and come into my compartment by mistake. Jumping up with the intention of putting him right, I at once realized to my dismay [*erkannte aber bald verdutzt*] that the intruder was nothing but my own reflection in the looking-glass on the open door. I can still recollect that I thoroughly disliked his appearance.”⁹ Contemplating our (and his own) affective response to confronting our double, Freud accepted Otto Rank’s argument that the creation of doubles originally served the narcissistic purpose of ensuring the immortality of the bodily ego.¹⁰ Yet to this he added that once the psychic state of primary narcissism has been superseded, the double transforms itself into the opposite of what it originally represented. From a figure endowed with life-supporting power, it becomes “the uncanny harbinger of death”.¹¹ In confrontation with our double, we are at once enthralled by the observation that it is possible to survive in the other and reminded of the fact that this very possibility only exists at the expense of our own individuality, that is to say by virtue of our willingness to relinquish our subjective uniqueness. The ambiguous status of doubles, which elicit admiration as well as hostility, repulsion as well as attraction, explains why our relation to ourselves, as reflected in similar others, is governed by what Freud called the “narcissism of minor differences” (*Narzißmus der kleinen Differenzen*).¹² In relation to the similar other, we tend to rescue our love for ourselves, our oneness and

9 Freud, S., “The Uncanny”, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17, ed. J. Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1955), 248. For a perspicacious Lacanian reading of this scene, see M. Dolar, “I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night: Lacan and the Uncanny”, in *October*, vol. 58 (1991), 5–23. p. 15 in particular.

10 See Rank, O., “The Double”, trans. H. Tucker (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971)

11 Freud, S., “The Uncanny”, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17, ed. J. Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1955), 235.

12 Freud, S., “Civilization and Its Discontents”, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 21, ed. J. Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1964), 114.

exclusivity, by emphasizing the small differences in the other, yet precisely in concentrating on these small distinguishing features we surreptitiously reinforce our similarity. After admitting to his “slightly disagreeable feeling” when meeting *Herr S. Freud* in his consultation room and thus, we may assume, to facing the prospect of somehow having to analyse himself in the other, Freud added between brackets and six years after *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* was first published: “(However, I must record the assurance of one of my critics that in this respect his feelings are the opposite of mine.)”¹³ Freud rarely agreed with his critics, yet in this case the guarantee that his namesake had experienced a “slightly agreeable feeling” when meeting his nominal alter ego seemed entirely worthy of mention.

There are numerous literary examples of how the alter ego triggers affective ambivalence in the ego and how the Freudian “narcissism of minor differences” prompts the ego to recognize and aggrandize the differential characteristics in the other. “It is difficult, indeed, to define, or even to describe, my real feelings towards him,” the narrator stated about his alter ego in Edgar Allan Poe’s *William Wilson*, “[t]hey formed a motley and heterogeneous admixture; —some petulant animosity, which was not yet hatred, some esteem, more respect, much fear, with a world of uneasy curiosity.”¹⁴ As the narrator confessed, the other William Wilson was in all but one respect a copy of himself: “[M]y rival had a weakness in the faucial or guttural organs, which precluded him from raising his voice at any time *above a very low whisper*. Of this defect I did not fail to take what poor advantage lay in my power.”¹⁵

In *August 25, 1983*, Jorge Luis Borges exploits the theme of the double by weaving a narrative about a fleeting encounter with himself as a dying older man in a hotel room. It should be

13 Freud, S., “The Psychopathology of Everyday Life”, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 6, ed. J. Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1960), 25.

14 Poe, E.A., “William Wilson”, in *The Complete Illustrated Stories and Poems* (London: Chancellor Press, 1988), 38.

15 Poe, E.A., “William Wilson”, 39.

noted, here, that this short story is in itself the reflection and continuation of another short story called *The Other*, published eight years earlier, in which Borges recounts an incident of meeting a younger version of himself on a bench in Cambridge MA.¹⁶ Hence, in both stories the alter ego is both similar and different, older in *August 25, 1983* and younger in *The Other*, and the same can be said about the two stories themselves. Similar in their narrative of Borges encountering himself, they are different insofar as the older narrator of (the older story) *The Other* appears as younger in (the younger story) *August 25, 1983*. For Borges, this double take on self-doubling elicits thought-provoking exchanges between the ego and his alter ego about dreams, the dreamer and the dreamt, which could be regarded as reflections upon the relative status of selfhood and subjectivity. “Who is dreaming whom?”, the narrator’s older self asks him in *August 25, 1983*, “I know I am dreaming you—I do not know whether you are dreaming me...” “I am the dreamer,” the narrator asserts, to which his older self replies: “Don’t you realize that the first thing to find out is whether there is only one man dreaming, or two men dreaming each other?”¹⁷

In his work *Looking for Alfred*, which may be considered a prequel or preliminary outline of *Double Take*, Grimonprez substituted Alfred Hitchcock for Jorge Luis Borges, adding to the effect of doubling by placing the director in the place of the writer and exchanging the textual narrative for the diegetic space of the film essay.¹⁸ Grimonprez’s decision to replace Borges with Hitchcock, here, is particularly astute, given the latter’s lifelong obsession with effects of doubling. Indeed, from *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) to *Strangers on a Train* (1951), from *Rebecca* (1940) to *Vertigo* (1958), and including *The Wrong Man* (1956), *Spellbound* (1945) and *North*

16 Borges, J.L., “August 25, 1983”, in *The Book of Sand and Shakespeare’s Memory*, trans. A. Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001), 99–104; Borges, J.L., “The Other”, in *The Book of Sand and Shakespeare’s Memory*, trans. A. Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001), 3–11.

17 Borges, J.L., “August 25, 1983”, 101.

18 See Bode, S., (ed.), *Johan Grimonprez: Looking for Alfred* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2007), 54–59.

by *Northwest* (1959), Hitchcock's films contain a kaleidoscopic array of doubles, replicas, duplicates, lookalikes, copies, surrogates and substitutes. Hitchcock's "double desire" should not be interpreted, here, as a dual, twofold desire—that is to say as a desire to animate his characters with a set of conflicting motives—but as a fundamental desire for doubles, which constantly raises questions about the significance of explosive interpersonal rivalries for the emergence and maintenance of identity, selfhood and individuality. The paradigm of these strange dual relationships is captured, of course, in the opening shots of *Shadow of a Doubt*, which Hitchcock himself regarded as his favourite film. Uncle Charlie (played by Joseph Cotten) and his niece Charlie (played by Teresa Wright) are both lying on their beds, uncle's head to the right and niece's head to the left, with the doors in the background situated respectively to the right and to the left, as if reflected in a mirror. "We are like twins; we are both alike," niece Charlie concedes later on. In other Hitchcock films, the effect of doubling is rendered in rather more subtle ways, and in some cases the duality of relationships is effectively reduced to the power of language or, as Lacan would say, to the intrinsic ambiguity of the signifier. As such, in *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956), Ambrose Chapel is first (and mistakenly) associated with the name of a taxidermist and only subsequently identified as the name of a place of worship. While acknowledging François Truffaut's seminal analysis of doubling effects in *Shadow of a Doubt*, Mladen Dolar has argued that Hitchcock's endless stream of dual relationships between people, places, scenes, names, motives and so on are actually more complicated than they appear, because they are invariably mediated by a third element, which "is not doubled in the mirror-image and which presents the hinge of the duplication".¹⁹ In *Shadow of a Doubt*, this third element is evidently money, which is present in large quantities in Uncle Charlie's bedroom, whereas niece Charlie is awoken from

19 Dolar, M., "Hitchcock's Objects", in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*, ed. S. Žižek (London/New York: Verso, 1992), 33.

her dreams by a conversation about its very absence. The object, here, resembles the famous Hitchcockian MacGuffin, something which serves the purpose of positioning the dramatis personae and carrying the narrative, without containing much significance in itself.

In *Double Take*, Grimonprez reinserts Hitchcock himself into a deadly dual relationship, yet the director's encounter with himself as a dying man—Hitchcock's encounter, in the first instance, but by a curious twist of fate also Grimonprez's encounter, since the main Hitchcock double (Ron Burrage) he identified would also prove to be a dying man—is no longer mediated by any kind of recognizable material object. Much like in Borges' stories, the mediating object between Hitchcock and his older avatar is recognition itself: that is to say, the acceptance by the other of being first and foremost, one, unique and original. Although each of them is "a caricature of the other", each of them is desperate to assert their singular existence, and the more desperate they become to see themselves recognized for who they are, the more their relationship descends into utter parody. Grimonprez's structure, here, involuntarily brings to mind Lacan's concept of the mirror stage, which he employed to describe and explain how the child's ego emerges as a result of an imaginary identification with its reflection in the mirror—a constituting ontological moment which signals the start for an endless power struggle between the ego and its alter egos, with prestige and recognition as the principal stakes of the resulting social conflict.²⁰

The brilliance of *Double Take*, of course, is that Grimonprez demonstrates how these conflictual dual relationships do not only occur in the fictionalized space of the Borgesian and Hitchcockian universe, but equally in the mediatized arena of western political ideology and mass-market advertising, especially during the Cold War. Although one may feel hard pressed to regard the explosive Kitchen Summit Conference between

20 See Lacan, J., "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience", in *Écrits*, trans. B. Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 75–81.

Khrushchev and Nixon as driven by the narcissism of minor differences, it nonetheless appears that they had “scripted the moment together”, battling for power, domination and hegemony in an infernal spiral of narcissistic self-assertion. Throughout the mutual taunting and reciprocal bluff, the threat of world-destruction is far less intimidating than the fear of being second. And if there is no other option than to admit that the other was first, whether in conquering space or in the discovery of fresh-perked coffee, then there is always the possibility of reproducing the original in improved form, quantitatively and/or qualitatively. In addition, Grimonprez suggests how western political ideology and mass-market advertising are deeply intertwined in their competitive quest for the recognition of their product superiority. And the strict allegiance of both forces does not only reveal itself in the identification and pursuit of common goals, but equally in the reliance on a shared set of interests. If a televised advertising campaign can persuade millions of consumers to buy a particular commodity, why would television not be effective in selling the political ideology of liberal economy and its free consumerism? If a certain type of political ideology rests on the social pillar of the nuclear family, as the heartland of consumerism, why wouldn't a televised advertising campaign be effective in selling the normative image of a happily married life alongside the product that allegedly sustains it?

In *Double Take*, Grimonprez demonstrates, then, that we as human beings are at once animated by a visceral desire to be first, one and unique and obsessed with copying, replicating and reproducing, seemingly accepting the loss of originality if the substitute brings with it the promises of newness, progress, enhancement and improvement. Why stick to fresh-perked coffee if instant Folgers tastes as good and it moreover allows for marital conflict to be transformed into newfound domestic bliss?

Double Take

Narration of the Film by Tom McCarthy

2009

They say that if you meet your double, you should kill him. Or that he will kill you. I can't remember which—but the gist of it is that two of you is one too many. By the end of the script, one of you must die.

I have pondered many times, but somehow never understood, the meaning of that fateful encounter one August afternoon in 1962—a story, I was to find out, that was scripted nonetheless by me. I have chewed the details over and over so repeatedly that the memory of it has become inaccurate, like a film scratched and faded by the years. The episode seems too strange to be real. Perhaps it happened, perhaps it still has to happen, perhaps it has never stopped happening.

We had replicated Davidson's pet shop on a set at Universal Studios in Los Angeles. We were shooting an episode of the type that my audience had already come to expect in each new film: the scene in which I myself make a fleeting appearance. This one had me exiting the shop, my two white terriers Geoffrey and Stanley trotting along the sidewalk in front of me, quite oblivious to the threat massing in the sky above.

I substituted a body-double for myself so that I could oversee a walk-through of the shot. I was about to re-insert myself into