

Dear

Editor



I've been asking myself recently whether no difference in appearance is any difference at all in a world of appearances. I'm picking through the first quarter of this century, and it feels like I'm walking around a Sturtevant exhibition. Not exactly *déjà vu*, it's more like trying to look at, rather than into, a mirror in which I, vampire-like, do not appear.

Dear Editor,

Maybe you can answer a question I've been thinking about. Why does Freud use a century-old Gothic horror story, *The Sandman* by E. T. A. Hoffman (1816), to illustrate his theory of the uncanny? Or, more specifically, why *doesn't* he talk about *film*? Freud focuses on the figures of the doppelgänger and the automaton, both of which had already made their cinematic debut by 1919, when he wrote "The Uncanny." Cinema is full of robots, dolls that come to life, possessed mannequins, etc.; and as for doppelgängers, what could be more uncanny than "twinning," when using double (or triple, quadruple) exposures, an actor can play identical selves standing side-by-side? That seems pretty up Freud's street if you ask me. *And* both Hoffman and Freud relate the uncanny to the stealing or loss of eyes, which seems to suggest an intimate relation to the visual. That's motive, means, and opportunity, as they say on *Law & Order*; so why would Freud overlook the ascendant medium of his day? One which would enjoy a close relationship to psychoanalysis throughout the twentieth century? What gives!?

Dear Editor,

When actors are "twinned" in film, they first play each role separately. They act/react towards some object that stands in for their absent self; a tennis ball held aloft on a stick is often used to represent where their gaze is meant to fall, the point of eye contact. The shots are then "stitched" together to create a complete image, where the actor appears twice in the same frame (as twins, clones, future/past selves, whatever); the realism of the effect depends on the skill of the actor and technician, but also the audience's desire to forget that each figure in the scene is actually speaking to an empty space. Like a collage, aligning the pieces only goes so far; the viewer sutures it into a whole.

This technique remained pretty unchanged from the beginning of cinema through the 1970s, but had some limits. The camera had to be perfectly still so that the two shots would align when composited, and the characters

could not cross the "seam" that divided the frame, let alone touch or cross in front or behind one another. The first major departure from this was the use of computerized motion tracking in David Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers* (1988), in which Jeremy Irons plays twin gynecologists Elliot and Beverly Mantle. By allowing the camera to move in exactly the same path in each take, the shot could move without the two images becoming misaligned. Irons could walk side-by-side with himself while the shot moved with them through the postmodern interior of their clinic. For the first time, the twinned actor could inhabit the world, rather than simply be framed by it.

Dear Editor,

Um, it seems important to point out that "twinning" as a special effect has no necessary relation to biological twins, and nothing to do with filming a pair of actual twins. It's not a question of content; they could be clones, demonic manifestations, or hallucinations. What makes twinning (as a verb) special is that it is a technical process; actually, if you overlook the technical aspect, the image flattens into something banal or self-evident. To appreciate it, we must simultaneously see and un-see its effect.

Think of it this way, dear editor. In his essay, Freud spends some time considering whether the uncanny is a result of undecidability: is the doppelgänger real? supernatural? a hallucination? or a trick or deception? Doubt pervades the world of the story, extending even to the sanity of the narrator, and this doubt, so the theory goes, produces the feeling of the uncanny. In the end Freud rejects this hypothesis in favor of the castration complex, but in a film like *Dead Ringers*, indeterminacy resolves into an unambiguous paradox: there is only one Jeremy Irons, but there are two of him. One Jeremy Irons looks another in the eye; the distance between their two gazes is apparently only a meter or two, but it seems large enough to induce vertigo. A dialogue is constructed out of two sets of disconnected utterances, each addressed towards a void, but we find it natural, even emotionally



Jeremy Irons, *Dead Ringers*, 1988

convincing. *Knowing* that it's a trick is what makes it seem strange, not the effect itself.

So Freud was right; there's no "undecidability" about the double. I don't know if I'd call it a castration complex, but it has something to do with that the emptiness between the two figures, which, I suspect, reflects another, nearer emptiness. I search for breaks in the moments that their eyes meet, some kind of telling misalignment; nonetheless my mind holds the fiction together, imagining a spontaneous exchange between these two figures, while knowing that, in all probability, they are actually talking to a tennis ball. There is some alienating effect, pulling me outside of the film's narrative, but I am not searching for a "critical awareness" of its manipulations. The tennis ball, dropped into this deep well between the two apparitions of Irons, does not splash back upon itself, but on the subjectivity it is meant to stand in for.

Dear Editor,

I mean, is it just me, or is the process of twinning, which retroactively produces the *effect* of a conversation, an appropriate model for the production of subjectivity *itself*? While discussing the twinning of Rachel Weisz in the *Dead Ringers* remake (2023), the visual effects supervisor (Eric Pascarelli) admits as much: "Acting itself is a visual effect." While his point was that the performance is what makes twinning convincing, his answer could be interpreted more literally: appearing as someone, anyone really, is the true special effect. Like, it's 2028; do you know where your subjectivity is?

Dear Editor,

I'm sure I'm not the only J-Lac fan to write in saying that the subject does not exist except in language. But it's not enough just to speak; it requires at least an image of the other to confirm that something has been communicated, that these words are mine, however slight the glance or nod in response. The self that speaks is an after effect, something projected backwards to retroactively authorize its statements. Imagine Weisz

performing each side of her dialogue with herself, her words falling unanswered, like one side of a telephone conversation; but she is not quite alone: there is the tennis ball, the image of the other reduced to its essential element. Everything extraneous is dispensed with; what remains is only the point of contact, the mutuality of the gaze.

Dear Editor,

Some aspects of this "twinning" thing are familiar from Louis Althusser's foundational study of subjectivity. The example of the tennis ball is no different in principle from those given in Althusser's text. There's the policeman on the street who orders me to stop, and in that gesture establishes me as an individual subject to the law, as well as grounds the law itself as a material practice in our encounter. There is an important difference, however, and it is precisely a material one. Rachel Weisz is talking to someone who isn't there, and she only becomes a non-schizophrenic subject when united with her doubled self. In the sutured space between the two images of Weisz, an entire chain of devices and mediations is contained and concealed, and several temporalities are folded within: not only the sequential shots of Weisz that are collapsed into a single moment, but also the strange already-afterwards of post-production. The dual figures of twinning have become for our time what the policeman was for Althusser: a model of the subject, but one heavily mediated by a technical apparatus, a post-hoc construct put together in an editing booth that retroactively disappears.

Dear Editor,

Where, precisely, in time do we meet? Somewhere between the dead past when I write these words and the future when you slice them open? A simulated present that is a composite of our different temporalities, I reckon. Dear editor, where are you in this loop, tinkering with your traces and remains—are you ahead of or behind me?



Rachel Weisz, *Dead Ringers*, 2023

Dear Editor,

Have you ever read Paul Preciado's column in *Libération*? It's a classier publication than this one, but its got the look of a tabloid. I think Preciado must appreciate the trashy-philosophical dialectic of the *Libé*. Anyhow, in one piece he describes teleconferencing between Athens and Barcelona, narrating a familiar sense of dispersion:

I watch her as she looks at a map on her screen. It is impossible to say at what instant her eyes stop seeing me, at what instant she has replaced my image with another. Our screens look at each other. Our screens love each other. When that happens, we are properly speaking neither here nor there. Music, maps, writing, we ourselves are relational entities, and our love, we exist at that point as constituted, in the space that Deleuze calls 'the fold,' whose internal externalities are made of thousands of internet cables, folded, folded over, and unfolded over hundreds of thousands of screens.

Preciado narrates his encounter as one of dislocation, not knowing whether the other is looking at him or another image on her screen. The gaze has suddenly changed from a single point into a flat field; the "tennis ball" is now in motion, a vector that Preciado chases from one side of the court to the other. These volleys open all kinds of uncertainties: did they hear me? are they responding to me or to something else? where along this network do we "meet"? The loss is unsettling but also opens onto new identifications, in which the camera and screen, like the tennis ball, stands in for the interlocutor. Preciado cannot look directly into the eyes of someone on screen; instead he must look into the camera: his eyes meet the apparatus, and it is the screens who stare lovingly at each other. In this account, technology is no longer a prosthetic, something instrumental, but something which loves and is loved. Perhaps our own experience is simply peripheral to the screens' amorous longing; we are the clothes on the floor next to this new love-making, the friction between two points in

a network rubbing back on itself; or perhaps just as I need the other to recognize myself as the one who loves, the computers need us, too, to witness the exchange of all those data packets.

Dear Editor,

I've been thinking about a time in the near future when it will be possible for everyone to have their own personal clone: an autonomous double to take your place that would act, speak, and think as you would. It could shop for you easily enough—that data is already well harvested—or attend social obligations, sit in a chair and listen to a speech or make small talk. The real problem, I think, wouldn't be teaching it my preferences or dietary restrictions, or even behavior like gestures or circadian rhythm (although of course it wouldn't really sleep; and who's to say it would ever really be awake either). I think the hard part would be teaching it all the things I would not do. In the end we are not so much our choices but our taboos, what we have repressed rather than what we do. Restraint is hard to quantify; by its very nature, it is an empty data set. The causes of inhibition are often murky, half the time unknown even to me. How can I teach my double to react to something as nuanced as being touched, when so many subtle distinctions are at play? Would it have to experience my whole history of embarrassments to properly learn my most personal, most arbitrary boundaries? Such lessons cannot be conveyed in large data sets; they must be spoon-fed doses of *à la carte* pain.

Dear Editor,

There isn't much twinning in Jordan Peele's *Us* (2019)—for the most part it sticks to more traditional techniques, such as over the shoulder shots, for which a body double would suffice. There is one extended struggle between Adelaide and her doppelgänger Red (both played by Lupita Nyong'o) that used a combination of compositing and facial mapping; and another scene in which the younger Adelaide/Red chokes her double.



Madison Curry, *Us*, 2019



Lindsay Lohan, *The Parent Trap*, 1998

Lindsay Lohan, *The Parent Trap*, 1998



Madison Curry, *Us*, 2019

Instead of a single character being twinned, *Us* assigns a double to the entire American body-politic—its aims are allegorical.

The doppelgängers in *Us* are “tethered” by an invisible force to their above-ground counterparts, whom they crudely pantomime in a maze of underground tunnels. We learn that they were created by an unnamed entity as a kind of experiment to control their surface doubles, but have since been abandoned. As the windowless, painted cinder block hallways and tiled floors that they dwell in suggest, they have been given over to the care of the *biopolitical*: prison, school, hospital, or psychiatric ward, the doubles are administered as products of some power-knowledge regime. Whatever the original intention, they now constitute a population to be tended, fed, and administered, a difficult remainder; they are institutionalized. The plot of the film is set in motion when a young girl from the surface, Adelaide, wanders to the threshold of the underground where she meets her doppelgänger in 1986. Red imprisons Adelaide and switches clothes with her before taking her place above ground. While their outfits are similar, the clothing in the underground is an imprecise copy of the surface world garments. Adelaide is wearing a T-shirt featuring Michael Jackson’s *Thriller*, but Red’s shirt has only a vague stain where the figures and lettering should be. In a sense, what the underground world lacks is precisely this dimension of signifiers: words and images are blurred, as is whatever sense of symbolic inclusion they might suggest. When Adelaide joins the group underground, she brings with her *representation*. Her T-shirt depicts the logo of the Hands Across America campaign, a chain of paper cut-out figures stretched across a map of the United States, inserting a simple representation of “the People” into a world bereft of any images. At the end of the film, after a night of violence, the doppelgängers join hands in a re-enactment of the Hands Across America gesture 33 years later.

Us asks what happens when the body that is disciplined, cared for, measured, and institutionalized wants to be one of “The People,” that abstract horizon of the nation.

I think it would be a simplification, however, to interpret these as two distinct groups of people, the represented and unrepresented. As the doubling suggests, they are two *aspects* of the same body politic: the social body tended by a biopolitical apparatus and the sovereign People, the bearers of sovereignty over the imagined nation. The claim of the doppelgängers, then, is the collapse of a split first theorized by medieval jurists as the doctrine of the “King’s Two Bodies,” a distinction that Eric Santner points out remains within the genealogy of the democratic state. At the level of the individual, according to Santner, the crisis of sovereignty corresponds to an anxious loop between the roles one plays in the social world of signifiers (citizen, mother, judge, doctor, prisoner, etc.) and the clinical body, the bundle of nerves, flesh, and tissue that must bear these titles. The People possesses its own counterpart, a collective body that is often said to need “defending,” “healing,” even disciplining; but this shared flesh can also appear grotesque and unmanageable, as in the opening scene of *Us*, where it is invoked by a TV ad for Hands Across America: “What has 12 million eyes? 192 million teeth? And stretches from the Golden Gate Bridge all the way to the Twin Towers?”

Dear Editor,

You say “twins” and I think of the Twin Towers. Just how my mind works—I was 13 when they fell down, at my school in New Jersey, about 45km (as the crow flies) to lower Manhattan. We didn’t have TVs inside the school, so I didn’t really see images of the buildings until I got home, by which point they had already collapsed. So what I actually remember from that day is 4th period gym class. I think we were playing soccer, or maybe capture the flag, when an F-15 jet flew right above us. It flickered against the sky for a moment, and everyone stopped running after the ball and looked up. We all stood motionless staring at the cloudless sky, a little too long, well past the point of seeing any trace of the plane, left to ponder only the loud roar that lingered in its absence. We seemed



Rachel Weisz, *Dead Ringers*, 2023

to be monitoring the empty blue field itself; looking for what, I'm not sure. So when you say "twins", I think of something which fails to appear. I never thought that much about the "twin-ness" of the towers, although Jean Baudrillard did write (after the fact) that "the two World Trade Center towers were the perfect embodiment of this definitive order precisely in their twin nature."

Dear Editor,

So my doppelgänger was delivered last week, and while advertised as plug and play, I've found training it frustrating. In particular, instilling *neuroses* acquired through trauma has proved challenging, due in no small part to its fight or flight factory setting. I knew this would involve administering daily treatments to achieve the repressed behaviors that would properly mirror my own; obviously it became necessary to restrain and confine it for this purpose. I know I signed up for all that; but I hadn't anticipated that I would have to relive each of my traumas in the *opposite role* that I experienced them. Like a good sparring partner, to teach defense I must attack, and repression is nothing if not a kind of psychic defense. So I must now perversely assume the role of my own abuser; but more than what I have suffered at the hands of others, it is the instances of my own viciousness that stalk my thoughts. So stranger still, to imprint a sense of *guilt*, I must play the *victims* of my own past violence, and, like a true masochist, teach my doppelgänger how to hurt me. Where's *that* in the manual, I ask you.

Dear Editor,

Watching Rachel Weisz's twin scenes, rather than the old to-and-fro of *Verfremdungseffekt*, I find myself directed towards another fiction, one more fundamental than what's on the screen. I mean a "bigger" one which seems to underwrite our times, a simple idea, completely stupid actually, but hard to see, because we know it's a fiction but act like it isn't. That's why the "hermeneutics of suspicion" are no use anymore; there's

nothing to uncover because the whole "reveal" is part of the routine. Instead of the theorist's *voilà!* it takes the form of the Freudian disavowal: "I know very well, but all the same..."

I see the real Rachel Weisz in candid moments posted by Hilton Als, who would never write for a sordid rag like this one but is not above using Instagram. Some of the photos, Als tells us, come from in-person meetings during the pandemic, when face-to-face contact became a precious occasion, the very coin of authenticity. The images are overlaid with a Polaroid filter, a rhetorical gesture to materiality; so we quickly recognize the camera tricks and digital effects—we know there is only one Rachel Weisz, although we see two—but this is just the set up for the larger fiction in which we might have, as Octave Mannoni would put it, faith: that which seems to be is equivalent to that which is. Call it the inverted paranoid stance, as counter-intuitive as that may seem in our paranoid times.

This comes, appropriately, in twin axioms. First, it poses the subject as a technical fabrication, an effect of film, a communication network, a predictive algorithm, etc. You could call this the "Elliot" proposition, after the Mantle twin who (in the Rachel Weisz version) fixates on growing a human embryo entirely by laboratory means. The subject, twinning suggests, is never there until the apparatus conjures it; and this never happens at the site of production, but always at the moment of reception, or, the second proposition: this subject can be validated only by and for an observer. There is no question of an interior state or psyche. The only criterion is how effectively it functions as a subject within a circuit, where recognition by another (presumably human) observer underwrites its equivalency. In film, the viewer plays this role, investing the disconnected utterances of Rachel Weisz with psychic life. Now, rhetorical consistency demands I name this second proposition the "Beverly," but it does sort of fit. As in the circuit described above, her identity, separate from that of Elliot, emerges only through third-party recognition: her lover Genevieve, one of the few



Jeremy Irons, *Dead Ringers*, 1988

people who can tell the Mantle sisters apart, the one who, to paraphrase Deleuze, extracts her from her pack, however small, and finds her own packs, the multiplicities she encloses within herself. But I don't need to give this second proposition a name; it is already known as the Turing Test.

Dear Editor,

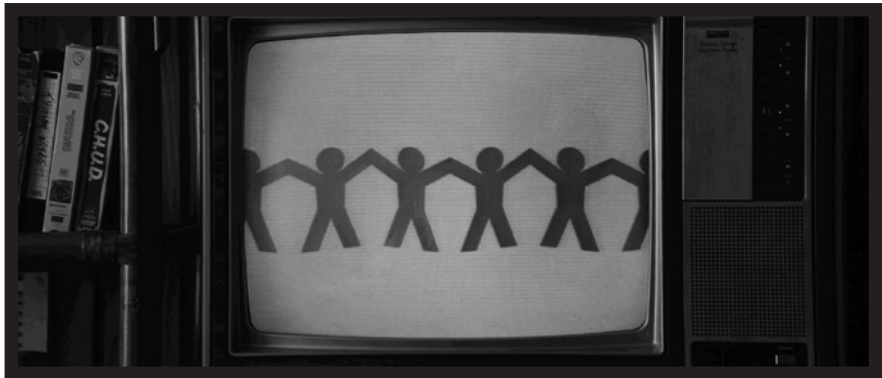
I once used the Cameo app to pay Lindsay Lohan to make a short video. At the time I felt a bit like the sorcerer's apprentice, meddling with powers beyond my control, and a little surprised that, having uttered the magic words and paid the \$500 fee, I had successfully conjured her. Perhaps there was a shade of pathos as well, prompted by her headlines at the time: Lindsay in rehab, Lindsay is broke, Lindsay on the run. Did she move to Dubai because she ran out of good will in Hollywood? Unlikely. It strikes me now that Cameo was an app for a very specific historical juncture, one which closed with the advent of the AI-generated celebrity avatar. The videos made for Cameo already follow a somewhat algorithmic format of happy birthdays, anniversaries, and encouraging words to new graduates and entrepreneurs. The requests for these videos are limited to short text-based prompts not so different from what a predictive algorithm might be able to process.

During the shooting of *The Canyons* (2013), her last lead roll for nearly 9 years, Lohan was beset by widely reported off-set difficulties. Even *The New York Times Magazine* (not typically a rival of TMZ) covered the shoot, noting Lohan's accumulated debts across Los Angeles, and the difficulties of producing a film with an actress that most companies considered too volatile to insure. It was impossible to watch the film and not see the Lohan of tabloid headlines, who seemed to merge with her on-screen character; and she was really *good* in that movie. This "twin" is always there, but now, no longer content to speak in the metatext, it wants the main role.

It would be relatively simple to generate a digital version of Lindsay Lohan. Such an avatar would not be hired as much as licensed;

it would never be on-camera or off-set, but would simply be in-network, potentially present at any point and at any time, for inspirational speeches, birthdays, or relationship counseling. This figure is no longer charismatic; its aura has faded, replaced by a holographic glow as the network itself emerges as the protagonist of this new image. We seem to live in a vast network saturated with personality cults (it doesn't matter whether this person is an entertainer, politician, ethnonationalist, spiritual guru, etc.), but this is a reversal of cause and effect: our leaders do not inhabit the network, they are an expression of it.

In the final episode of the *Dead Ringers* remake, we see two holographic images of the twin sisters welcoming patients to one of their many franchised birthing centers. As pressures from their investors cause Beverly and Elliot to tear each other apart, their computer generated images extend their personae throughout their national network as a simulacrum of the highly personalized care that their facilities promise to deliver. Their virtual avatars reassure patients and investors that the charismatic founder lives on in the networks of biopolitical care and finance, even as one twin carves the other up and assumes her identity. The cinematic automaton emerges again at the twilight of film, not as a figure on screen, an actor in a robot suit or an animated doll, but as the circulation of images itself: the potential of the virtual double to proliferate anywhere within the network. It will be the editors who control the flow of these images, who composite a Lindsay here or a Jeremy there. It turns out that the doppelgänger and the automaton, at the moment that cinema fractures across an omnipresent screen, converge.



Presence.



Becket MWN, 2028