

# MAY



## “Nothing rings a bell?”, Brice Dellsperger, *Body Double 22*

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Brice Dellsperger, “More Body Doubles”, Air de Paris, February 20 – March 20, 2010.

“As he reaches the front steps of his own house he realizes that all the regularity of his normal life, all the security of his existence, was nothing but deception and delusion.”<sup>1</sup>

“Do you remember last summer in Cape Cod? Do you remember one night, in the dining room, there was that young Navy officer? [. . .] Nothing rings a bell?” With these words, and the ensuing narrative, Nicole Kidman plunges Tom Cruise into a state of terror. What happened next in *Eyes Wide Shut* would involve the consequences of this fantasized tale, which sunders the unruffled world of the Harford family, a world which Tom Cruise’s smile, ever more grimacing as the film progresses, tries to save at all costs. How can this sundering be recorded? This is perhaps what Brice Dellsperger strives to do in *Body Double 22*.

Since 1995, Brice Dellsperger has been producing remakes of films based on a strict methodology. In most of them, one and the same actor, the artist Jean-Luc Verna, plays all the characters, of both genders, as a tribute to the drag-queen shows which have marked the artist: “I’ve always been fascinated by drag-queen spectacles because they tell us about men and women at the same time. There’s not really one character who holds sway. On a visual level, it’s a story about a woman. On a level to do with reality, it’s a story about a man.”<sup>2</sup> These deliberately flawed remakes never try to “stick” to the original version. On the contrary, it is a matter, each time, of gauging the gap that occurs between the original film and Dellsperger’s reformulated version, and, needless to say, it is the image which most conspicuously carries any such discrepancy. The use of the “blue screen” actually encourages visual “conflagrations,” as the graft produced by the cut-in never takes perfectly. As for the soundtrack, it is taken from the original one, and then re-played by Jean-Luc Verna.<sup>3</sup> Dellsperger’s films have an immediately recognizable style, which comes straight from these never disguised visual anomalies, about which we cannot properly say whether they function on the side of excess (exaggeration of poses and postures, cross-dressing, make-up, costumes) or on the side of a neutralization of effects (getting rid of narrative conventions, simplified sets, exposure of structures).

At the origin of this activity embarked upon in 1995 we find Brian de Palma’s *Body Double* (1984), a cannibalistic film, deriving from Hitchcock, whom it quotes, disembowels, puts back together, and deconstructs. Remake, stand-in, body double, and voyeurism are the central themes. In a kitsch world—the world of Los Angeles and its pasteboard decors—a long new-generation view triggers a highly improbable scenario. Propped against this film of reflections and artifice, which are used like structure and prototype, the remakes nevertheless each strive towards a different source-film.

When shown in art galleries, Dellsperger’s films thus work at establishing links between film and contemporary art: if Brian de Palma is the primary reference, the connection that these remakes create also rings out with the camp chapter of the history of experimental film, which the figure of the film-maker Jack Smith (1932 – 1989) incarnates most dazzlingly. Reversal, parodies, every manner of highlight, conscious duplicity, assertive sexuality, outrageously exaggerated set and theatricality—the camp aesthetic as described by Susan Sontag in 1964 in a famous article responds admirably to the release of *Flaming Creatures*, a trans-genre manifesto

movie by Jack Smith which would have mixed fortunes. The mid-1960s thus adjusted a critical discourse to a frenzied and glamorous formal deregulation: in both, drag made it possible to “examine the space of the representation from its sidelines.”<sup>4</sup> As a critical operator and a force of deconstruction, drag—and transvestites—upsets conventions and grapples with Hollywood productions. As Philippe-Alain Michaud wrote: “Smith made explicit in *Flaming Creatures* what was still implicit in the films of Sternberg and the ‘Vehicles’ of Maria Montez, then Yvonne de Carlo: a work on visual textures, on exotic decors, on androgynous sexuality.”<sup>5</sup> It is this marginal history of the link between experimental film and cross-dressing that Brice Dellsperger “imports” into the white cube of contemporary art galleries.

In *Body Double 22*, recently shown at Air de Paris, Dellsperger is inspired by *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999): “A contradictory attraction: I didn’t know how to take this film, which end to attack it from, and I felt a strength in it, though I don’t know what it consists of—but it involves me.”<sup>6</sup> Kubrick’s film, adapted from a short story by Arthur Schnitzler, tells the tale of a nightmarish episode in the life of a New York doctor’s family. What is new here, with regard to how the *Body Double* films usually function, is that Dellsperger and Verna together selected the scenes they wanted to re-enact. For the first time, the editing of the original film is thus not complied with. Put back together, densified, and squeezed into a few key scenes by the operations which he coordinates—Dellsperger presents the real skeletal structure of *Eyes Wide Shut*. The remake gesture here possibly takes a new turn: in investigating the original film through film-making, the re-staging is duplicated by a documentary project. Now, how is a film to be documented by the film?

At the hub of Dellsperger’s remake we find the scene of the orgiastic ceremony. The theater chosen by the artist to accommodate, among other scenes, the remake of this scene helps to explain this idea of documentarization. By introducing a decor that is absent in Kubrick’s work, in order to stage his remake, the artist produces a shift which here acts as commentary. For if *Eyes Wide Shut* does not include any scene that occurs in a theater, the whole of the film nevertheless responds to highly theatrical rules.

Situated in the middle of *Eyes Wide Shut*, permeated by a masked and impassive Tom Cruise, the ceremony sequence is treated by Kubrick in the most obviously fantastic way: masks, nudity, music, undeniably kitsch set. Ultimately, the excessive staging produces an “expected,” almost stiff, representation of what a scene of this kind might be like. This, incidentally, is probably the filmmaker’s goal: showing fantasy as governed by convention. *Eyes Wide Shut* can easily be understood as a film dealing with cliché: cliché of bourgeois mores and their closest secrets. When Tom Cruise, in his mind, puts into images the fantasized tale of his wife, the transposition takes place in black and white, in slow motion—the Navy officer in uniform, Kidman in a floral printed dress and high heels: a model of the genre. The film’s opening scene is also exemplary. Its soundtrack is taken from Shostakovich’s *Jazz Suite*; it starts with the credits but continues into the opening shots, which see the Harford couple getting dressed for a party. We follow Tom Cruise into his bedroom, then into the bathroom where Nicole Kidman is finishing getting herself ready. The music continues while the couple leaves the bathroom, and it is in a very discreet way that we see Tom Cruise press the hifi system’s off button. The music stops. This softly Viennese air, from another era, was really part of the decor (“in”) and not of the credits (“off”). So this music is what the couple is listening to before they go out, producing their own *mise en scène*, and turning the most complete artifice into the setting for their privacy.

Like this sequence—which overexposes the middle-class interior by making it an “artificial environment” rather than trying to make it singular—the film actually deploys one and the same “scene”: the party, the confession, the orgy, the dream, the morgue, New York streets by night . . . all are connected by an almost programmatic datum which seems to neutralize the differences: this is the “cliché” value that Kubrick attributes to each one of these fragments. Cliché of the party scene: glasses of champagne, barely disguised seduction, the usual dialogues and smiles. Cliché of Nicole Kidman’s memory: Cape Cod, the Navy officer, glances exchanged in a hotel lobby. Cliché of the orgy followed by that of the dream . . . One and the same “scene” for one and the same question: what is more personal to us, and what should most aptly differentiate us (our privacy), actually functions everywhere in accordance with the same rules and the same mainsprings.

Documenting the cliché is perhaps what Brice Dellsperger has been working at since his earliest remakes. But this idea finds its almost ideal object in *Eyes Wide Shut*. The artist’s find (the theater as an area of shared inclusion) demonstrates the analytical appropriateness of the work he develops in the place of Kubrick’s movie. It may seem paradoxical to link theater and documentary. And yet, the work of laying bare the cinematographic challenges and procedures proposed by Dellsperger here finds a perfect application. For the theatrical space in which most of *Body Double 22* takes place has its corollary: many scenes chosen by Dellsperger are subjected to the eye of those taking part in the ceremony, with inserts on masked faces acting like a counterpoint to the filmed situations. The best example of this voyeurism is probably embodied by the way in which Dellsperger appropriates the confession scene, as told by Nicole Kidman to Tom Cruise about her glances exchanged with that Navy officer at Cape Cod and the things that she might have done next (“If you men only knew . . .” she says before starting her tale). Originally, this scene takes place in the couple’s bedroom. With Dellsperger, of course, this bedroom incorporates the theater set, with this important subtle difference: the sequence will not be shot on stage but where the spectators are supposed to be. What is more, the artist transposes it to the middle of the ceremony, to the center of the circle formed by the naked, masked women. The couple’s privacy and intimacy are neatly exposed for all to see. What Dellsperger thus creates is a merging of sequences that are clearly distinct in Kubrick’s movie. A way, perhaps, of establishing their equivalence.

In his work involving dream interpretations, Freud singles out several motifs, including those of displacement and condensation, which we are told are: “One of the essential modes of the functioning of the unconscious processes: a sole idea represents several

associative chains at whose point of intersection it is located. From the economic viewpoint, what happens is that the idea is cathected by the sum of those energies which are concentrated upon it by virtue of the fact that they are attached to these different chains.”<sup>7</sup> As an aggregative process of fusion and combination, condensation tallies with Dellsperger’s work here: by bringing onto a plane of equivalence two very separate scenes in the original film, he produces a third term corresponding to their fusion but which, above all, comments admirably on both. Nicole Kidman’s tale informing her husband about her secret desires is in fact the equivalent of the ordeal which this latter inflicts upon himself by taking part in the orgy as an onlooker. Both scenes tally with each other. We also know that condensation finds in the dream (which is the formal and process-related vein of *Eyes Wide Shut*) its best representation. In his essay titled “On Dreams,” Freud explains: “The dream never utters the alternative ‘either/or’, but accepts both as having equal rights in the same connection. When ‘either/or’ is used in the reproduction of dreams, it is to be replaced by ‘and’.”<sup>8</sup> Dellsperger actually stages this hypothesis: the dream *and* the orgy *and* the tale of a hypothetical case of adultery and other sequences still co-exist in the set which he has imagined, that of the theater, of appearances, and of artifice. The gesture is to be understood as a commentary, an interpretation of the original object. As such, Dellsperger’s remake maybe likened to a kind of informed documentary of *Eyes Wide Shut*.

On 14 May, 1922 Freud wrote to Schnitzler: “I have tormented myself with the question why in all these years I never sought you out and had a conversation with you? [. . .] The answer to this question contains what appears to me as too intimate. I think I have avoided you from a kind of reluctance to meet my double.”<sup>9</sup> Published a few years later, Schnitzler’s *Traumnovelle*, which would act as a canvas for Kubrick, thus treats this figure of the double today used by Dellsperger as a tool for re-reading and analyzing the history of the cinema. The overlaps—between genres, disciplines, methods, media and periods—which are in this way offered to us create the idea of a liberation. The flamboyant and yet anaemic aspect of Dellsperger’s remakes embodies, at best, the need for the experimental: thereby, both the observation and the hijacking of conventions confirm their subversive dimension.

1. Arthur Schnitzler, *Rhapsody: A Dream Novel*, trans. O. P. Schinnerer (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), 112–113.

2. “Hollywood Drag,” Vincent Simon, Yagg.com, 12 March 2010.

3. In the case of *Body Double 22*, the scenes were shot based on existing dialogues, then re-enacted by actors specialized in dubbing, who stayed as close as possible to Verna’s performance.

4. The expression comes from Philippe-Alain Michaud, commenting on the text by Jean-Claude Lebensztejn, *A Beauty Parlour* (1976), in his essay: “En passant l’octroi.’ Sur le travesti au cinéma,” in *Sketches. Histoire de l’art, cinéma* (Paris: Editions Kargo, 2006), 81.

5. *Ibid.*, 86.

6. “Hollywood Drag,” *op.cit.*

7. J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974), 82.

8. Sigmund Freud, “On Dreams,” Trans. M. D. Eder (New York: Cosimo, 2009), 24.

9. Sigmund Freud, *Letters of Sigmund Freud*, selected and edited by Frist L. Freud, translated by Tania and James Stun (Basic Books, 1960), 339.

*Translated from French by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods*

Image : Brice Dellsperger, *Body Double 22*, 2010, with Jean-Luc Verna, video projection, 37 min.