
Double Dealing

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Art sets itself apart in some way or other, otherwise one would not notice art as art. A classical example is of course the *trompe-l'œil* case. If we do not reveal the *trompe-l'œil* as the visual pun that it is, then we would not have noticed it as something special at all in the first place. There would then have been no work of art setting itself apart. However, if, for instance, a *trompe-l'œil* painting of a door was not seen as the visual pun that it actually was, then it would have been nothing but an ordinary door – in the mind of the beholder – a door to open and walk through, if one had wished to. So, there are three possibilities here: i) the revealed *trompe-l'œil* door, ii) the unrevealed *trompe-l'œil* door that we remember having seen but never tried to open, and, iii) the *trompe-l'œil* door we cannot even remember that we have seen. And of course we can imagine real doors taken for *trompe-l'œil* doors etc, cases that, however, will not be discussed here. So, I have introduced here the idea of art as a, in a certain sense, deceitful *in-vention*. Today, much art appears to take the form of a deceitful *inter-vention*. Have we not heard about many cases of how people engaged in their everyday doings, suddenly come to realize – often with a sting of irritation or even anger – that they are taking part in some other person's premeditated act-of-art? Now, I am not embarking here on an exploration of such deceitful interventions. But since there is a general reference to art as deceit in what follows, my account, I suppose, has bearings on certain kinds of contemporary art.

Listen. I state: the disclosure of deceit in art, the disclosure of double-dealing, defines the limits of the act of art. It is precisely this that I want to focus on, the double-dealing that defines an act of art – remember the *trompe-l'œil* case. But is a *trompe-l'œil* painting really an act of art? Is it not an art *object*, like all paintings are? I would prefer to call the *trompe-l'œil* painting, not an art object, but an act-of-art, in the sense that we get prepared to take a step of action, or actually take action, in relation to this kind of a work of art, for instance, the action of

checking whether there is a real handle on the door or not. Compare a painting of a beach landscape with palm trees, blinding sunlight and so on, which does not for a second set me looking for my sunglasses.

Let us move to another example, namely, the magician's conjuring act, which is appropriately called an act of art, in the sense that it involves sleight-of-hand, like card tricks, card tricks in which someone in the audience, one of us, is invited to pick a card and so on. Here, deceit and double-dealing is the issue. And we tend to smile and be fascinated when fooled by the magician's act. How can it be that we are happy when being fooled? Probably because we initially entrusted the magician to perform the trick of pulling our leg, simply by considering him or her a magician. Compare this with the aforementioned deceitful intervention that we know from contemporary art, where an artist tricks us without forewarning. This tends to induce our – the beholders' – disappointment and anger.

A magician's conjuring act is a case of double-dealing that amuses and satisfies, at least for the moment. Of course, double-dealing in life tends to be a bad thing, generally speaking. However, I shall try to show the "good thing" about double-dealing, namely, as critical to our conception of the aesthetic act. Notice that I introduce the concept "aesthetic act" here. My account so far has very much had the function of underpinning the idea of the aesthetic act. I started with the notion of an art-object, then I talked about acts-of-art, and now, about aesthetic acts. I feel most at ease with the last notion, the notion of the aesthetic act; I feel more at ease with this notion than with the notions of art-works and acts-of-art, respectively. Why? Simply because I want to relate my thinking to everyday action rather than to art. If, for instance, someone is said to have made his life a work or art (read as an art object), I would not like to be that person myself. On the other hand, many of us naturally embrace the idea of seeing fellow beings as being engaged in, and performing, aesthetic acts by sheer living.

Let us focus on one particular example of double-dealing: a 46-second shot from Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* from 1999, starring Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman.¹ Let me start by describing the scene. It is a scene of passion between Tom Cruise, alias Dr. William Harford, and his wife Nicole Kidman, alias Alice – incidentally Nicole Kidman and Tom Cruise were at the time married also in real life. The scene starts with a very distinct cut and it ends with an equally distinct cut. Now, what makes the initial and concluding respective cuts so dis-

1. Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* is based on Arthur Schnitzler's "Traumnovelle" (Dream novel), 1926.

tinct is primarily the soundtrack, namely, the cut-out chorus of “Baby did a bad bad thing”, adding a heavy, triggering, and of course, unbroken pulse to the scene. In fact, the sense of enhanced continuity established by the beat is so persuasive that it took repetitive viewings before I realized that the scene was done in two shots.

The scene stands out as clearly, yet in a subtle way, as, say, Shakespeare’s recurrent actors playing actors in a play in the play. Up to now I have stressed the sharp contours of the scene, the way it stands out, the way it is clearly set off, from the preceding and following scene. However, visually, and generally speaking, the overall tendency of the 46 seconds is of a mood quickly rising, then soon fading out, or phasing into a state of clarity, or into a state of confusion, a state of understanding or a state of misunderstanding. What I am talking about is an aspect of double-dealing.

What happens, more exactly? We observe an undressed Kidman from quite close behind standing in front of a hall mirror. She is in the process of taking off her earrings. It is late. She has had a little too much champagne. She is at home. She moves slightly, leisurely, as if the music was in her head. There is a lingering feeling about her in this inceptive part of the scene. The camera is slowly moving even closer. There is nobody in the room, except for her. Then, Tom Cruise, equally naked, appears in the mirror, close to her. So he was obviously there. But notice, he appears first in the mirror, only a moment later do we also see him in the room. There is nothing sudden about his appearance. The scene has changed; yet nothing has changed – and it does not trouble me. Let me make a comparison here. First I read the scene as though Kidman was alone, then, to my surprise I realise that Cruise has been there from the start. Compare this to a person’s starting to read a sentence afresh, after having made a reading error. Then the corrected reading replaces the faulty reading, whereas my “corrected” reading of the mirror scene – that is, with Tom Cruise as being in the room from the beginning – does not replace my first impression of Kidman as being alone.

Let me show you one single frame from this scene. Here we are... It is chosen from the tail end of the scene, it is perhaps the very last frame of the scene, even. It has been chosen as the teaser of the whole film, used in marketing. Either Kubrick himself, or the producer, or some PR agent – Kubrick died before the film was brought to completion – chose this frame because they thought that this particular image would attract an audience. For good reasons, we can assume. Now, back to the scene...

He starts kissing her neck. She takes off her glasses. She looks at herself in the

mirror repeatedly, the camera draws closer, her eyes catch a glimpse of herself, and of the two of them. Here, after 30 seconds of the 46-second scene, comes an almost indiscernible cut. The camera has moved slightly to the side, so that her fixed gaze (her watching of herself) no longer obtains. It is as though the gaze misses its goal, a sliding, skidding gaze. It should be noted here that the camera is now so close to her, close to them, that we cannot tell if we are looking at a mirror reflection or directly into her face, directly at them. However, we have fallen into a visual trap, because, at close inspection, I notice that the camera has been moved rather drastically to the side, so that there is no mirror confusion involved at all here. We are in fact looking at her more or less straight on. All this is done with subtle means; the camera tracking shot and the discreet cut are mixed up with Kidman's turning around towards Cruise, and it is difficult to sort out how these movements and dislocations add to and subtract from one another. Now, I understand that it is very difficult to follow what it is I am trying to show here. Let it suffice to say that my account is meant to convey how the scene is constructed, technically speaking, because nothing is in fact hidden as far as I can see. To emphasise: if you have what I say here in print, on paper, you could easily check my deconstruction against the film. However, you can grasp what I am saying, I suppose, if I tell you that the photograph of her and Cruise does *not* show her looking into the mirror but in fact right into the middle of nowhere or something equivalent to nowhere, rather like when you find yourself looking at something without really seeing it.

What is special about this scene of seduction? First, there are of course innumerable scenes of seduction in motion pictures. However, there are not many of these innumerable scenes, in which a protagonist escapes the tight grip or closure of the aspired union of seduction. Isn't it the case that in the majority of seduction scenes we observe protagonists either looking into one another's eyes or with their eyes shut or maybe floating away together on waves of emotion? So, what we have here is in a way some kind of "inverted intimacy". I mean the following: had she been looking at herself, then there would be a voyeuristic intimacy, and this is in point of fact our immediate impression of the scene. This is how I made you see the image to begin with, as a mirror scene. But as I have told you, this is not the case. Is it not more appropriate to read her attention as lack of attention, in this case, lack of intimacy, or "inverted intimacy", namely, if attention is understood as an intellectual process establishing closeness, and in its extreme form, enhanced closeness, that is, intimacy. Now, I have to remind you that the image you are looking at is one split second at the very end of the 16-second

shot that concludes the scene. Reading the whole 16-second shot, we get the impression of a balancing between attentiveness and inattentiveness, between attention and lack of attention. It is this balancing that I would refer to as characteristic of aesthetic double-dealing: the crossing and braiding of attention and lack of attention, the crossing and braiding of attentiveness and inattentiveness.

It has probably not escaped your grasp that this scene is a version of the classic mirror-trick scene in art, the standard form of which is a Venus figure seen from behind looking at her own face in the mirror (*Rokeby Venus* by Velázquez is a well-known example). The main point of this construction is, of course, the suggestion that we cannot conclusively separate the act of looking into a mirror and the act of looking into a picture. How does this work in the *Eyes-Wide-Shut* scene? The scene starts by our seeing Kidman's figure from behind and in the mirror. My impression is that my "immediate" and "mediated" reading of her figure are equally important. And I think that this equilibrium possibly reminds us of the somewhat stirring (disturbing) equilibrium of our looking at ourselves in a mirror, of my looking at myself in a mirror. You men, just think about how it is when you try out some new outfit in front of the boutique dressing-room mirror, a swaying equilibrium indeed where you and your image of yourself meet and act towards one another. First, back to the film: the *Eyes-Wide-Shut* scene ends in a state in which immediacy and mediation somehow collapse. Now back to the boutique example: consider the collapse of you and your image of yourself when you have become comfortable in your new suit. Now, does your new comfort affect your having become accustomed to your refreshed image of yourself? What I am saying, basically, is of course that in the *Eyes-Wide-Shut* example, as well as in the boutique example, we learn about what happens when reflections are in the process of being integrated into our life, when reflections are in the process of being absorbed in our bodies, we learn that the almost *ritual* duality of double-dealing dissolves in the habits of daily life.

Another troubling issue is what it means to consider something aesthetically, outside its setting, for this is very much what I have done here: I have picked one scene from a film without really caring much about the film as an aesthetic whole; I have not even tried to see my scene in the context of the film. If I had done so, theoretically, my scene might have turned out quite differently in content (even though I do not believe that it would have done so). My claim is that there are episodes, scenes, events, which are pregnant and give birth to understanding. Such episodes, scenes, events, are subtle in the extreme, as opposed to episodes, scenes and events that are not. What am I saying? Well, for instance, that I can easily

distinguish a good tango partner from a bad one. What I argue for, then, is that a well-grounded critical account of a “scene of subtleties” does not necessarily have to refer back to the context from which it emanated (in this case the film from which our shot was picked). Subtle scenes are scenes in which double-dealing is the business. And double-dealing sets double-dealing apart. This sounds elliptic, indeed. Yes, it is elliptic, but it brings us back to our magician’s conjuring act, his card-trick, involving subtleties and sleights of hand. Reconsider the trick: is not all we can say basically that the trick makes the trick, or, in our aesthetic terms: double-dealing sets double-dealing apart, double-dealing sets subtleties going, and the business of subtleties is a source of pleasure.