

“DOPPELTGÄNGER”. BODY DOUBLES, OR THE SHADOW AND HIS EGO

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“Oh what is that grazing the banister?
Is that not how I looked out the looking glass?
And those are my limbs—how dazzling!
Now it lifts up its hands, like tufts of yarn.
That’s the line of my brow and my curls,—
Woe, am I mad, or is my end drawing near?”

ANNETTE VON DROSTE-HÜLSHOFF,
DAS FRÄULEIN VON RODENSCHILD, 1842



FIG. 1
FRIEDRICH HUNDT,
*PORTRAIT OF ANNETTE
VON DROSTE-HÜLSHOFF*
DAGUERREOTYPE, 1845

1 “It was a little before eight o’clock in the morning when Yakov Petrovitch Golyadkin, a titular councillor, woke up from a long sleep.” (Dostoyevsky 1951: 477) That is the opening of the novel *The Double*, which the young Dostoevski published after the runaway success of his debut, *Poor Folk* (1846). The novel’s beginning is unspectacular—unlike the events to follow. The book’s action spans four days of a rainy, cold November in mid-nineteenth-century St. Petersburg. To summarize: at a party, on a renewed attempt to win the favor of Klara Olsufyevna Berendeyev—a young woman from an élite family whom he venerates—Golyadkin is publicly humiliated and expelled from the house. In deep despair, vexed by self-recrimination and suicidal thoughts, he wanders around nighttime St. Petersburg for hours. Finally, he catches sight of a lone pedestrian who strikes him as strange and uncanny. Acting on a spontaneous impulse, he follows the stranger all the way to the man’s apartment, which—to Golyadkin’s great surprise—turns out to be his own. His sense of foreboding soon bears out:

The stranger, also in his coat and hat, was sitting before him on his bed, and with a faint smile, screwing up his eyes, nodded to him in a friendly way. Mr. Golyadkin wanted to scream, but could not—to protest in some way, but his strength failed him. His hair stood on end, and he almost fell down with horror. And, indeed, there was good reason. He recognized his nocturnal visitor. The nocturnal visitor was no other than himself—Mr. Golyadkin himself, another Mr. Golyadkin, but absolutely the same as himself—in fact, what is called a double in every respect. (Dostoyevsky 1951: 515)

After some initial hesitation, the original Golyadkin invites his alter ego to spend the night. Despite their early apprehensions, the two of them pass the evening in a more relaxed, almost amiable mood. In the process, it emerges that the double is not only identical to Golyadkin in every way, but he even comes from the same area, has the same name, and finally—as we learn the next day—works in the very same department of the civil service, where he is greeted warmly as a new member of staff. Although conversations with colleagues indicate that they have noticed the unusual duplication of person and name, this is not further remarked upon. Within several days, the “real” Golyadkin’s hopes for a mutually beneficial relationship with his alter ego fall apart. The “fake” Golyadkin grows increasingly rude, scheming, and at last openly malicious. A disastrous rivalry develops between the original and the copy, between Golyadkins I and II, a battle that Golyadkin I ultimately loses. His doppelgänger wins out as a successful second edition; Golyadkin I had previously only dreamed of winning his colleagues’ sympathies and his boss’s recognition. All his attempts to defend against being gradually displaced from his own life are in vain.

Yet that is not all. At another soirée at the Berendeyevs’ parlor and in front of the daughter, with whom Golyadkin is secretly in love, the situation derails altogether. Golyadkin is publicly exposed and sent away once and for all. Several gawkers run alongside the carriage that is carting him off. One by one, they fall behind, leaving only a single man, “Mr. Golyadkin’s unworthy twin”:

With his hands in the trouser pockets of his green uniform he ran on with a satisfied air, skipping first to one and then to the other side of the carriage, sometimes catching hold of the window-frame and hanging on by it, poking his head in at the window, and throwing farewell kisses to Mr. Golyadkin. But he began to get tired, he was less and less often to be seen, and at last vanished altogether (Dostoyevsky 1951: 614).

The doctor, who is alongside Golyadkin in the carriage, pronounces—like “a judge’s sentence”—that he is being confined to an institution. The novel ends with Golyadkin shrieking.

2 Dostoevsky’s novel was an unexpected flop with readers, and the critics tore it apart. Yet he maintained mixed feelings about it. Throughout his life, he viewed it as a failure, but still he wrote that “its idea was rather lucid, and I have never expressed in my writings anything more serious.” (Dostoyevsky 1919: 883) Aside from the complex form and portrayal, the novel has some unusual features that, to my knowledge, have never been examined in the context of the doppelgänger motif. This doppelgänger does not simply disappear at the end. He is left behind. By the time the original Golyadkin is sent away, his clone has fully taken over his life—his personal, professional, and social position—and takes his place as an improvement on this original. Golyadkin II has utterly absorbed Golyadkin I. If the doppelgänger—or indeed *Doppeltgänger* (doubled-goer), as the German word is spelled in the Grimm Brothers’ famous dictionary—is a person who can “appear in two different places at once”—Dostoevsky resolves the conflict between them not only by segregating the two editions of the same person in separate locations, but by

making one of them literally vanish from view: Golyadkin I, as an institutionalized patient (Grimm 1860: 1263). Golyadkin II is left behind as an ambitious bureaucrat. The struggle is over, and the roles of winner and loser have been clearly assigned.

The agonal confrontation between a self/ego and its doppelgänger is already visibly deviating here from its antecedent in German Romanticism. Specifically, E.T.H. Hoffmann invoked “internal struggles” waged by “some dread power which endeavors to destroy us in our own selves” against those very selves, so as to externalize that internal struggle and to project it into the real world as a feud between two symmetrical, mirror-image combatants (Hoffmann 2008: 14). Thus, the doppelgänger figure appears to presage the “nuclear fission of the ego” that the individual (Greek *átamos*)—following the literal meaning of “indivisible”—would undergo in the twentieth century and from which it would never fully recover.

Indeed, beginning with the turn of the nineteenth century, these sorts of doubling fantasies seemed to run rampant: besides in the work of the authors already mentioned, they could be found in the pages of Jean Paul, Heinrich Heine, Theodor Storm, Edgar Allen Poe, Oscar Wilde, and others. The identical replication of oneself becomes an occasion to investigate what is presumably the most familiar, the *self*, as the stage of radical *self-estrangement* (Freud 2001: 3696). Of course, Sigmund Freud saw in this the workings of the unconscious that governs our minds. Specifically, he considered the “recurrence of the same thing” to be “what achieves such an indubitably uncanny effect,” as expressed most prominently in the doppelgänger motif (Freud 2001: 3696). Drawing on Otto Rank (1993), he stresses the fundamental ambivalence toward the doppelgänger, who seems, on the one hand, to threaten the ego and the ego identity, but on the other to provide “insurance against the destruction of the ego” through duplication (Freud 2001: 3687). We see this ambivalence, a classic symptom of any psychiatric condition, at the beginning of Dostoevsky’s novel in Golyadkin’s ambivalent relationship with his clone, which, over the course of their first encounter, vacillates between a diffuse apprehensiveness and hopes of friendly coexistence. Only after the behavior of Golyadkin’s double grows increasingly hostile does the nature of their relationship become clear. The duplicate becomes a lethal threat, the “evil self.” Hence, the doppelgänger motif took on another attribute: a qualitative discrepancy between good and evil that would culminate forty years later in Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), which became world-famous in both literature and film. However, in Dostoevsky’s novel, the complete absorption of the original by his update, who has been strategically and professionally optimized, raises a host of questions that I cannot altogether untangle here. I would therefore like to outline at least one of these questions and reflect on it analytically in light of our own time.

3 Scholars of literary, cultural, and media studies were quick to notice the temporal proximity between the emergence of doppelgänger themes in Romantic Era prose and poetry and the invention of photography in the early nineteenth century (Starl 2011). As early as 1844, the Westphalian poet Annette von Droste-Hülshoff associated a ghostly encounter with a doppelgänger with “Daguerre’s pictures” in her poem “Doppeltgänger.” (Droste-Hülshoff 2014: 384) People were once shocked by the optical-chemical production of their own likenesses in daguerreotypes and, later, the limitless reproducibility of such likenesses through photography. The very capability of freezing any moment in time and consigning it to some pictorial medium provoked a rupture in the epistemic regime of an era that was beginning to blur the lines between visibility, recognizability, and reality. Meanwhile, the capability of creating a photographic likeness of myself transferred this rupture to the inner workings of human psychology. Ever since then, we have been confronted by something at once foreign and familiar, someone who is both *me* and *not me*. Golyadkin’s cry—“Or pretend that I am not myself, but somebody else strikingly like me ... Simply not I, not I—and that’s all” (Dostoyevsky 1951: 481)—could just as easily be a reaction to seeing his own photographic likeness. As late as the waning twentieth

century, in his final and perhaps most beautiful book, *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes was still invoking the “profound madness of Photography,” pointing to “the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity.” (Barthes 1981: 12–13) This is a reaction we have by now learned to repress. But to this day, even when looking at trivial snapshots, we still feel a remnant of that same animal horror that runs through Golyadkin’s bones when he encounters his double. Barthes refers to “that faint uneasiness which seizes me when I look at ‘myself’ on a piece of paper,” the same reaction that Siegfried Kracauer described as a “shudder” some fifty years earlier:

A shudder runs through the beholder/viewer of old photographs. For they do not make visible the knowledge of the original but rather the spatial configuration of a moment; it is not the person who appears in his or her photograph, but the sum of what can be deducted from him or her. It annihilates the person by portraying him or her, and were person and portrayal to converge, the person would cease to exist. (Kracauer 1993: 431)

The culture of photography has never quite shaken off that uneasiness. The equivocal sensation that can always accompany a glance at one’s own photographic likeness points to that same dualistic/duellistic confrontation that ultimately ruins the titular councilor Goldyakin, and which Kracauer takes to be a literal and overt threat of annihilation. The cryptic relationship between photography and death—around which Roland Barthes relentlessly circled without ever quite pinning it down—eventually escalates, in *Camera Lucida*, to the question of the dead man who confronts us through his picture as someone living/dead (Barthes 2002, 87). Barthes uses the term “punctum” of time to designate that enigmatic simultaneity that pervades the photo of the living/dead man: “He is dead and he is going to die ...” (Barthes 1981: 95–96) This was Barthes’s well-known caption beneath Alexander Gardner’s photograph of Lewis Paynes, which was taken in 1865 shortly before Payne’s execution for his attempted assassination of the US Secretary of State. These words are certainly paradigmatic, but they point to the testimonial nature of a recording medium (which may well apply to all recording media) that shows the viewer a person who *is going to be dead*.

And yet—and here we move slightly beyond Barthes’s horizons—a photographic depiction of myself confronts me not only with death and mortality in general, specifically someone else’s, but most of all with my own. What faces me in the photographic depiction of myself is *me—as the dead man I am going to be*. The “crisis of death”—which, in Barthes’s view, began “in the second half of the nineteenth century” and must have been connected to photograph—perhaps takes on a different contour if we juxtapose the “punctum” of time with that singular gaze that I direct at my own likeness (Barthes 1981: 92). What it reflects is not in fact another self distinct from me, but myself as the dead man I will someday be, as seen through the eyes of someone else I will never be: *I am dead and I am going to die*.

4 Who was it who said that the nineteenth century dreamed up the monsters that came true in the twentieth? Apparently, the twenty-first century is taking this a step further. A concluding remark on that point. It seems to me that in this age, when my self is digitally producible as a virtual avatar in infinitely emulatable environments, the doppelgänger motif is becoming virulent within humans’ lived experience and realities in a new and unsettling form. After all, especially since the worldwide spread of the smart-phone in the 2010s, we are now constantly synchronized with digital copies of ourselves. In real time, our behavior is compared with and fed back into behavioral patterns extrapolated from it. And moreover, via this copy, we are also confronted with digitally optimized versions of ourselves, compared to which we are chronically failing short. *The digital version sets the standards*. And, slowly but surely, it takes the place of its analog original, from which it was abstracted, so as to reflect an inferiority that confronts it vis-à-vis its digital version.¹

¹ For more on this, see Meyer-Drawe (2018), 26f.

If mathematical game theory took the economic concept of competition as the “enmity between individuals” (Engels 1975: 423) who are artificially atomized and pitted against one another, then transferred it to a playing board so to formalize it, standardize it algorithmically, and universalize it as calculated routines of human behavior, these theories’ digitalization and automation via AI-based specialized systems have ultimately shifted this enmity inside our selves. The social sphere is rendered competitive and hostile following the same process applied to the psyche, which now begins to compete with itself *within* itself (see Galison 2001). The market, whose rules were elevated in the mid-twentieth century into a guiding principle of knowledge and then to a practical regulating force for the social sphere, is mutating into the per-formative force of a subjectivity whose creeping market-ness is completing and perfecting the economization of societal, political, social, and finally natural life.² And if ethics—at least in the Classical sense, upon which Nietzsche and, in his own way, Foucault built—implies that art is “friends with itself,” then a human being as self-enemy is quintessentially non-ethical. Dostoevsky’s Golyadkin character seems like an earlier prototype of this human being whose *self-enmity* will bear radical implications for the question of the subject, its relationship to itself, to the environment, and to the larger world. It is as though we no longer trust the ground under our feet and have likewise lost faith in the starry sky overhead, our own kind, and ultimately our very selves. It is dizzying to contemplate: “At the same time Mr. Golyadkin felt as though the ground were giving way under him, as though he were staggering, falling.” (Dostoyevsky 1951: 505)

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² I have started to distinguish this process using the neologism “homo oeconomicus ludens.” See Mayer 2020.