



Mark Rappolt

Doppelgangers

Thanks to *Back to the Future II* (1989), everyone knows that meeting another version of yourself whilst traveling through space or time can have terrible consequences. Who could forget the wild-eyed, crazy-haired Dr. Emmett Brown, inventor of time-traveling modifications to an iconic DeLorean DMC-12, preaching the apocalyptic warning that such an encounter would do nothing less than “unravel the very fabric of the space-time continuum and destroy the entire universe?” Evidently Slater Bradley could. For more than a decade the artist has played around with his double. And, like a child’s chemistry set, it’s been threatening to go everywhere.

Bradley was fourteen when *Back to the Future II* was released and represented pretty precisely the movie’s target demographic. Nirvana’s first album, *Bleach*, was also released in 1989 and, as Bradley’s work—in particular *Phantom Release* (2003), a three-minute-long “newly discovered” fan-made video of a Nirvana performance—demonstrates, the artist went on to develop a healthy obsession with that band. (*Stoned & Dethroned*, a 2004 solo exhibition at New York’s Team Gallery collected *Phantom Release* and a series of photographic works based on Cobain, to mark the tenth anniversary of the singer’s suicide.) Indeed, the celebrities—chief among them (besides Cobain) Joy Division’s lead singer Ian Curtis, the self-styled king of pop Michael Jackson, and most recently the actor River Phoenix—around whom Bradley formulates a large part of his work were

those that he encountered or that rose to prominence during the formative years of his life. So, given the extent to which his oeuvre harks back to an era that began around the late 1980s and early 1990s, an era whose cultural productions he was clearly lapping up, it's hard to argue that the juvenile Bradley's mind simply wasn't ready to take in *Back to the Future II*'s fundamental message.

Bradley first encountered his own double, a man called Ben Brock, in various nightclubs during the late 1990s. Bradley and Brock look and act uncannily alike. Back then people kept telling the artist that they had seen him at places he was not. Creepy. But instead of keeping apart, like Dr. Brown ordered, they began to work together, with Bradley first casting Brock in one of his works late in 1999. Not long afterwards, Bradley's college roommate spent ten minutes talking to Brock in a nightclub before realizing he'd got the wrong man. "I guess that was the moment I knew that this project had legs," the artist says, also recalling—as if to up both the creepiness and the sense that he's ignoring some obvious signs and portents—how, on the only occasion that he visited Brock's house in Ohio, all the plates in the kitchen fell off their shelves as soon as Bradley crossed the threshold.¹ The relationship was affirmed at *Charlatan*, a 2000 exhibition at Team, when Bradley began passing off photographs of Brock as if they were portraits of the artist himself.



Christopher Lloyd as Dr. Emmett Brown (center)
in *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985).

Using the kind of literary terminology the *Back to the Future* franchise by and large eschews, Bradley refers to his other as a “doppelganger,” a word that first emerged in nineteenth-century German literature to describe a particular kind of ghoul that replicated the person of the individual it visited and that has since been co-opted into English to mean a double in a more general sense. Nevertheless, like the potential encounters with past or future selves in *Back to the Future II*, the appearance of a doppelganger

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is traditionally bad news. It's a bringer of ill tidings. An omen of death. The sinister stuff of bad dreams and nightmares. The nasty Mr. Hyde to one's nice Dr. Jekyll. Legend has it that the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley had visions in which he encountered a copy of himself issuing ominous warnings shortly before he drowned; John Donne is said to have had a similar nightmare before his wife miscarried; in literature the doppelganger can be found, in various guises, in the works of Poe, Hoffmann, Andersen, Dostoyevsky, Gogol, Melville, Conrad, and Mann, to name just a few. In fact, such was its ubiquity in turn-of-the-century literature that when questioned, in 1966, about themes of the double in his own work—most prominently *Lolita* (1955), an annotated edition of which Bradley had been reading shortly before his first encounter with Brock, and *Pale Fire* (1962)—Vladimir Nabokov would declare that “the doppelganger subject is a frightful bore.”²



Vladimir Nabokov

Clearly Bradley begs to differ. Brock appears in the three videos that make up the artist's much-lauded *Doppelganger Trilogy*, a series of works that explores the mechanics of celebrity and identity formation in a fully mediated (perhaps even more specifically Internet) age. The trilogy comprises *Factory Archives* (2001–2), in which Brock channels Ian Curtis; the previously mentioned *Phantom Release*, in which it is Brock who plays Cobain; and *Recorded Yesterday* (2004), in which

You just split

Brock performs as Michael Jackson moonwalking. More recently, Brock has appeared again in *Dark Night of the Soul* (2005–6), during which the actor, safely encased within an astronaut's suit, wanders around New York's American Museum of Natural History to the accompaniment of Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata," and *Boulevard of broken dreams* (2009), in which a seemingly alienated Brock embarks on a moody stroll through



Slater Bradley, *Dark Night of the Soul*, 2005/06.

Manhattan, evoking J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and invoking occasional lines from M. Ageyev's *Novel with Cocaine* (1934). In a funny way it's as if the Brock of *Dark Night of the Soul* forgot to take his spacesuit off for *Boulevard of broken dreams*.

And yet, despite all that, on the evidence of his latest video work, coauthored by filmmaker Ed Lachman, there are signs that even Bradley may have had enough of all this doubling up. In *Dead Ringer* (2011), a three-channel looped video, the artist appears to have split Brock's head open with an axe.

my head open

"You just split my head open," says Brock disbelievingly as he uncertainly picks himself up off the ground. "I've never wanted to kill a man before," he continues, shakily aiming his rifle towards the camera (and the general direction from which Bradley will later emerge) before collapsing in a heap. Even his final words seem to be spoken on Bradley's behalf. And while all this may not be quite the apocalypse Dr. Brown envisaged (and given that Brock and Bradley are only on screen at the same time when one of them is dead, it's far from clear whether or not this is an incident Brown would

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worry about), in the context of Bradley's oeuvre, his scuttle from one side of the camera to the other nevertheless appears to mark a turning point.

Dead Ringer is based, like the artist's related video *Shadow* (2010), on scenes from *Dark Blood*, a feature film directed by George Sluizer but left unfinished and unreleased following the death of its star, River Phoenix,



The Doppelganger as Ian Curtis, Kurt Cobain, and Michael Jackson in Slater Bradley's *Factory Icon*, 2000/04 (left); *I hate myself and want to die*, 2003/04 (center); and *The Animals* (outtake), 2004 (right).

outside West Hollywood's Viper Room after a drug overdose in 1993.³ Coincidentally, but apparently confirming 1989 as a foundational year in Bradley's life, Phoenix's appearance as the young Indy in the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989) was, according to the artist, an experience that cemented his interest in the subsequently doomed actor.⁴ You can see Phoenix performing the scene performed by Brock in *Dead Ringer* on one of the few clips from *Dark Blood* that's escaped onto YouTube. Indeed, it's not just that you can; you're expected to. As I write this, 91,798 other people already have.⁵ And aside from Bradley popping into the final frames of *Dead*

Ringer to claim the kill (and his hat), the artwork is a relatively faithful replica of the original clip (Phoenix's character dies in the original movie).

The direction towards this kind of source material—YouTube fragments, fan-released material—is a crucial component of Bradley's work. In part that's because the fan networks on which such clips generally appear are one of the subjects of his art. But it's also important because, on a fundamental level, Bradley's work is not even aimed at an art audience. After all, unless the members of that audience are fans of the stars, they most probably couldn't care less whether or not Brock's words in *Dead Ringer* are indeed the same as those spoken by Phoenix (they are), or that Brock, like Cobain, is left-handed and therefore plays guitar in the same direction. Indeed, even if that audience did care they'd need to resort to an Internet search rather than anything the artist provides in his exhibitions to test the authenticity of such works. In short, Bradley's works turn on the assumption that you know where they're coming from. And that, rather than any test, is what gives them the feel of authenticity upon which their reception (both as brilliant fakes or as potentially authentic footage) depends.

At a fundamental level, the work is aimed at someone who might appreciate all the details. "I copied Nirvana's instruments and clothes," Bradley wrote of *Phantom Release*, "so that even the most hardcore fan would not be disappointed by a dumb mistake in detail."⁶ So it's the hardcore fan, apparently, that Bradley seeks to please. As much as Brock performs to double the artist and to double the stars that are the ostensible subjects of Bradley's work, Bradley doubles the subcultures of fandom. Perhaps he doesn't even go so far as to double it. Given that the celebrities he and Brock conjure are important influences on Bradley's life, perhaps he is actually operating as nothing more than a fan. And yet this very uncertainty—the fact that Bradley may not actually have



Slater Bradley, *Marijuana*, 2004.

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the kind of distance we expect of an artist when they're offering a critique of a particular culture, that far from critiquing it he may simply be reveling in it—is part of the thrill of looking at his work.

Phantom Release was in part inspired by the digitalnirvana.net website on which fans trade information about bootlegs and unofficial recordings of the band. Writing about the work (to accompany a 2004 exhibition of *The Doppelganger Trilogy* at Blum & Poe in Los Angeles) Bradley recalls that he wanted to create an equivalent to the Super 8 footage that might have been lost and found in a fan's basement, just as he had found the collection of 1994 obituary magazines he had stored in a basement to use as source material when it came to creating the *Stoned & Dethroned* show. And perhaps this is why our old friend Dr. Brown might not need to be so worried about Bradley messing around with Brock—it's far from clear whether Brock's doubling Curtis, Cobain, Jackson, Phoenix, or Bradley, or all of the above. Perhaps, even, Brock's presence as an interface between the artist and celebrity subject suggests that the relationship between the famous and the fan is so complete that it's impossible to identify which is which: the one is simply a prosthesis appended to the other. It's like watching a set of Fibonacci numbers unfold and then collapse before your eyes. And, of course, you're implicitly invited to test the logic of their sequencing.

There is indeed, in Bradley's work, some suggestion of equivalence between the person who views Bradley's engagement with celebrity from the perspective of a fan and the person who views it as an artwork. For the art person, just as for the fan, there's the titillation of voyeurism. For the fan it comes about through seeking to know the habits, rituals, and routines—what food they eat, where they hang out, where they shop, etc.—of the object of their attention so completely that it, perversely, strips the celebrity of anything that made them special (thus allowing the fan further to identify with them). For the art person it comes via the thrill of peeking into the world of someone else's obsession, combined with a desire to find some sort of universal, communicable truth in the work (like I'm doing now), a kind of knowledge (in Bradley's case, this tends to be some sort of understanding of the sociopolitical aspects of celebrity in the Internet age) that binds them to fellow art aficionados just as surely as the knowledge

that Kurt Cobain was left-handed does when it comes to identifying a community of “true” Nirvana fans. And just as that sinistral knowledge allows the true Nirvana fan to look down upon the fan who doesn’t know (allowing them to exclude the ignoramus from the community of true fans), so the ability to extract a “higher” reading, beyond the mere glitz of celebrity, separates the community of art experts from art amateurs.

At the heart of the relationship between fandom and the object of its adulation is a sense of community, or, depending on your politics, even an erotics or commodity exchange (love being the commodity). It’s one that’s best described by a celebrity, in this case Nikki Sixx, Mötley Crüe’s bass player. Recalling his thoughts on a drive home from the hospital after he had been admitted following a drug overdose and subsequently reported dead on local radio: “I felt so alone and monstrous on tour, as if I had nobody that cared for me and nobody to care for. In that car, I realized that I was one of the luckiest guys in the world. I had millions of people who cared for me and millions of people I cared for.”⁷

Of course, for anyone outside the bubble of mutual appreciation Sixx describes, it’s almost impossible to read the musician’s words and not think that Sixx is somewhat delusional, probably prone to exaggeration, and certainly narcissistic. But all that does highlight the Gulliverian sense of scale of the celebrity–fan relationship: on the one hand, there’s the fan’s microscopic attention to the details of their heroes’ lives, and on the other, the celebrity’s expectation that such details have a lasting appeal to a wide audience. And both of these perspectives play out in Bradley’s work: on the one hand his insistence on exact verisimilitude, and on the other the belief, implicit in the very act of offering his work up for public scrutiny, that his subject matter will appeal to a wider audience than that of the mere fan. This can be both horrifying—in Jonathan Swift’s 1726 novel Gulliver gets washed up in Brobdingnag, where he gets to see people twelve times his size in such microscopic detail, to the pores of their skin and the hairs on a lady’s nipple, that he is eventually disgusted rather than awed by them—and revelatory—in Lilliput, where Gulliver is twelve times the size of the average inhabitant, he learns that being big and powerful doesn’t make life’s

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problems any smaller. Everyone, the story of Gulliver tells us, is horribly and disgustingly the same.

In the end Bradley is less interested in people like Sixx and more interested in celebrities who couldn't handle their fame and did die of depression (Curtis and Cobain are suicides) or overindulgence (while Jackson died some time after Bradley made *Recorded Yesterday*, the artist has stated that the appeal of the subject lay in the singer's gradual withdrawal from public life),⁸ which makes Brock-Phoenix's violent demise in the aptly named *Dead Ringer* even more of a tease. Who the hell is Brock in this work? Is he doing nothing more than simply acting out one of Phoenix's scenes? Just being Phoenix? Or does his demise and Bradley's emergence signal the end of the latter's reliance of the former?

Both *Shadow* and *Dead Ringer* were created in collaboration with filmmaker Ed Lachman, the actual cinematographer on *Dark Blood* seventeen years ago. *Shadow* and *Dead Ringer* each star Brock in the role of Phoenix as channeled by Lachman via his memories of the original shoot. Or, to put it another way, Lachman channels his memories, thoughts, and feelings on River Phoenix and shares them with Bradley, who then reincarnates Phoenix through Brock. In the case of *Shadow*, the result is a sort of prologue to *Dark Blood*, focusing on the Phoenix character (a reclusive widower who lives near a nuclear testing site in the Nevada desert, his wife having died of radiation poisoning) as he rambles, looking for what is lost around the original location. But *Shadow* also includes many episodes (the appearance of a mysterious young girl; an episode in Phoenix's favorite local bar) that are unrelated to the original film, but connect previous works to present fact and past fiction.

But this of course is what any memory or memorial is. Bradley states that he was inspired to contact Lachman having seen a 2006 documentary (*Final 24: River Phoenix*) that traced the final day of Phoenix's life. In it, Lachman recalls the last day of shooting on *Dark Blood*: "We did four takes of a soliloquy, the last day we shot with him on *Dark Blood*. It was in the cave on a set in Los Angeles that we had created after coming back from the desert in Utah... it was lighted to feel like it was all lit by candles. That was

on Saturday—just hours before he died in front of the Viper Room early Halloween morning. When we saw the dailies on Monday morning, after the last take and we heard ‘cut,’ the camera was still rolling, and I realized that I hadn’t turned the camera off. The lights on the set were dimmed down and for at least fifteen seconds, which seemed like a lifetime. River was standing in front of the camera as a perfect silhouette only lit by the candles. It was the eeriest feeling I’ve ever had with something that I had photographed. People were crying. We knew it was the last time we would ever see River.”⁹ What Lachman does—looking for signs and portents in the footage of Phoenix—is exactly what fans do when they pour over videos of their heroes and exactly what Bradley is asking his audience to do when confronted by his artworks.

“It’s tough having heroes,” the rock critic Lester Bangs once whined. “It’s the hardest thing in the world. It’s harder than being a hero. Heroes are generally expected to produce something or other to reconfirm their mandarin-fingered clinch on the hot buns of the bitch muse... But hero-worshippers (fans) must live with the continually confirmed dread of hero-slippage.”¹⁰ It’s a dread that Bradley at once confronts—by preserving his heroes—and denies, as everything and everyone slides into one. Brock is Phoenix, is Bradley, is us, is a fan, is an art lover, is a memory, is a coconspirator, is a friend. Slippage is everywhere, from the formation of our identities to the architectures of our cultures and subcultures. Perhaps that’s exactly the kind of space-time unraveling that Dr. Emmett Brown so hysterically feared back in 1989.

1 Slater Bradley, correspondence with the author, August 9, 2011.

2 Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 83.

3 The footage of *Dark Blood* is currently locked in a lab due to a continuing lawsuit.

4 Bradley, August 9, 2011.

5 Slater Bradley, correspondence with the author, August 6, 2011.

6 Slater Bradley, “Slater Bradley on the *Doppelgänger Trilogy*,” statement accompanying the exhibition *The Doppelgänger Trilogy*, Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, December 11, 2004–January 22, 2005.

7 Mötley Crüe, *The Dirt: Confessions of the World’s Most Notorious Rock Band* (New York: Harper Entertainment, 2001), 207.

8 Bradley, August 9, 2011.

9 Ed Lachman, correspondence with the author, September 27, 2011.

10 Lester Bangs, ‘David Bowie: Station to Station’, *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung*, (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1996), 161.