

DAVID CRONENBERG'S "DEAD RINGERS" 1989

The film "Dead Ringers" is an emotionally devastating study of the multi-faceted and perverse relationship between identical twin brother gynecologists Beverly and Elliot Mantle. It is an intense psychological drama, confronting director David Cronenberg's familiar preoccupations - (fear of physical and mental disintegration, mortality, the power struggle between the sexes, as well as between the psyches of the brothers for dominance over their joint and shared reality) - without the paradoxical protection of visceral disgust. Instead, the abstract, expressionistic and, at times, Renaissance visions in the imagery synthesizes the physical and the mental.

Renaissance artistic imagery subtly infuses the movie from beginning to end in such examples as 16th century medical sketches; medical instruments devised by Beverly seemingly from Renaissance torture originals; the dead brothers posed in a male-to-male version of Michelangelo's Pieta with Mary (the female force) removed; and Beverly being decked out in his red operating robes like a Renaissance cardinal.

This synthesis concentrates on imagistically portraying as an external reality the internalized landscapes of the one soul shared by the twin brothers. Cronenberg uses clever, unobtrusive trick camerawork to surround Jeremy Irons with an aura of subliminal evil as he renders a superlative performance as both twin brothers. This, linked with an acute attention to minute details and elevating the nuance into a visual art form, succeeds in creating two clearly delineated personalities.

The brothers run a private infertility clinic in Toronto, where introverted Beverly conducts painstaking research and deals with day-to-day patients while extrovert Elliot travels the country publicizing their work and accepting awards and accolades for both. Suddenly, this delicate symbiotic and as Elliot states, "synchronistic" balance between them and within them is upset by the eruption into their lives of hedonistic actress Claire Niveau (Genevieve Bujold). As always, they share everything, including Claire, until Beverly realizes that he has at last found something he does not want to share.

Torn between love for Claire and fear of separation from his brother, he plunges into a drink- and drug- fueled whirlpool of emotional and physical confusion; when Elliot tries to help, he too is sucked into the vortex of pain and despair. Likewise, Cronenberg pulls the viewer deeper and deeper into his harrowing tale of separation and loss, the disturbing, cathartic power of which leaves one drained but exhilarated intellectually at being shown a myriad-faceted reality through the "soul" of the brothers. Cronenberg seems to be exploring psychological concepts in a visual way, and the idea of the shadow personality within us all is separated out for us in the form of the Mantle twins. Elliot's name evokes T. S. Eliot and his Wasteland:

Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you.

This inter-linkage between the personality and the shadow is beautifully portrayed in a darkened, blues - music dance sequence where both brothers dance together with a woman locked between them. Cronenberg's camera captures visuals of moving male hands in the dance without the viewer being able to identify to which brother they belong.

Images from T. S. Eliot's poetry are extended in the movie to include color, especially red. Eliot writes:

Only there is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different ...

The color red in both poem and film seems to fuse with an idea of the maternal matrix - mother earth, mother - birth and in the film Beverly Mantle works gynecologically in a red draped, red - dressed operating theater and staff. The images evoked of birthing are also linked to violence within the act itself. Red violence begets the twins and red bloody violence will see them depart their reality and life.

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