

About Prompt book, 14-minute video, by Alice Anderson
Essay by DIANE WATTEAU

"All you have to do is to jump"

Alice Anderson is an English artist in wonderland who I'm sure would have loved Freud. Very intelligent, very mischievous, very playful. She is also very serious when her images question the feminine, the little girl and the third party. And the Freudian father. Her latest film done in French, *Prompt Book*, ties the knots, for me, of the subconscious with the real in the fantastic. That is where Alice the body is put. A body that goes from the mother to the daughter, to the child, until it goes, literally, out the window for the final fatal jump, in front of the father.

Going through the looking glass is not enough; the girl child becomes an adolescent, is locked up in her image or in the "extra room" Monique Schneider¹ talks about so well. She is locked up by her father in this enigmatic room, at the top of a big family house, surely in South East (London). As an adolescent she remembers her father's love for her when she was 6. Between her mother's phrase, "are you hiding something from me?", implying incest, and the announcement at the end of the film that the mother lost her singer's voice with the birth of her daughter, *there is only one question for the child, redemption: redeeming her life by willpower* (she writes the word "willpower" on a scrap of paper). Between mirror-covered walls or papered with Toile de Jouy, what can you do to be loved by your father? "Your father let you down. Everything was possible when you were 6 or 7", says the mother. The quest for this lost love is only possible "if you win the prize", and faced with this, the mother's order is a constant threat "All you have to do is... "

At the beginning of the film she jumps on a springboard. Trained by her father, she has to win a prize. She falls once. Then jumps. The dangerous somersault taken at its word.

All of Alice Anderson's pieces are very short. This one makes a nod to the medium length feature film. Very close to Lynch and Hitchcock, Alice Anderson questions woman's desire and changes of identity. *Prompt Book*, the title, is translated by *Souffler n'est pas jouer*. (Breathing, prompting, is not the same as playing) The expression *prompt book* is used in the theatre to give production indications. But what seems closer here to the whole idea is that the word *prompt* is also used in the theatre to whisper the lines to actors when they forget them.

The story is of an adolescent locked up in a room. What first looks like a tale in a chateau quickly becomes a fantasy or a top psychoanalyst's case book. The education is all in negatives: punitive solitude, blackmail, permanent spying. Everything is done to punish the girl-child who is becoming a woman. She has to pay. As in the Countess de Segur's stories. Obedience is strictly regulated: "1-2-3".

¹ M. Schneider, *le paradigme féminin* (The Feminine Paradigm), Paris, Aubier/Psychanalyse, 2004

But this quickly becomes an immoral tale: in this secret-ridden room, it might be possible to see our *Alice* of Lewis Carroll, with whom she devotedly identifies and from whom she draws inspiration. Natasha, the little girl, swaps her image thanks to a book of roles her father gives her. Changing size and going to the other side of the mirror have to do with coming of age, what the child undergoes to enter adolescence and the adult world. The trip takes place on a chessboard, a game from which chance is excluded. Alice-Natasha's choices are determinant for her to reach her goal.

Something happened with the father. Her birth thwarted her mother's career as a singer. The tale is built on this drama and surveillance. Wonder does not last long. The permission to jump her father gave, twisted by the mother's warning: "All you have to do is... ", i.e. disappear. The child jumps out. Childhood is finished.

"*All you have to do is...: jump*" becomes the combination of the parents' injunctions joined end to end. Everything is mysterious in this successive embedding of double injunctions. This end-of-childhood tale is a catastrophe: the fall is the toll for a mistake. What is understood is that it is forbidden to grow up and become a woman. The girl is the symptom of another body. Like Elisabeth von R., Freud's famous case study, she embodies the symptom that is both the other body and plural. The symptom in the partner-symptom sense is an answer from the real. *The object of pleasure is here as in Lewis Carroll's world, perfectly defined: it is the young girl.* He is from that community.

One must not underestimate Lewis Carroll's burlesque nor Alice Anderson's fantastic. *Alice in Wonderland* expresses the anxiety of being lost in a universe in which nothing is any longer sure. Alice cries out: "Was I really me waking up this morning?" And with perfectly good logic – her character was created by a mathematician – she resolves the problem by the absurd. But she is aware that she doesn't remember much.

- "Who are you?"
- "My name is Alice, but..."
- "Well, there's a dumb name! interrupts Humpty-Dumpty. What does it mean?"
- "Is it absolutely necessary for a name to mean something?" Alice enquires quizzically.
- "Of course it's necessary, Humpty-Dumpty answers laughingly; my own name means this form that is mine, and which is, of course, a very beautiful form. With a name like yours, you could have had almost any form" (The Other Side of the Mirror, p. 176)

Deleuze analyzes this conquest of surfaces very well: one no longer sinks, one slides, either on the flat surface of the mirror or, here, thanks to the role play. Alice Anderson uses this art of surfaces to make of her character "two surfaces that roll into each other so that one goes from one story to the other. When she disappears on one side, she reappears on the other, like a spherical chess game.