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1000 Words: Johan Grimonprez



Johan Grimonprez, *Double Take*, 2009, stills from a color film/video in 35 mm and digital Betacam versions, 80 minutes.

“THEY SAY THAT if you meet your double, you should kill him.” The mantra in Belgian artist Johan Grimonprez’s eighty-minute film *Double Take*, 2009, suggests that the real must assert itself against its image to prevent its own defeat in an ongoing battle between fiction and reality. The quotation is from the narrative that anchors the film—written by British novelist Tom McCarthy and based on Jorge Luis Borges’s short story “August 25, 1983”—in which Alfred Hitchcock meets an older version of himself. Alongside the intermittent narration of this tale in voice-over by a Hitchcock “sound-alike,” the film features interviews with Ron Burrage, one of the plethora of portly bowler-hatted Hitchcock look-alikes in Grimonprez’s *Looking for Alfred*, 2005, as well as carefully edited sequences of archival footage from the late 1950s and early ’60s. These include television news reports of the Cuban missile crisis, US and Soviet satellite launches, atomic bomb tests, and Nixon and Khrushchev’s 1959 “kitchen debate,” in addition to excerpts from Hitchcock’s wry introductions to his own television programs. At various points we see Folgers coffee commercials in which distraught housewives learn to mend their ways after serving their husbands unsatisfactory coffee. Throughout, echoes of and excerpts from *The Birds* propose Hitchcock’s 1963 film as an allegory for television (which, the director once quipped, “has brought murder back into the home—where it belongs”) and for missiles descending from the sky, suggesting a psychohistorical analogy between the fear of nuclear attack and the suspense that Hitchcock made his trademark.

As Grimonprez’s film develops, the parallels press in upon us ever more closely. The two Hitchcocks meet; television duplicates cinema; the opening salvos of the cold war expose the Soviet Union and the West as mirrors of each other. The proliferating layers of doubling are themselves interconnected: In one excerpt from the kitchen debate, Nixon boasts, “There are some instances where you may be ahead of us—for example, in the development of the thrust of your rockets for the investigation of outer space. There may be some instances—for example, color television—where we’re ahead of you.” Yet, as the film implies, the overriding purpose of the space race and of television was propaganda, both individually and, to greatest effect, when acting together.

The interplay between fiction and reality has long been central to Grimonprez’s practice; it already characterized his 1997 film essay *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, which conjoined archival footage of plane hijackings with excerpts from Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* and *Mao II*, and became notorious for its uncanny preemption of some of the shrewder theorizations of 9/11. *Double Take*—recently on view at Sean Kelly Gallery in New York and at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, and currently at the Garage Center for Contemporary Culture in Moscow and Magasin 3 Stockholm Konsthall—clearly speaks to the origins of our current predicament, too, in which the symbiosis of the fictional and the actual has become increasingly difficult to parse. Indeed, a rapid-fire sequence after the final

credits portrays both politicians and Hollywood as still invested in perpetuating a culture of fear. We should remember, as Grimonprez has noted, that “*The Birds* is the first Hitchcock film not to feature ‘The End.’” *Double Take* plays out our recent history against a fiction even while it presents that history itself as an ongoing story of claustrophobic suspense.

IN ONE OF HIS interviews with François Truffaut, Hitchcock speaks of the difference between surprise and suspense. He explains that to create suspense—even during the interview itself—the audience needs only to know that a bomb is under the table. Hitchcock is talking about how he constructs his fictions, but it’s hard not to think of the Cuban missile crisis, which was dominating television screens the same fall that the two directors were having their conversation in Los Angeles—in 1962, during the filming of *The Birds*. Although Hitchcock argued that his film wasn’t an allegory for catastrophe coming from the sky, it came to seem to me—after I’d worked my way through a vast quantity of archival material—that *The Birds* is entirely embedded in that specific historical context. At that time, even as cinema was having to redefine itself as a consequence of losing its audience to television, television was playing a pivotal role in the propaganda of fear: catastrophe culture—just like the birds—invading the world of domestic bliss.

Today, Hollywood seems to be running ahead of reality. The world is so awash in images that we related to 9/11 through images we had already projected out into the world. In a sense, fiction came back to haunt us as reality. After being confronted with *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*’s being a kind of premonition of 9/11, I wondered how to deal with that—with something happening in life confirming the film, even going beyond what one could have imagined. Slavoj Žižek described the 9/11 attacks as a real-life version of *The Birds*, the ultimate Hitchcockian threat, suddenly appearing from nowhere.

But I’m not a Baudrillard addict who thinks that reality has totally disappeared. *Double Take* does explore those boundaries, though it doesn’t say that reality has imploded. I think reality is very much there, but it’s co-constructed: Fictions are made into reality and back and forth. There was all this talk about weapons of mass destruction. It was a lie, yet even though the war was actually triggered by a fiction, it turned into an abhorrent reality.

When I was editing *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, the news coverage of the first Iraq war was a way for me to work through the material in that film. The second Iraq war was totally different—a double take on the first Iraq war. But *Double Take* is not overtly about Iraq, of course. It looks at the two rival ideologies of the Communist bloc and the capitalist bloc as analogies for the doubling that is mapped out in the film and in the story Tom McCarthy wrote, in which Hitchcock meets Hitchcock in a meditation on the perfect crime. The film looks at how fear was projected into society, like a fiction, on both sides of the ideological divide between East and West. It’s also about the fear industry and how fear has become a commodity.

Double Take starts off with Hitchcock saying, “I think my mother scared me when I was three months old.” He is pretending to be totally serious, but then he says, “You see, she said ‘Boo!’ ” and turns it into a joke. It’s like the whole cold war—the entire world was like, “Oh, they are scaring us,” but in the end all either side actually did was say “Boo!” in order to boost their defense industries, and people started to wonder, was this all a big joke or something?

Even Kennedy came to power by exaggerating the Red threat. And television played a huge part in drilling fear into people during the cold war, which justified the military’s accumulating large, expensive stockpiles of nuclear arms—at the beginning, for sure, but even more so at the end, when, with no reasonable gain in security, defense budgets escalated with the Star Wars program while public programs were eroded to a third-world standard. History repeats itself. That’s why the two Hitchcocks meet each other in the story—the Hitchcock from 1962 and the Hitchcock from 1980. Among other things, they talk about how television changed the nature of storytelling. Hitchcock had helped define what television was all about, and there’s something awkward about his ambivalence toward the television format and toward the programming getting interrupted all the time with commercials. As Heiner Müller said, the commercials are the most political part of television. The commercials hijack the whole history—the story that you’re telling. When Hitchcock introduced *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* and *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour*, he was always goofing around and laughing at the commercials in a sardonic way—that was his way of dealing with it. He was television’s biggest prankster.

The ads for Folgers coffee in *Double Take* are written into the story in such a way that sometimes you don’t know what’s going on: With the cup of poisoned coffee from Hitchcock’s *Notorious* occasionally spliced in between, and especially when the *Psycho* music instills the images with a double meaning, the commercial suddenly seems like a murder weapon. If you connect Hitchcock and these ads, it makes you think of poisoned coffee; at the end of the story maybe Hitchcock is killed by a cup of coffee. But it’s also the commercials that start to kill Hitchcock—because cinema and television are rival doubles as well. The older Hitchcock in the story even argues that “television killed cinema.”

We stumbled onto Ron Burrage when we held Hitchcock look-alike castings in London in 2004, and that developed into the doppelgänger plot and the Hitchcockian theme of mistaken identity. Ron, who died last year, was someone from a totally different background whose connection with a Hollywood icon, through circumstances not entirely of his own making, had become his life. In reality, his life and Hitchcock's were tied together by a series of coincidences: There was more to the resemblance than met the eye. Ron used to work as a bellboy at Claridge's, where Hitchcock stayed whenever he was in London; then he waited tables at the Savoy—Hitchcock's favorite restaurant—where he served the likes of Cary Grant and James Mason. So he was at the other end of the spectrum from Hitchcock, who was working with the same actors on the set. And Ron was actually born on the same day as Hitchcock, August 13, but thirty years later. Then we found an episode of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* where Hitchcock introduces himself as "the Alfred Hitchcock of thirty years ago." And Ron actually introduced Tippi Hedren at the premiere of the restored version of *The Birds* in 1999, on the night of his seventieth and Hitchcock's hundredth birthday.

In his appearances on television, Hitchcock often played off the idea of the double: He would be mistaken for someone pretending to be the real Hitchcock, he would work the strings of a marionette of himself, walk off with his own head under his arm, dress as a woman, or appear as his own brother, explaining that Alfred was nowhere to be found. Once he staged a look-alike contest in which he claimed to have been disqualified in the first round. More generally, the doppelgänger is often depicted as the harbinger of bad luck, as in Dostoyevsky's *The Double*, which inspired Borges as well as Hitchcock.

There were so many coincidences and other doubling analogies that came up. *The Birds* came out in 1963, the year Kennedy was shot, and I found a peculiar anecdote in Hitchcock's daughter's 2003 book, *Alma Hitchcock: The Woman Behind the Man*, where she says that her father got an invitation from President Kennedy for a White House luncheon that was postmarked one day before Kennedy's assassination. For me, that coincidence was a knot connecting everything—Kennedy's funeral, which the whole world watched on television, *The Birds* . . . A lot of things fell into place.

After the credits at the end of the film, there's a footnote in very fast-forward acceleration. I show the Berlin wall coming down—marking a time when the whole world had to be redefined and when the United States had to reinvent its imaginary other. Next, the flying saucers descending on Washington, DC—from the opening of *Independence Day*—suggest how, at the beginning of the 1990s, the image of the alien became pervasive in American society. That role was later taken on by Bin Laden, and again fictions were being projected into society. We were in desperate need of another fear factor, and that's where the film leaves off, with Donald Rumsfeld talking about the known knowns, the known unknowns, and the unknown unknowns.

— As told to Alexander Scrimgeour

Johan Grimmonprez's Double Take has its US theatrical premiere at Film Forum in New York June 2–15. This 1000 Words originally appeared in the April 2009 issue of Artforum.