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Interviews | If You Meet Your Double, You Should Kill Him: Johan Grimonprez on Double Take

To write about Hitchcock today—nay, to think about Hitchcock today—is, as Johan Grimonprez's Double Take admits in its dizzying construction, simply vertiginous. Just as from a contemporary perspective there is no one “history,” there are many Hitchcocks. Still, the master of suspense has managed to avoid becoming a cliché himself, perhaps due to being appropriated into the art field by practitioners as disparate as Douglases Gordon and Stan; in an associated shift, Hitchcock doesn't seem to be that present in the discourse of film criticism today, perhaps because of this academic canonization. Grimonprez's response: a film about Hitchcock that is not “about” Hitchcock, but uses Hitchcock as a mirror, for both himself, and for a period of history. For what was the Cold War if not one long, painful MacGuffin?

A media artist who turns media into art (and makes art about media), Grimonprez's career is a double take—jumping from the cinema to the art gallery and back—and his films inspire double takes in the viewer. The prescient dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y (1998), produced in part for documenta X, shows how terrorists use the media, and vice versa, fostering a state of panic and paranoia in the citizenry; in Double Take the same psychological relationship is transferred, then doubled: to the US and USSR during the Cold War, to Alfred Hitchcock and popular culture. The strategy in both films is an assaultive barrage comprised of images and sounds both familiar and alien, edited not mainly to provide information, but to provide a feeling for history. Evoking a specific cultural zeitgeist, they speak to the need to see history at a distance, but at the same time to speak from inside it. In dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y this feeling is driven home through copious quoting of Don DeLillo: in Double Take, it's inscribed in the voice of Hitchcock, in his lead-ins and promos—or a voice double of Hitchcock, who sometimes speaks while a physical Hitchcock double appears on screen.

As an artist with a keen grasp of the political and the social, and an academic himself, Grimonprez foregoes interpretation, and dances with density in a way that's far from stodgy: pleasure leaps out amid the seriousness, and, in a way, Hitchcock is reborn, freed from the academy's shackles. Grimonprez's enthusiasm keeps trying to break through the frame: Double Take zips and zaps like the most addictive of television shows. The film is anchored by a chronological recap of the US-USSR Cold War relationship, the time when catastrophic culture was at the point of formation. This was also when Hitchcock moved into America's living rooms, and made The Birds (1963), a typically dense masterpiece whose title characters epitomize the return of the repressed but also, as a Hitchcock scholar might claim, symbolize the encroaching presence of the medium of television itself. On a parallel strand, Grimonprez shoots original material written by novelist Tom McCarthy—a fictional meeting between Hitchcocks young and old, on the set of The Birds. This Borgesian confrontation with the Other comes with a warning: “If you meet your double, you should kill him.”

By adding these other levels, Grimonprez complicates the telling of history. The film is content—indeed, it is inherent in the terms of its dialogue between the present and the past, between fiction and documentary—to shapeshift, like the Master himself who kept three sizes of suits because of his frequent weight changes. Grimonprez takes pleasure in allusion, showing how the mind strives to make sense out of coincidence—the mode of the paranoid, who is often the most grounded because of a constant questioning and reevaluation of "reality." He composes a formal, visual poetry that nods to YouTube, with leaps across times and spaces, a poetry that can only be finished by the viewer upon the realization—with a final image of Donald Rumsfeld's infamous riddle about knowns and unknowns—that the commoditization of fear for political gain is happening again, only the Other has changed. For it is true that history is written to make sense of the present and, also, as DeLillo wrote, "Nothing happens until it is consumed."

CINEMA SCOPE: Is your art practice based in activism?

JOHAN GRIMONPREZ: That would be a reductionist reading, but there's an activist component. I've very unhappy with the state of the world, so, yes, let's change it! What's going on upsets me, so more than ever we should question what's going on in the media. The mainstream media doesn't correspond to the actual state of the world. And then the repressed comes back to haunt you in the form of Independence Day (1996), flying saucers into the World Trade Center. For me that was one interpretation of 9/11. Very often when we were analyzing the early '90s with the collapse of the Soviet Union, that image of the alien kept coming back, and the imaginary Other of America was not filled in. Then 9/11 reshaped those boundaries.

SCOPE: So if there is this activism behind Double Take, the film can be read as you writing (or rewriting) history with the war on terror in mind, and using the beginning of the Cold War as a parallel cautionary tale.

GRIMONPREZ: Definitely it's a component of it. It's part of our world and it's so hard to deny that. When you put gasoline in your tank, it's part of your everyday reality.

SCOPE: Why not make a film about that, why bury it in something historical?

GRIMONPREZ: Well, apparently you got the message.

SCOPE: At the beginning of the film there is the image of the man falling from the Empire State Building, one might say that's a pretty clear allusion to 9/11.

GRIMONPREZ: At one point the film began with an anecdote that I found in an article from The New York Times from September 11, 1948: on that day, hundreds of birds crashed into the Empire State Building, landing onto Fifth Avenue. But I don't know why I took it out…the film is now showing in a gallery in New York, and when you walk in that quote is on the wall.

SCOPE: What is the difference for you between a feature film and an installation? Double Take also began as another installation, Looking for Alfred (2005), about the casting of the Hitchcock doubles.

GRIMONPREZ: I think what's more important is the general social context in which the work is read. For example during Tiananmen, the Chinese were watching CNN to compare it to Chinese television to look at the contradictions. But in the second Iraq War CNN was inscribed as a tool of war for Americans, something completely different. So the point of reception, the context in which something is shown, makes you read it in a different way, more so than the format. For dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y the way it was shown in Israel was very different than in New York.

SCOPE: In Double Take you quote Hitchcock's winking critique of television—it's like a gun, your enjoyment depends on what side you're on. When television is analyzed in an art (or filmic art) context, it usually comes with a wholesale critique. You imply that it's not the medium itself that is problematic, maybe because the new threat to traditional media arrived with the internet.

GRIMONPREZ: But television is such a big word. Just like how you can't say "history" but "histories"—interpreted by whatever time period or geographical area as something different. Think of American television versus European television. Let's narrow it down to what's going on in the film: It traces the rise of that medium at a moment where Hollywood needed to find itself, and how Hitchcock helped to define that medium. Because he suddenly had to take into account that a sponsor will interrupt the broadcast with a commercial. He came to terms with that by laughing at it, presenting a kind of anti-commercial, or making a joke or a pun on the whole commercialization of the television landscape. At one point he was joking that he would do the commercial himself, like for a toothpaste company, and he'd brush his teeth and they'd fall out. The sponsor would complain, and he'd say, "It's going to sell more toothpaste!" But he wasn't allowed to do that.

CNN adapted to the commercial as well, it's called the "drop-in style" where they repeat morsels of news every half hour, so if you zap and return you haven't missed anything. In High Anxiety, Patricia Mellencamp does a Freudian analysis of this where she sees it as an obsessive behaviour, how our culture has become obsessed with catastrophe to the point of neurosis.

SCOPE: And High Anxiety (1977) is of course Mel Brooks' Hitchcock parody.

GRIMONPREZ: Mel Brooks told a funny story where he went out to dinner with Hitchcock, and Hitchcock ordered a steak—well, and appetizer, a steak, and a dessert—and they finished, and then Hitchcock says, "Let's do it again," and ordered another full meal.

SCOPE: There's so much that you could mention about Hitchcock, he's almost an endless well, so to confine yourself from 1957 to 1963 must have been crucial.

GRIMONPREZ: Alfred Hitchcock Presents runs from 1956-1963, The Alfred Hitchcock Hour starts in 1965. James Allardice was a writer for Alfred Hitchcock Presents, and he wrote all the lead-ins. He died in 1966, so maybe that's why the introductions stopped. He was also Hitchcock's speechwriter—his double in a way that he came up with the rhetoric, the jokes, and the idea of the doubling. The same with the MacGuffin story, it's actually a Scottish screenwriter, Angus MacPhail, who coined it.

SCOPE: And during that period is also the first time when Truffaut interviewed Hitchcock.

GRIMONPREZ: On the set of The Birds on August 12, 1962, which is also the date of my birth.

SCOPE: At times though you do fudge the historical record a bit…such as when you intercut the promo for The Birds with the news story on the launching of Sputnik.

GRIMONPREZ: Sure, but it's not that far off, because when you talk about 1957, it's also the time he started the TV series, and I lump The Birds in with that period, and his relationship to television. In 1959 he shot Psycho with his crew from Alfred Hitchcock Presents. Yes, it's not always accurate chronologically; the film jumps back and forth based on what's appropriate for any moment. He introduced The Birds by looking at the sky, so I cut to the paranoia that came with Sputnik; it made sense. In 1962 people were still freaked out…America wasn't far behind in the space race, but the paranoia was there. They drilled it into the television audience and the cinema newsreels. It was still the moment when television took shape, so that's also why I jump forth back in time.

SCOPE: But this also speaks to its unclassifiability; you can't simply call it a documentary, a fiction, or an essay film—it has all these things together.

GRIMONPREZ: In the way we actually construct our reality, or document that reality, there are always fictions that proliferate, there are always things that you project, and the way that we construct reality is based on fictions and paradigms that coexist—it's that way with Flaherty. The wife of Nanook is his mistress, and the igloo is not a real igloo, they cut it in half. And, on the other hand, sometimes when you see a film that's fiction, it grabs you, because the violence is there, you get moved, closer to what the feeling really is. I like to put those things on their head, because they affect and inform one another. And CNN now dramatizes the news. The war is a complete fiction, but the news is supposed to be "documentary." It's so crucial to question those boundaries. For me the labels are secondary. dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y was trying to explore the shift at the end of the '70s and beginning of the '80s when they got rid of the Bolex and took the video camera into the field, and bit by bit our relationship to video imagery shifted.

SCOPE: Do you think the media has become more a part of the power structure since the '60s? Or are people more desensitized to the imagery today?

GRIMONPREZ: At the beginning of the '80s they began controlling who from the press got invited to the White House. With the first Iraq War Colin Powell said that you can't win the war without winning the media; in the second Iraq War they were so conscious about it. It's also crucial to talk about which geography you're talking about—if you were born in Iraq, the images would mean more to you. Hitchcock got that reaction a lot, that he desensitized people to violence, especially around Psycho. And at one point a father wrote him a letter telling Hitchcock that his daughter wouldn't take a shower after Psycho, and Hitchcock responded, "Well, send her to the dry cleaner." But maybe we did reach a threshold…

SCOPE: And with television Hitchcock brought murder back into the American living room where it always belonged.

GRIMONPREZ: The film is sort of about that as well, but on a more personal level, like two guys talking about their characters, and how they kill them… maybe that's a poetic level, but it's weird to go from talking about the Iraq War to talking about poetry. But Truffaut wrote how Hitchcock portrayed his murder scenes like they were love scenes, and vice versa. It's like exploring what the boundaries of that narrative might be—you push the boundaries of what a love story might stand for.

SCOPE: It's also this mirror thing—if you have a double you can love it and hate it.

GRIMONPREZ: But television is a mirror as well. When images come back from Iraq, it's a mirror that we don't want to acknowledge. Then it comes back to haunt us on another level. It's a tough one, the power of the image… And Hitchcock was very much aware of that.

SCOPE: Does the fascination with Hitchcock come from the films themselves? The persona? A combination?

GRIMONPREZ: A combination, for sure. But, first of all, he went through everything, starting off in the silent period, the black-and-white period, crossed from Britain to the US, played on television, tried 3D, Panavision, etc. He went through the whole evolution of the medium: if one character would epitomize the history of cinema, it would be Hitchcock. He worked with all the clichés and metaphors…maybe also because he was such an influence on the Nouvelle Vague. And some of his best films have the typical symbols of the fairy tale, like Notorious (1946). But more than we realize now, he set forth a lot of our contemporary vocabulary. North by Northwest (1959) is a combination of spy thriller and comedy, which set forth the James Bond genre.

SCOPE: To talk about the editing for a second, you build complexity by repeating scenes in different contexts, such as the Folger's commercials.

GRIMONPREZ: Ah, again that's obsessive behaviour, like I was talking about with CNN. I thought it was fun to have five commercial breaks, with real commercials. At one point there's the ad where the coffee pot turns around, and at that point in the conversation the coffee becomes the poison—it's metaphorical as it's the advertising that's going to kill you. In the conversation they say television killed cinema. That's what Hitchcock would say, not me. But the obsessive behaviour of images being repeated is like the drop-in style, but when they're repeated they're set in a different context. You would be surprised at a lot of the things that I left out. For example, we have a Folger's commercial from the '80s with Rod Taylor, the star of The Birds.

SCOPE: How does Borges fit into the project?

GRIMONPREZ: Borges was a big part of Looking for Alfred. Which was also about Magritte too, who is also a magical realist, or symbolist. I relate to Borges as a Belgian, as doubling in Belgian culture is very present: everything is subtitled. So "This is not a pipe" is a literally very Belgian thing, as when you see Star Trek or a Hollywood film on Saturday afternoon you have to read subtitles. So you're already removed. And there's no such thing as a Belgian language, there's either Flemish or French, so as a Belgian you always have to relate to something in a distanced way, with a kind of irony.

SCOPE: Also in terms of the structure of the narration, which is a kind of postmodern narration, like the literature of Borges…

GRIMONPREZ: Well, first you have to define what you mean by postmodern, and as I still believe in a utopian project, which is very much in the film, I don't know if you'd call it postmodern…it's the same with The Birds, which lends itself to so many interpretations, because Hitchcock refused to put "The End" at the end, so it's open-ended. One analysis of The Birds is that they stand for television, Zizek says The Birds are libidinized by the repressed atmosphere of the relationship between the mother and the son, and so on. I think maybe I'm still a modernist—dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y is very moral. CNN is postmodern.

SCOPE: I was talking more about structure.

GRIMONPREZ: I would call the Borgesian structure more magical realism. You know that Borges and Hitchcock were both born in August 1899, at the beginning, when the Lumières were showing their films, Magritte was born in 1898, he's one year older than both of them. The shots in Double Take where Hitchcock is walking through the long corridors to go meet himself were shot in Brussels in the Palais des Beaux-Arts, where Magritte has a long history…Maybe that's where my background comes in. For Borges, the doubling also has to do with how language doubles reality. For Hitchcock it came to me first through the cameos, how he became a kind of double agent, and also plays on the doubles in the TV introductions. But the double is a very well-known literary figure. Borges wrote the story that is the basis for the script of Double Take twice, once as "The Other" and later as "August 25, 1983." Dostoyevsky, funnily enough, also rewrote The Double as it wasn't well received.

SCOPE: That also brings to mind Gus Van Sant's remake of Psycho (1998), or, of course, the fact that Hitchcock himself reshot Blackmail (1929) and remade The Man Who Knew Too Much (1934/1956).

GRIMONPREZ: Even on The Simpsons, you have it—Homer meets his double. Maybe it's been overused, but maybe it's also part of our consciousness. Maybe the nature of language, the idea of the double is built into the way we conceive and can talk about reality. I think the film has this philosophical application as well. It's also a doubling of what history is. We forget so easily that what was going on in the '60s is what's going on now, with nuclear proliferation and paranoia with Iran. Paranoia is turned into fear, and fear into a commodity.

SCOPE: And how popular culture can be an unconscious vehicle to transmit this paranoia…One thing that struck me is how Hitchcock's work, maybe unconsciously, stoked this Cold War paranoia, like The

Birds, or, with Cuba, Topaz (1969). Or is it about how certain cultural objects take on the meaning of what's in the air, the social context of the time.

GRIMONPREZ: Or maybe it goes back and forth, yeah? Like Zizek would say, he libidinized the story, making a film about Cuba to be about sexual politics. That's how he makes you care about it. When I was editing I'd pick up on stuff and only later realize how present it is in the conversation today. It's invested with meaning, but maybe you pick it up in an unconscious way, and when it's out there you let the material take you. It's how novelists say the character takes over and dictates how the story is being told. With dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y, I started off wanting to tell a story about saying goodbye, but the material took me in a different direction, to airplane hijacking and terrorism. This film was about the history of happy endings, and it became something completely different. Gaumont used to make films for France that had happy endings, and for the Russian audience they'd make a tragic ending. It's not explicit in Double Take, but from the beginning of the '60s—and I think it's related to television—a lot of directors in Hollywood started to take away "The End." The idea of what an "end" is had to be redefined with television. Like what Borges writes about the book of sand, you keep turning the pages and it keeps going, you can never finish it. Television is like that—it' s an image that doesn't end.

And I watched as many Alfred Hitchcock Presents episodes that I could, then, bit by bit, you realize, oh, he has a lookalike context, or he's walking off with his head, or playing his brother, or dresses up as a woman Then you are confronted by Ron Burridge, the Hitchcock double. I was invited by the Hammer in Los Angeles, and they set me up in the UCLA archive. So I started researching that time period of The Birds, and stumbled onto Sputnik, and the first man in space is in 1961, right before The Birds. And the Bay of Pigs happens just after Gagarin got into space, on April 12, 1961. Also the Kitchen Debate, that I stumbled on in UCLA, that was the first summit on television. And how does it all relate? From the beginning of the '60s we started thinking about time in a very different way, we started thinking about "The End" in a very different way. Television is on when you have food, or you can go to the bathroom and come back, at that point you began to relate to the image in a very different way.

SCOPE: Double Take also seems to me to be a post-internet narrative, if you will. Look at how storytelling has changed since the internet, even Hollywood films have become much more complex, and it has to do with how people's minds have adapted in a way to this situation.

GRIMONPREZ: Exactly. I think Double Take is very much about that, even if it's not saying that, but it analyzes the relationship between two media that coexist. At one of the screenings the discussion was about YouTube. But cinema has the sense of time—the way you can tell a story with time, and music…

SCOPE: You used "The Hustle" to great effect in dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y, and I wanted to bring up the two songs that bracket Double Take, "Where Did Our Love Go?" and "You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'." In a strange way this lends the film a sense of nostalgia. And it's not really a time that one should be nostalgic for. Maybe you're nostalgic for your own childhood, which was the time of the film's setting?

GRIMONPREZ: Yeah, the sense of missing home, that was the time of my childhood. But it's a bit of the case that we live now in a homelessness state…

SCOPE: And many people have written about the Cold War as a political structure that's easy to come to terms with, as opposed to what's going on today, where there's less certainty.

GRIMONPREZ: Maybe I'm scared and want to go somewhere safe.

SCOPE: There's no place like home.

GRIMONPREZ: You know, the whole beginning of dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y is scored to the opening song from The Wizard of Oz. And the film is from 1939, which is when the first antenna was placed on the

Empire State Building. And also the first film with three lenses, three strip Technicolor, and switches from black and white to colour. For me when the tornado happens, and Dorothy's watching through the window and everything starts to become colour, it's like catastrophic culture, the home being taken over the rainbow, over colour television… again, like with The Birds. But nostalgia, that's a good question. My first film, Kobarweng or Where Is Your Helicopter (1992), was set in a remote village in New Guinea, and I had to deal with a lot of anthropology. At that time I used to argue that every anthropologist is driven by nostalgia—he's displaced—by a sense of belonging. Maybe. When I got to this village in 1986, the first question I was asked was "Where is your helicopter?" Apparently in 1959 a team of anthropologists came down from the sky in a helicopter, and totally usurped the history of the village. Everyone freaked out—they had never seen a helicopter before, and they had faintly heard about white guys. They had heard planes, and they wrote them into their cosmology as sounds of birds. So there's some kind of link to Double Take and to The Birds, and, well, dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y is about airplanes too. And I always wanted to make a film about alien abduction.