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Long Shadows

Johan Grimmonprez's recent films explore the mechanisms of the arms trade

BY EVAN CALDER WILLIAMS

In addition to its ample cruelties and endlessly confounded sense of 'it can't go on like this much longer, can it?', 2017 has also been a year of profound historical torsion, marked by the return of specific figures and fears wrongly presumed to have been left in the present's wake. Consider, for instance, the starkly renewed appearance of fascists on the American scene alongside perennial varieties of white supremacists, provoking an uncanny sense of having looped back 80 years. Or, perhaps even more striking, is how the Donald Trump presidency has reactivated a distinct apocalyptic anxiety that cast long shadows over the second half of the 20th century: the prospect of atomic annihilation. The past three decades, especially follow-ing the collapse of the Soviet bloc, have witnessed the slow re-ordering of a global existential threat, with catastrophic climate change claiming increased visibility and politi-cal urgency. In this way, two timescales of doom have been made to overlap and coincide, with cold war reboot and a hot arctic competing for pride of place in the attention economy of gnawing fear.

This November, Belgian artist and filmmaker Johan Grimonprez's 2016 documentary *Shadow World*, based on Andrew Feinstein's book of the same name, will air in the US on PBS. This would be welcome news in any context, given the strength of the film, which traverses the ample deceptions, mechanisms and consequences of the global arms trade. It does so largely through a range of interviews with defence analysts, journalists, military officers, activists and politicians, interspersed with TV footage, surveillance and drone videos, news conferences, advertisements for defence firms and a disarmingly charismatic arms dealer named Riccardo Privitera, who knows full well the role expected of him and plays it to the hilt, chain-smoking in a black turtleneck. The public broadcast of *Shadow World* in 2017 feels even more important than it might have done last year: the film embodies the eddies and echoes that feed into a feeling of the untimely and out of joint, as reloaded *Dr. Strangelove* anxieties form a messy confluence with the ongoing security apparatus of post 9/11 distributive war. *Shadow World* isn't the first Grimonprez project to tackle such issues. For the past three decades – in films, installations, essays, pioneering video archives and media archaeology projects – he has doggedly pursued a concern with the manipulation by and of the media, long before it gained the baleful moniker of 'fake news'. In so doing, he's explored a set of consistent fixations: war, TV, remote controls, unverifiable histories, double dealing, advertising, the 'deep state', hijacking and other acts deemed terrorist and, last but certainly not least, Alfred Hitchcock. In other words: Grimonprez deals with the entire cultural and military complex, at once chaotic and engineered, termed the cold war and its aftermath.



Johan Grimonprez, *Shadow World*, 2016, film still. Courtesy: the artist, Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, kamel mennour, Paris, Flatland Gallery, Amsterdam, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, Louverture Films, Dillywood and Shadow World inc., New York

Yet, it's not only this content that has remained constant through Grimonprez's projects but also the works' affective tenor, treading a slippery balance between pulp absurdism, solemn inquiry, kitsch humour and sincere pathos. His fundamental stylistic choices have also been consistent: all of his films are marked not only by the co-

presence of non-fiction and fictional materials but also by a refusal to trace a single historical path or didactic structure. Narratives slip between voices and details with the peculiar attention of a frantic channel-hopper – what Grimonprez calls ‘zapping’, ‘zipping’ and ‘grazing’ – who doesn’t necessarily know what they’re looking for until it grabs them.¹ But, if *Shadow World* (and the shorter films that remix and expand on its interviews, such as 2017’s *Blue Orchids*) carries over many of his earlier themes, it also marks a slow drift within his practice, moving from works of fractured historical ‘zapping’ – like *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* (1997) – to what more closely resembles the genre of documentary, complete with interviewed experts and ‘talking heads’.

To make sense of this shift, it’s worth looking back at *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, a manically skittering work of archive fever that centres on plane hijackings from the late 1960s through to the ‘90s. (Still Grimonprez’s best-known film, it also remains disquietingly prescient in its anticipation of a transformed geopolitics and image culture after 9/11.) The noir-ish title itself provides a good point of entry, as it makes evident one of the unique aspects of the artist’s projects: the inspiration and tropes he draws from the history of genre film and fiction. This includes mystery, noir, horror and, above all, the thriller, especially in its hitchcock-ian vein. This influence is made explicit in *Double Take* (2009) – based on a story by British novelist Tom McCarthy, in the first of their two collaborations – which hinges on footage of hitchcock himself in his films and TV shows; it spins out a wild, disjointed fable of duplicitous identity and weapons-grade paranoia. Such borrowing from pulp goes far beyond pastiche, however. For, if his explicit references are to films such as *Dial M for Murder* (1954), which are enmeshed in detection and conspiracy, the underlying operation opens onto a different genre territory of speculative fiction, from sci-fi to its more metaphysical variants. Like the slippery counterfactual histories of German film director alexander Kluge and the Uruguayan writer eduardo Galeano – who reads excerpts from his book *Children of the Days: A Calendar of Human History* (2013) in *Shadow World* – Grimonprez suggests that history is not only composed of what has already happened but is also haunted by what never came to pass.



Johan Grimonprez, *Shadow World*, 2016, film still. Courtesy: the artist, Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, kamel mennour, Paris, Flatland Gallery, Amsterdam, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, Louverture Films, Dillywood and Shadow World inc., New York

As the inclusion of Galeano suggests, Grimonprez's interest in speculative fiction and its procedures hasn't dulled in his more recent work. But it has taken on a different quality – one that was first glimpsed in *Double Take* and is now fully evident in *Shadow World*. Speculation is increasingly bound to the words of individual people, especially politicians, who spin stories and half-truths, and whose lies – such as the claims of 'weapons of mass destruction' in Iraq – have very real and bloody consequences. Yet, given that these topical concerns aren't new, such a shift has to be understood in terms of Grimonprez's stylistic decision to organize *Shadow World* – as well as recent short films such as *On Tickling* (2017), with the gerontologist and philosopher Raymond Tallis – around interviews rather than archival materials. This is a real departure. If *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* is a nod to a pulp heritage, that disaggregated title also denotes the fragmentary and piecemeal approach of its montage, which builds not so much a narrative as a mosaic. Such an approach was inseparable from the resolutely televisual media landscape it combed, navigated through the remote control and the restless vision of its armchair spectator. The film goes so far as to replicate the visual and sonic effects of changing channels as it hops between images. At its best moments, *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*'s assemblage of scattered fragments into a meaningful constellation works so well because it is guided by that distraction. As a result, Grimonprez's earlier practice comes into dialogue with a long and inconstant lineage of found-footage films, not only those that track out a hidden social logic – like Jorge Furtado's *Ilha das Flores* (Isle of Flowers, 1989), or the sprawling essays of Adam Curtis – but also those that hinge on the precise rhythms of connection and interval, such as the works of Dara Birnbaum, Abigail Child and Matthias Müller.



Shadow World, 2016, film still of archival image of the Russian-German Fraternization during World War I. Courtesy: the artist, Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, kamel mennour, Paris, Flatland Gallery, Amsterdam, Das Bundesarchiv, Koblenz, Louverture Films, Dillywood, and Shadow

In *Shadow World*, a wholly different media landscape is at stake: that of the internet and its unprecedented proliferation of screens and digital images. The film's style, in hewing closer to what we recognize as documentary, is far from the chaotic overlaid windows often designated as 'postinternet', but it shares a sense that no image is beyond reach, provided you know the right search term. This isn't a problem per se, especially as that kind of searchability can radically democratize access to materials. all the same, it begs a question about the method at play in Grimonprez's recent works, as important as i find them to be: specifically, a tendency toward the illustrative.

As mentioned, *Shadow World* is structured around the talking head interview, with persons selected for their specific knowledge of the issues at stake. *Blue Orchids* goes further, narrowing down the wider range of experts, spin doctors and conspirators to a binary but blurry opposition between the journalist Chris Hedges and arms dealer Privitera. But, by shifting emphasis to the interview, the prickly oddness, precision and interconnections of the found/'zapped' footage in earlier works goes missing and the reproduced images come to feel more like interchangeable illustrations of what is being spoken about, however obliquely. This is evident in the structure of the Grimonprez work that most frustrates me, *Every Day Words Disappear* (2016). in this short film, an interview with the philosopher Michael Hardt on his theories of the politics of love is intercut with scenes from Jean-Luc Godard's dystopian sci-fi *Alphaville* (1965). But there's little sense of entanglement, friction or linkage between Hardt's ideas and the film beyond the fact that both concern the category of love. The compelling polyvalence and polyvocality at work in *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* or *Double Take* is lost. if i have doubts about this transition from what could be called an entangled montage to an illustrative one – and about how this relates to a far larger social and technological transformation of image culture – it isn't because of my preference for one style over the other. It comes, instead, from what I see as the real political stakes of how images interact and how they can obliquely capture the minor textures and contours of enormous historical shifts. To give an example: one of Grimonprez's other signature elements is his deployment of music in ways that code as kitsch, melodramatic and schmaltzy, with a particular affinity for what verges on muzak. Yet, in the early projects, that music's appearance was specifically conditioned: bound to genre hyperbole and audience affect, part of the saccharine soundscape of TV advertising. In a brilliant moment in *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, Grimonprez details how a plan to mislead hijackers by disguising a South Korean airport as a north Korean one failed because a transistor radio picked up the sounds of American jazz, which was forbidden in north Korea. As text laid over an image of hostages' heads poking out of a plane window explains this, we hear – what else? – easy-listening jazz. The music is not neutral but embedded and thick with historical meaning, even as it keeps coming untethered from any single source.

There's a superficially similar scene that appears in *Shadow World* and is repeated in *Blue Orchids*, where it provides the film's title. Privitera is speaking of an escort agency called Blue Orchids that he has employed to entertain clients and to provide him with useful pillow talk. as he speaks, we hear the porno soundtrack of 'Barry's Theme' (1973) by Barry White's Love Unlimited orchestra and watch swirling lights over found footage of a woman dancing in a mirrored room before the film cuts and zooms in on the lingerie-clad blonde printed on privitera's lighter. The moment falls flat, as do the uses of electro-pop and sentimental strings that recur throughout the film – whether ironically or to amp up pathos – because it lacks a sense of unexpected connections. instead, it merely fleshes out Privitera's words and, in so doing, risks letting him drive the film. as a result, *Blue Orchid* comes close to

falling into the trap of popular movies like 2016's *War Dogs* – basically *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), but about arms dealing – which entirely confirms, and conforms to, the perspective of those who profit from war, ultimately treating it as so much edifying fun despite requisite moral overtones.



Johan Grimonprez, *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, 1997, film still. Courtesy: the artist, Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, kamel mennour, Paris, Flatland Gallery, Amsterdam, and zaptomatik, Brussels

But it's very clear that, while he's committed to humour, Grimonprez clearly doesn't find any of this fun, as is made evident by the frequent inclusion of footage taken from planes and drones of murderous American strikes, often silent and marked by the horrifying anticipation of what we know is about to happen. However, just as the televisual footage that drove his work in the 1990s was inseparable from the technologies of transmission and home recording that enabled it, so these types of image cannot be separated from the ease of circulation and reproducibility that makes them so familiar and which allows their passage from command centre to YouTube. In this regard, I can't help but be reminded of the vital debates posed in the US with particular urgency in recent years, concerning the ethics of replicating and recirculating footage or still images of the murders of black and Latinx americans by police. One of the things that these debates have clarified starkly is not – as the argument is often wilfully misunderstood – an absolute ban on showing or processing these images. rather, it's a necessary refusal of the casualness with which they are so often deployed, circling back to a sadistic economy of image

proliferation that thinks little about what exactly it means to put such images on a public GIFish loop, as if they were memes rather than deaths.

I'd argue that we have to pose similar hard questions about how the footage of deaths by military operations is deployed in *Shadow World*: what does it mean to present them as loose illustrations of what is being discussed, without identifying the site, the names of the deceased or even the year in which their deaths occurred? What are the consequences of reproducing footage made by the state as evidence and celebration of its own martial capacities – and to broadcast these anew on TV? Lastly, what does it mean to bind the blunt force of such images, always in danger of becoming normalized, to a mode of cogent explanation and narration, rather than situating them within the furious dislocation and strange echoes that marked Grimonprez's early films? Amid its interviews, *Shadow World* certainly involves some of those haunting echoes and images: a lone horse stands before a smoking building, roller-skaters spin in an endless circle and 100,000 World War I combatants leave their trenches on Christmas to embrace their supposed enemies and share cigarettes. But – as the early films demonstrated so well – sometimes the most potent way to sketch the ever-contested networks that link sovereign power, image-making, technology and commerce is to refuse to let their products be given stable form and instead to allow what is screened to articulate its own uncanny linkages and points of bristling contact. That mode of assemblage hasn't become outmoded, even as the media landscape has shifted irrevocably. Because, as this year has shown us, nothing is left behind as cleanly as might be hoped, whether or not it let itself be seen to start.

¹ As defined in his zapomatik.com web project.

Main image: Johan Grimonprez, *Shadow World*, 2016, film still. Courtesy: the artist, Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, kamel mennour, Paris, Flatland Gallery, Amsterdam, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, Louverture Films, Dillywood and *Shadow World inc.*, New York

EVAN CALDER WILLIAMS

Evan Calder Williams teaches at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, USA. His recent books are *Shard Cinema* (2017) and, with David Fernbach, a new translation of Mario Mieli's *Towards a Gay Communism* (2017).



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