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FILM

THINK AGAIN

With *Double Take*, Johan Grimonprez extends his exploration of the mirror worlds of news and entertainment, using Alfred Hitchcock—and his doubles—as suitably duplicitous guides.

BY NANCY PRINCENTHAL

THE UNRELIABILITY OF MEMORY, the mutability of identity, and the tendency of real life to imitate the movies, especially in their tendency toward terror: these are not novel themes, but they are more or less inexhaustible, and in Johan Grimonprez's 80-minute film *Double Take* (2009), they are explored with rare depth and acuity.

Built around a story written by novelist Tom McCarthy that draws on a tale by Jorge Luis Borges, the film has a narrative arc both simple and maddeningly recursive. The time is 1962, and, as the tale begins, Alfred Hitchcock is called away from the set of *The Birds* to take a phone call. It is a ruse. After an ominous walk through an empty, ornate building, he finds himself confronting his double—or rather, an older version of himself, who speaks from 1980, the



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Alfred Hitchcock Lookalikes Casting

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"Looking For Alfred", Johan Grimonprez director.
If you resemble Alfred Hitchcock, please send or deliver a picture to:
Emily Schroeder, Casting Director
3223 Wilshire Blvd, Suite 718
L.A., CA 90036

Deadline April 19
Film to shoot in June in London.
Casting open to any age (over 18), and any ethnicity.

Compensation: Scale pay plus all travel and expenses
Principals only. Recruiters, please don't contact this job poster.
Please, no phone calls about this job!
Please do not contact job poster about other services, products or commercial interests.
Reporting this message elsewhere is OK,
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Above, casting announcement for Hitchcock doubles on Craigslist, 2004.

Top, still from Johan Grimonprez's film *Double Take*, 2009, 80 minutes. All photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, and Zapomatik, Brussels.

year Hitchcock died. A Hitchcockian voiceover warns of death ("They say that if you meet your double you should kill him, or he will kill you; two of you is one too many"), and, intermittently throughout the rest of the movie, we return to the room in which the menacing conversation between the not-quite-identical twins proceeds. Neither man is shown, though we see their shadows and silhouettes, and a mouth puckering around a fat cigar. Often, the camera's focus is on the cup of coffee that, poisoned, will effect the coup de grâce.

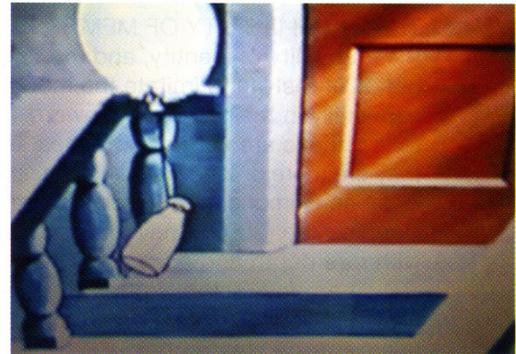
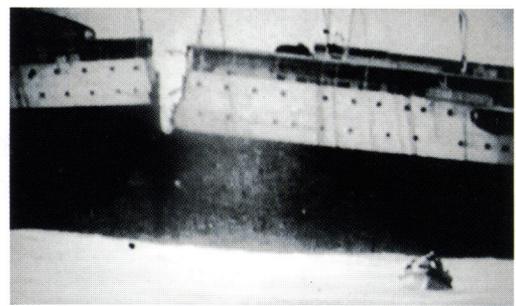
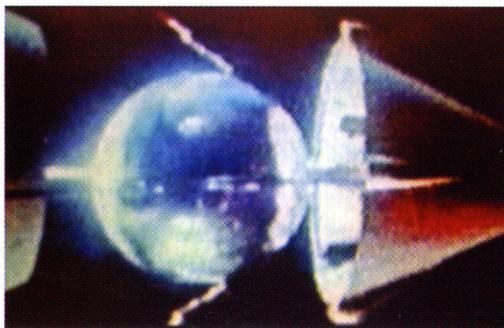
As in the Borges text, there is a Dorian Grayish—or a *Seventh Seal*-ish—aspect to the colloquy at the heart of *Double Take*. But this is also a hurtling trip through a hall of mirrors created by the entertainment business and the news industry, for which 1962 is, arguably, an important date stamp. A year in which, Grimonprez implies, the balance of popularity tipped from

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movies to television, 1962 is also when the Cuban Missile Crisis developed; the Berlin Wall was one year old, Kennedy's assassination one year away. As it happens, 1962 is also the year of Grimonprez's birth, in Roeselare, Belgium, to what he describes as "a simple Flemish family, with mum in the kitchen."¹ A circuitous and much-interrupted academic career led him by the early '90s to New York (where he attended the School of Visual Arts and the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program), and he now divides his time between New York and Brussels. In an interview for the book that accompanied *Looking for Alfred* (2005)—an early, 10-minute kernel of *Double Take*—Grimonprez says that Belgium, with its two languages (Dutch and French) and two governmental institutions (Flemish and Walloon), "is embedded in the cultural schizophrenia of two languages living side by side; one constantly translating or repeating the other and never taking it seriously. . . . Misunderstanding becomes culture, the poetry of misinterpretation."² Evidently, his fascination with the yielding surface of familiar events, and his tendency to replay images and find new meaning in the repetition, are among the inclinations shaped by his native culture.

Though the confrontation between Hitchcock and his doppelgänger is the spine of *Double Take*—it is fleshed out with original footage of Ron Burrage, a professional Hitchcock look-alike—the bulk of the film is an extraordinarily vivid collage of clips from newscasts, television shows (principally "Alfred Hitchcock Presents"), the commercials that punctuated them and movies. The main sponsor for Hitchcock's weekly show, which ran for a decade beginning in 1955, was Folgers Coffee, and its wildly sexist ads, really too appalling to be funny, are an insistent leitmotif. Generally, they feature a downcast young wife overcome by anxiety that the coffee she

makes doesn't please her husband (whence, perhaps, the fatal cup that threatens the fictional Hitchcocks). In every ad's blissful denouement, the "instant" product the wife serves her exacting husband is praised as indistinguishable from "fresh-perked" coffee; the question of why these idle housewives wouldn't simply prepare the real thing begins to seem paradigmatic for the film's fundamental inquiry into why our culture yearns so ardently for successful imitation—for falsehood. As Grimonprez frames it, this appetite is a positive mark of modernity. All the corny introductions and ad-break announcements that Hitchcock made for the show, most of them expressing smirky and patently hypocritical



Eight stills from *Double Take*.

Bottom right, Hitchcock and Tippi Hedren, *Nice*, 1963. Photo RDA/Getty Images.

contempt for popular television—or ironic and prototypically postmodern respect—are another sustained theme.

Hitchcock's TV patter is vaguely sinister, more so when compounded by his show's ads. Together, they support the accusations of misanthropy (constitutional) and misogyny (deliberate) that dogged him not only for his characterizations and plotlines but also for his treatment of actresses, Tippi Hedren in particular. The star of *The Birds* was, notoriously, injured in several ways in making the movie. (A climactic scene was made in a grueling five-day shoot involving live birds that resulted in physical and emotional harm; a ruinous contract from which Hitchcock wouldn't release her effectively aborted her career.) In *Double Take*, Hedren appears in clips from *The Birds*, which appear repeatedly throughout Grimonprez's work, as well as in promotional interviews for the Hitchcock movie and a 100th-birthday tribute to the director, where she shares the stage with Burrage (Hitchcock's real-life double).

Double Take's sketch of Hitchcock's

character contributes to a larger portrait of an era. But it is Hitchcock's acute sensitivity to the horror latent in the everyday—as when otherwise innocent birds become the equivalent of, say, airborne Soviet missiles, or invaders from outer space—that is Grimonprez's primary subject. Learning (and borrowing) from the master, he coaxes the most sinister of implications, and the scariest of viewing experiences, from material that is as familiar as it is bloodless. In *Double Take*, these are, paradoxically, the key incidents of the Cold War, which might seem to have long since become emotionally defunct. Grimonprez's method for reinvigorating them is to expose their stagecraft—and, more specifically, their weird entanglement with the rise of televised news. Showing us Nixon's repeated reminder to Khrushchev that everything they said in the 1959 Kitchen Debates was being watched by American viewers, Nixon's lame rejoinder to Khrushchev's boast of technological supremacy that the U.S. was ahead with color television and, on a later occasion, Kennedy's assertion, again with respect to the space race, that the U.S. was leading with satellite television broadcasts, Grimonprez zeroes in on ways that these politicians' rhetoric, as well as their on-camera performance, was shaped by the new medium. And, by current standards, shaped ineptly: we see the world being brought to the brink of Armageddon by men barely able to command a nascent form of public broadcast.

Doubling and redoubling news reports of the first launches of Sputnik and the many, many unsuccessful American rockets made in hasty response, of the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, Operation Mongoose (a hapless covert effort to assassinate Castro) and the Cuban Missile Crisis, and alternating them with cuts from public safety films meant to allay the fears these events raised and B movies meant to exploit them, Grimonprez (like Hitchcock) enlists humor to disarm viewers, the better to induce real fear. In a climax of narrative and historical overdetermination, imagery associated with the assassina-

IN A CLIMAX OF NARRATIVE AND HISTORICAL OVER-DETERMINATION, IMAGERY RELATED TO THE ASSASSINATION OF JFK ALTERNATES WITH THE DEATH OF ONE HITCHCOCK AT THE HANDS OF ANOTHER.

tion of JFK—the motorcade, the weeping bystanders, Walter Cronkite on the air, taking off his misted glasses—alternates with the narration of the death of one Hitchcock at the hands of the other. But *Double Take* does deliver some unexpected jolts, to American audiences, anyway. Notable among them is what Grimonprez presents as a nearly unbroken record of tactical and technological failures by the U.S. in the early Cold War.

Diciest of his choices, but well worth the risk, is the decision to introduce the movie with a kind of prologue involving footage of the 1945 crash of an army bomber jet into the Empire State Building. We see pedestrians gathered on the street, looking up in shock; in a separate shot that is grainy and blurry in the extreme, indistinct figures fall a great distance, their arms and legs cartwheeling as they drop. This short clip appears twice more in *Double Take*, at widely spaced intervals. (The Empire State Building is shown often, generally as a TV transmission tower, and falling New York buildings also recur.) Like the bodies coming home from Iraq in flag-draped coffins, these tiny figures in freefall, indelibly associated with 9/11, are images most famous for being withheld by the news media. (The only comparable use I know is Carolee Schneemann's black-and-white 2007 photocollage of falling people, these clearly World Trade Center victims.) The question of whether this suppression involves tact or censorship, preserves dignity or promotes a sinister erasure, is among the most provocative Grimonprez asks. In *Double Take*, he tugs us back and forth between passages like these that produce inescapable emotional traction and others that, Hitchcock style, mix the humorous and the frightful and leave us hydroplaning—or falling in thin air. The scramble he stages from one to the other may be

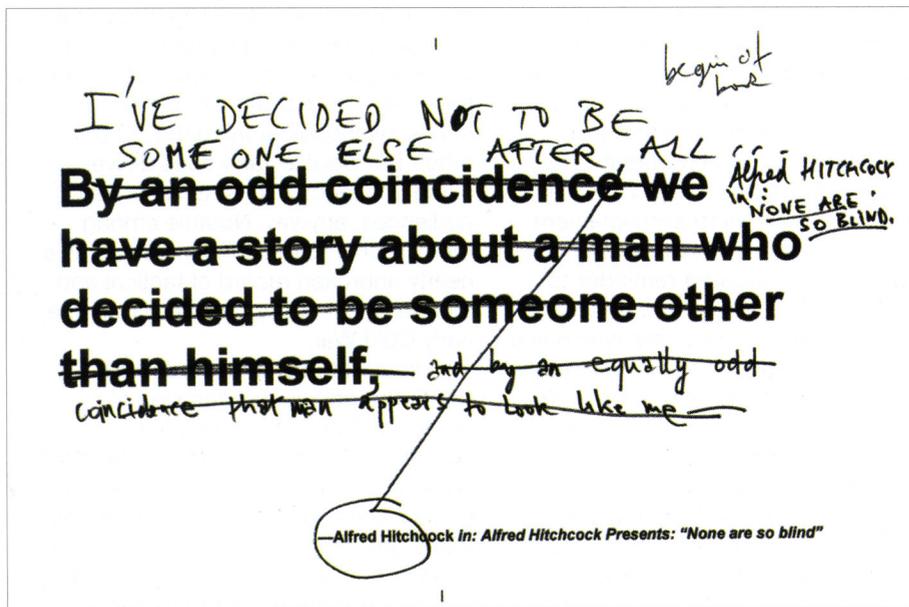


the key to his film's sustained and often hair-raising power.

After the final credits, *Double Take* leaps from 1962 to 1980 and beyond. Reagan appears with Gorbachev, and then Clinton with Yeltsin. The Berlin Wall comes down, for a moment of unalloyed joy, and, for pure comedy, Donald Rumsfeld delivers this Hobbit-worthy solo utter-

movie to end without a title frame saying "The End," and that television, with its extended serials, endless reruns and round-the-clock news coverage, "has redefined what an 'end' is all about."³ Though it has a tidier narrative shape than his previous films, *Double Take* is not a radical departure. The 1997 *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, his most ambitious project until *Double Take*, is a close the-

AFTER THE FINAL CREDITS, *DOUBLE TAKE* LEAPS FROM 1962 TO 1980 AND BEYOND. THE BERLIN WALL COMES DOWN, FOR A MOMENT OF UNALLOYED JOY, AND, FOR PURE COMEDY, DONALD RUMSFELD SPEAKS.



I've Decided Not To Be Someone Else After All, 2009, pen on paper, 10 5/8 by 16 1/2 inches.

ance: "There are known knowns, which are the things we know, and known unknowns—the things we know we don't know—and then there are unknown unknowns. . . ." Both too dumb for parody and profoundly true, Rumsfeld's little *pensée* throws a cold light on the frail structure we call national security. It also offers a reprieve from the parade of fateful pairings (Nixon v. Khrushchev, Kennedy v. Nixon, Kennedy v. Khrushchev, Khrushchev v. Brezhnev, and so on, all of them mirrored in Hitchcock v. Hitchcock) that otherwise governs *Double Take's* political narrative; perhaps, then, Rumsfeld is the point where things truly get unhinged.

That this coda lasts some minutes after the film proper has concluded suggests the difficulty Grimonprez has with bringing projects to a close—a problem he has made, characteristically, into a subject. In a 2003 interview, he notes that *The Birds* was Hitchcock's first

matic and stylistic precedent. Chillingly prescient, *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* is mainly a collage of archival material about airplane hijackings, once the preeminent form of terrorist activity. Grimonprez has explained, "The theme of hijacking planes . . . can be read as a metaphor for the 'hijacking' of images out of their original contexts,"⁴ a tactic that he still uses for equally reflexive purposes.

Portentously, the 1997 film begins and ends with planes descending over buildings; more broadly speaking, its focus on terrorism as a form of theater finds expression in *Double Take* as well. "Terrorists and novelists play a zero sum game" is a phrase repeated in *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*. As in the later film, there is no compunction about showing dead bodies, here tossed unceremoniously from planes. And some of the footage in *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* reappears intact in *Double Take*, including a truly priceless

clip showing Fidel Castro on a visit to the USSR, where he is taken into the forest for a midwinter hunt and treated to a snowbound alfresco feast, the party attired in wool coats and astrakhans, the table laid with linen and a gleaming samovar (which in *Double Take* summons thoughts of the Folgers ads). The intersection in this bit of history between theater and politics, and its stranger-than-fiction moment of near-magic realism, make it a good candidate for Grimonprez's version of Hitchcock's cameo appearances in his own movies. Both repeating moments serve to mark, across a body of work, the uncanny experience of the actual and the imaginary crossing paths. ○

¹ Geoffrey Macnab, "The Hitchcock Effect," *Flanders Image*, spring 2009, p. 19. ² "Hitchcock is not himself today . . . Johan Grimonprez in conversation with Chris Drake," in *Johan Grimonprez: Looking for Alfred*, London, Film and Video Umbrella; Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz; Munich, Pinakothek der Moderne; and Ghent, Zapomatik, 2007, p. 87. ³ *Ibid.*, p. 99. Grimonprez's 2005 film *Zunk* @ is, he says, "a film about the ending of films (or how television changed the idea of happy endings)." Cited in Florence Montagnon, "La réalité comme page de publicité," *Hardcore, vers un nouvel activisme*, Paris, Palais de Tokyo, 2003, p. 117. (Trans. Sean Kelly Gallery.) ⁴ "Beware! In playing the phantom you become one: An interview with Johan Grimonprez," in *Saving the Image: Art After Film*, Glasgow, Centre for Contemporary Art, 2003, p. 119.

Double Take was on view at Sean Kelly Gallery [Feb. 7-Mar. 21] and was also screened at the 59th Berlinale International Film Festival [Feb. 10-13], the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles [Mar. 12] and the Garage Center for Contemporary Culture, Moscow [Mar. 19]. It is now on view at Magasin 3, Stockholm Konsthall [Mar. 28-June 7] and will be shown at Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, in May 2010.