DOU__BLE

OCT. 21 – DEC. 6. 2018

FILMS & TEXT WORKS BY JOHAN GRIMONPREZ
CURATED BY JOSE FERREIRA & JAIMEY HAMILTON FARIS
Johan Grimonprez’s practice bridges art, cinema, and fiction by performing an archeology of contemporary media. In his non-linear montage films, he often puts early TV and cinema in dialog with contemporary fictional texts and historical events in order to explore how the past informs the present (and vice versa). Over the decades, his body of work has established a mode of questioning the development of the contemporary fear industry. His haunting montages seek to break the logic of fear and catastrophe. While at the same time, they suggest new narratives through which to value different emotions, different relations, and different politics.

Born in Roeselare, Belgium in 1962, Grimonprez studied at the School of Visual Arts and attended the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program in New York. He now divides his time between Belgium and New York and is a faculty member at the School of Visual Arts (New York). Grimonprez’s curatorial projects have been exhibited at museums worldwide, including the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; the Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich; and MoMA. His works are in the collections of Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa; and Tate Modern, London. His distributors are Soda Pictures and Kino Lorber International, and his artwork is represented by the Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, and the gallerie kamel mennour, Paris.

More information about his work can be found on his website:

www.johangrimonprez.be

TO LIVE IS TO BE OTHER.
TIME, A HESITANT SMILE.

—FERNANDO PESSOA
“IT’S A POOR SORT OF MEMORY—
“Nearly every day, words disappear... replaced by new words expressing different concepts. Lately many of my favorite words have disappeared... Weeping. Autumn light. And, tenderness.” These are the melancholic utterances of Natascha Von Braun in _Alphaville_, a French New Wave sci-fi noir film by Jean-Luc Goddard from 1965. As she and secret agent Lemmy Caution tour the dark and rainy streets of the futurist techno-fascist city of Alphaville, she slowly begins to realize that other words have long disappeared. She’s already forgotten the most important one of them all: love.

This is the perfect sort of dialog for artist and filmmaker Johan Grimonprez, now well known for his experimental films that remix classic cinema, literary texts, documentary footage, interviews, and more. Mining the radical subtexts in such phrases, gestures, and settings buried in the media archive, he finds ways to revive our critical reflection of this material and witness their role in both making and unmaking political agency in the spectator.

For the short film _Every Day Words Disappear_ (2016), Grimonprez intercuts the _Alphaville_ scene and a recent interview with political philosopher Michael Hardt (co-author with Antonio Negri of _Empire_, _Multitude_, and _Commonwealth_). Sitting at a kitchen table with the U.S.’s permanent war on terror weighing heavy on his mind, Hardt talks about reclaiming love as a political concept. Against Machiavelli’s dictate to rule with fear, Hardt proposes to look again at Spinoza’s understanding of love and joy: “...to think and act about the world, in the world, with a recognition that it’s due to each other...” Basically, love, as Hardt describes it, is the affective work of democracy—building empathy and care for others through the commons.

Abutting Hardt’s four-minute philosophical lecture, Natascha’s lament, and ultimately, her remembering of the word love, has new force. It subtly transforms her articulation of romantic love (for Lemmy) into political agency against the authoritarian state. Likewise, Hardt’s critique of our present day political system is strengthened by its juxtaposition with Goddard’s black and white filmic allegory of a dystopia built on a seductive retro aesthetic and the efficiency of a computer’s algorithms.

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HAVE WE BEEN HERE BEFORE?
ARE WE HERE AGAIN?

The back and forth between the two segments quickly brings the viewer to the questions at hand. How are love and fear related? Are they strictly oppositional? How does the Goddard film speak to contemporary political culture and its transmission of fear, but also perhaps complicate Michael Hardt’s notion of love? The beauty of Grimonprez’s montage method, used in all of his films, is to quickly break down barriers between past and present, fiction and reality, filmic action, political events, and literary musings. The viewer is given an opportunity to revisit a media text by reading it through another. The double take. This is a fundamentally important spectatorial mode solicited by Grimonprez. He is constantly inviting his viewers to look at historical footage for latent and delayed significance, to see protagonists and concepts as doppelgängers to others, and to witness the uncanniness of history.

Grimonprez is most interested in the mode of the double take as it poetically breaks down representations of power, and specifically, as it tries to expose the politics of fear and catastrophe. Grimonprez usually dives deep into a specific kind of recurrence of power, exploring all aspects and leads for a few years. This has resulted in three different but related feature-length films. Each of these, in turn, has spawned shorter films—works that further reflect on the material and terms of the larger project.
"WHAT WOULD IT MEAN TO HAVE THE BASIS OF OUR SOCIAL CHOICES BE FOUNDED ON LOVE?"

—MICHAEL HARDT

[EVERY DAY WORDS DISAPPEAR] is a filmic short that riffs off of SHADOW WORLD (2016), Grimonprez’s latest feature documentary. (I use the term documentary advisedly because Grimonprez usually challenges the ostensible objectivity that the category suggests. Nevertheless, SHADOW WORLD has won major awards in the category of documentary film at Edinburgh, Oostende, and Valladolid International Film Festivals.) SHADOW WORLD is based on the best-selling book by Andrew Feinstein about the international arms trade. Both the film and book explore the hidden-in-plain-sight world of politicians, corporations, and individuals profiting on global war and fear-mongering.

Grimonprez emphasizes the literary, emotive, and character-driven aspects of the book. A former arms dealer from South Africa reveals the shocking greed and mercenary spirit of the American and British governments, but there are questions about his motivations for speaking out and his reliability as a narrator. (Spoiler: he is fully exposed in BLUE ORCHIDS (2017), an outtake of SHADOW WORLD.) Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher banter lightly in public while their administrations orchestrate deals with Saudi Prince Bandar. Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld shape-shift through multiple administrations over the course of decades, while journalists Jeremy Scahill and Chris Hedges act as foils to the braggadocious behavior of the other two by carefully explaining the details of the corporate coup-d’état of the American political system under the guise of the “war on terror.” The media tactics used to maintain political and economic power—distracting cries of catastrophe and fear of the other set on instant repeat—are laid bare. Against this backdrop, Michael Hardt’s interview, the same in EVERY DAY WORDS DISAPPEAR, is a breath of fresh air with prospects of new and hopeful politics of love, as a means to break the fear cycle and reclaim democracy and the commons. It is a short clip, but ultimately a very important gesture that offers a glimpse of a potentially positive path forward.

SHADOW WORLD’S devotion to understanding the contemporary politics of fear could be considered a double take of Grimonprez’s first feature film, DIAL H-I-S-T-O-R- Y (1997). For 68 minutes, the film races through the history of media coverage of airplane hijackings as early as 1931 in Lima, Peru, the so-called “Golden Age” of hijacking in the sixties and seventies, the 1988 Lockerbie bombing, and ending with the 1994 Marseilles Air France Flight 8969. News footage, interviews, home videos, and commercials are remixed in loosely chronological order at a quick tempo. An added audio track reads against the grain of the footage. Passages from Don DeLillo’s White Noise and Mao II relate how the figure of the terrorist has overtaken that of the writer in controlling the public narrative—nothing can compete with the threat of

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DIAL H-I-S-T-O-R-Y’s rhythmic sampling now reads as quintessentially nineties (à la Don DeLillo and MTV), part of an important era of post-production art that appropriated and intervened in the making of the 24/7 media cycle. It immediately gained international acclaim when it was shown as part of Documenta X and released on DVD along with an essay by Slavoj Žižek, “A Holiday from History.” The film is also still probably one of the best all-time examples of détournement, a critical appropriative method that gained prominence with the avant-garde art group the Situationist International in the sixties and is still influential today. (Guy Debord famously proposed détourner D.W. Griffith’s Birth of a Nation by simply adding a new sound track to the film that denounced the Klu Klux Klan and imperialism.) To describe his method, Debord used the French verb détourner, which means “to hijack.”

Grimonprez, in using the technique for DIAL H-I-S-T-O-R-Y to examine that very same subject, doubled down on its meaning. In the syncopated “zapping” (as in channel surfing) between images and texts, viewers are invited to witness how network television began redefining the stakes of hijacking, heightening the tension between exotic revolutionaries and the negotiators, celebrating the horror and catastrophe so as to keep viewers tuned in during the commercial breaks. Over the course of six decades—and even before 9/11—we witness the transformative effect that the media has had on making and defining terrorism, even having a hand in changing the tactics and goals of the terrorists and politicians themselves, and ultimately changing history in the twentieth century. The film is exemplary in showing media and politics as mirror conditions of each other. But it didn’t yet delve into the government mechanizations involved in motivating hijackers to take the world media stage.

DOUBLE TAKE (2009), Grimonprez’s second feature film, is a sort of hinge between DIAL H-I-S-T-O-R-Y and SHADOW WORLD by showing the backstory of how politics and mass media became linked in the Cold War. Alfred Hitchcock, the master of suspense, acts as the viewer’s guide to the connections between fifties and sixties “containment culture” entertainment and American-Soviet stand-offs. Grimonprez uses the director’s cameo appearances, commercials, films, and general modus operandi of suspense to highlight the media theatrics used in the Cold War. Grimonprez also subtly weaves in a fictional encounter between Hitchcock and his double to act as an allegory for the Cold War. Developed in collaboration with author Tom McCarthy (and based on a Borges story), they hired two actors who both look uncannily like Hitchcock and scripted a story in which there is a murderous confrontation between the director and his older self. The fictional meeting is intercut with historical footage of the era, opening up the question of resemblances between American and Soviet politicians. As Grimonprez puts it in It’s A Poor Sort of Memory that Works Backwards, “The Cold War established this global mirror game: JFK versus Nixon, Nixon versus Brezhnev, Reagan versus Gorbachev, and so on.”

With the help of this uncanny allegory of Hitchcock and his double, other doubles, other espionage plots, and other MacGuffins (those flimsy plot devices that initiate intrigue, but are not significant in and of themselves) now become visible everywhere in the historical footage. Finally, in the epilogue, viewers can see that Donald Rumsfeld’s “weapons of mass destruction”—WMDs—are essentially yet another MacGuffin used to keep the global military industrial complex going. The ending of DOUBLE TAKE provides a segue to SHADOW WORLD by charting the early development of the military industrial complex’s selling of fear to the American public as well as the world at large.
In the short films conceived around DOUBLE TAKE and SHADOW WORLD there are also indications that Grimonprez has been seeking different ways to access the poetics of the double that may open again to love and with it the cultivation of community.

LOOKING FOR ALFRED (2005), FROM SATIN ISLAND (2015) and I MAY HAVE LOST FOREVER MY UMBRELLA (2011) focus on the importance of oblique encounters with the other. In I MAY HAVE LOST FOREVER MY UMBRELLA, for instance, Grimonprez finds imagery culled from the internet, much of it focused on the power of the natural world, and couples it with a famous text by Portuguese writer Fernando Pessoa about the illusions of selfhood. “To live is to be other,” the narrator says. And finally with his newest shorts, EVERY DAY WORDS DISAPPEAR and KISS-O-DROME (2016) he explores the importance of love-for-the-other in a world ensconced in representations of global conflict and catastrophe. Not just romantic love, but love for each other in general, love for the world. In these films, there are hints that Grimonprez might actually be interested in complexifying «love,» with notions of trust, cooperation, reciprocity and intimacy as well.

Love builds to resistance, as Grimonprez poetically suggests in KISS-O-DROME, with a kiss and a spin. This film is another outtake from SHADOW WORLD. The narrated text is based on the story of a massive demonstration in the streets of the Brazilian city of Sorocaba in 1980, then under a military dictatorship. Ignoring the morality laws against public affection, citizens took to the streets en masse to kiss each other. Though there is footage of this event from Brazil, Grimonprez strategically doesn’t show this, and pairs the story instead with older footage of a pair of roller skaters spinning on a circular platform mounted on the top of a building in New York in the 1930s. The juxtaposition strategically opens a poetic space between history and imagination, expressing in a more nuanced and allegorical way, the dangerous physical act of trusting another. The image of the centrifugal force of trust, a community of two spinning around an axis of limbs, doubles back to reanimate histories of revolution and their future potential.

In an interview with Catherine Bernard from May 2009 Grimonprez reminds us of what is at stake in these kinds of re-mediations. “Reality is not a given. It’s almost as if the world suffers from reality vertigo. The very notion of reality itself is at stake, or at least the access to reality that the media is controlling. Reality has always been entangled with the stories we tell ourselves . . . ” The key now is to keep spinning more towards stories of love, trust, intimacy, and community.
FLIP BOOKLET INSIDE OUT TO READ:
TERRORISM REDUX: JOHAN GRIMONPREZ’S
—BY CHRISTINA GERHARDT
— THAT ONLY WORKS BACKWARDS, SAID THE QUEEN

— LEWIS CARROLL
In 1931, as civil aviation had just begun, an airplane was hijacked for the first time. At an airport in Peru, a carrier of Pan American Airways, delivering mail for the United States Postal Service, was taken over, used to drop leaflets over Lima and then returned, undamaged, to the pilots. Televisions were invented around the same time. The televisions were public displays carried out in 1926 by John Logie Baird in Scotland and in 1925 by Charles Frances Jenkins in the U.S, just a few years prior to the first hijackings. In 1931, NBC, the original tenant of the pinnacle of the Empire State Building, began experimental television transmissions. Arguably, the history of hijackings and of television has thus been intertwined from the beginning.

Multimedia artist and filmmaker Johan Grimonprez’s DIAL H-I-S-T-O-R-Y (1997), a 68-minute essay film, presents this twin history of filmed hijackings. The film premiered at the Musée National d’Art Moderne in Paris, France and was then screened at the Documenta X in Kassel, Germany. With a soundtrack by Manhattan-based composer David Shea and passages read from Don DeLillo’s novels White Noise (1985) and Mao II (1991), the documentary provides a history of hijackings through montage. The montage includes segments from televised news broadcasts and found footage, animated films and science films, home videos and commercials. While the form rethinks screen cultures, the content reconsiders hijackings and the way they have been presented in mainstream media. The film thereby offers at once a history of hijackings and of their cultural mediation.

Only after World War II, during the Cold War and an uptick in terrorism did airplane hijackings take off. Between 1967 and 1977, 412 documented cases of hijackings took place. As the global self-liberation and self-determination struggles against colonialism and imperialism included, in some places, armed struggle, governments organized to push back in a variety of ways, including the establishment of dragnet computers. This surveillance led to the arrests of numerous terrorists. Hijackings then increased as armed struggle groups used them in order to pressure governments for the release of imprisoned political prisoners. DIAL H-I-S-T-O-R-Y features well-known groups that carried out hijackings during this period, including the Japanese Red Army, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Red Army Faction and the Revolutionary Cells.

The heyday of hijackings in the sixties and seventies also coincided with the era when mass tourism kicked off. The film shows images of the era’s stewardesses (when they were still called that) with aerosol-coiffed big hair and modeling colorful uniforms that include very short mini-skirts, in clips accompanied alternately by Wah-wah pedal distorted electric guitars (think: Jimi Hendrix), disco music and airport lounge music (think: Brian Eno’s Music for Airports, 1978) playing ambiently in the background.

An essay film, this documentary challenges viewers to reconsider the meaning of its constituent parts and how they relate. I first saw the film at the Kino Arsenal in Berlin, introduced by (essay) filmmaker and multi-media installation artist Hito Steyerl, who called attention to the film’s constellation-like structure. As film scholar Leo Goldsmith,
writing about Grimonprez’s *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* and Steyerl’s *In Free Fall* (2010), put it,

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**BOTH WORKS CONCERN HIJACKING AS A TROPE OF [...] TERRORISM AND POLITICAL ACTION, AND BOTH DRAW UPON SIMILAR COMPULSIONS, SCAVENGING IN THE AUDIOVISUAL JUNKYARD. GRIMONPREZ NAMED HIS FILM FOR THE ARCHIVAL PROCESS HE ENGAGED IN WHEN MAKING THE FILM, DIALING INTO HISTORY VIA METADATA AND KEYWORDS, AND STEYERL [...] NOTED THAT THEIR FILMS AROSE ON EITHER SIDE OF A HISTORICAL SHIFT IN THE CIRCULATION, EVEN INESCAPABILITY, OF MOVING IMAGES.**

As Goldsmith underscores, hijacking was a subset of terrorism. Furthermore, Grimonprez combines the image with a constellation of footage sharing a time capsule of life in the 1970s. The constellation includes television news coverage of the hijackings and the hijackers. A clip states a “Study reveals: dog lovers live longer than cat lovers.” Footage shows blood being mopped up from a floor after two attacks were carried out in 1985 only minutes apart: at the airports in Rome and in Vienna. Lab rats are shown in a glass aquarium style cage. A woman shows how a 1970s cabinet unfolds to pull out and pop up a television set. Images of Lenin, Mao and Castro appear. A flight safety demonstration plays: “If the cabin pressure changes suddenly, the compartment over your head will open and an oxygen mask will be within your reach. Extinguish all cigarettes. Pull down on the mask to start the flow of oxygen. Place the mask over your nose and mouth and continue to breathe normally. Then, take the elastic band and place it over your head.” Another safety video states: “The less time in a terminal, the safer you are.” Clips from trials of hijackers are shown. Interviews with hostages play. News footage shows a man whose arm has been partially blown off in the 1981 assassination of Anwar Sadat. Taken together, the configuration of clips takes viewers back to the 1970s and

"MEN HAVE TRIED THROUGHOUT HISTORY TO CURE THEMSELVES BY KILLING OTHERS"

—DON DELILLO
nestles the hijackings within the era’s political, scientific and cultural preoccupations.

The film, as its title DIAL H-I-S-T-O-R-Y suggests, also inquires into history. Can one dial history? Who is inscribed into history? Who is inscribed into history via media? What history is recalled? Only the terrorist is inscribed into history, the film states at some point. And the terrorist that hijacks is most visually inscribed into media and history.

DIAL H-I-S-T-O-R-Y also ruminates on time. From the sixties to the eighties, hijackings tended to be marked by a duration. That is, the hijackers frequently held the plane’s passengers captive while they laid down the terms for their release and negotiations and efforts to free the hostages began. These negotiations could last for hours or days, allowing news programs’ camera crews to arrive and film events as they unfolded. Not only did the events unfold over a longer duration, allowing a sustained attention to be devoted to them, the reduced number of television channels during the era and the lack of a 24-hour news cycle also focused the attention on hijackings differently.

Terrorism and hijackings are both intensely media events, using the coverage to broadcast the political message behind the attack. As a quote from Don DeLillo’s Mao II cited in the film puts it: “Nothing happens until it is consumed.” Television news channels, inversely, benefit from the increased viewings, as they boost their ratings. Thus, television and terrorism were tied together in the seventies.

Television in the sixties and seventies was still held captive by a limited number of channels, often two to three in Western nations, and news was typically watched on evening programs. In the U.S., during these decades Walter Cronkite was news anchor of CBS Evening News (1962–1981) and the most trusted man in America; David Brinkley and Chet Huntley were co-anchors of NBC Nightly News (1956–1970); and Frank Reynolds, Max Robinson and Peter Jennings were co-anchors of ABC World News Tonight (1978–1983). This period was followed by the era of the “Big Three”: Dan Rather at CBS Evenings News (1981–2005); Tom Brokaw at NBC Nightly News (1982–2004); and Peter Jennings on ABC World News Tonight (1983–2005). This narrow focus expanded slowly over the course of eighties with the establishment of the cable news industry and CNN, and more rapidly over the nineties, both in terms of the number of specialized channels available, such as Fox News Channel and MSNBC both founded in 1996, and their 24-hour news cycles.

Over the course of the seventies and eighties, hijackings and terrorist attacks carried out through airplanes changed dramatically, too. Metal detectors were implemented beginning in 1969, screening passengers for weapons. In 1970, sky marshals were first introduced. But their number was then and is now too low to monitor all flights, even with the recent revelations in the U.S. of the Quiet Skies surveillance program. In 1972, the Federal Aviation Administration introduced screenings of all passengers and all carry-on luggage. Hijackings decreased in the west. But most luggage was still checked at this time. It was after all, the era when there was no charge for checking luggage (or for food for that matter). As a result of the screenings and the still-checked luggage, bombs in checked suitcases became more common. The first terrorist attack on an airplane took place in 1976 when two time bombs exploded on a plane traveling from Barbados to Jamaica, killing all passengers.

One of the most dissonant montages closes the film. Clips show airplanes trying to land and ultimately crashing on runways or being blown up on runways while the credits scroll up across the screen and Van McCoy’s “Do the Hustle” plays. The credits stop. Then, a
post-credit scene shows Boris Yeltsin and Bill Clinton. Yeltsin speaks. His statement is not audible or sub-titled. Clinton laughs hysterically. The source of Clinton’s outburst is not shown. He tries to contain himself. Then, he doubles over, howling with laughter. Stands up. Wipes tears from his eyes. Attempts to gather and contain himself. Fails. Clinton had introduced Yeltsin, who was visiting the U.S. and going to give a speech on October 23, 1995. The dissonance arrives as the clip is shown on the heels of the exploded airplanes. The two heads of state of what had been the warring superpower nations during the Cold War are far removed from the hijackings, both what motivated them, and their impacts. Can we laugh at this clip, after seeing the exploded airplanes?

When Grimonprez released the film in the late nineties hijackings were on the wane. He obviously created DIAL H-I-S-T-O-R-Y in the pre-9/11 context. Thus, his film functions as a time capsule of hijackings during the seventies and pre-9/11. Consequently, one could ask what has changed both about hijackings and about the mediation, that is the replay of hijackings, in media post-9/11, which, of course, then also inquires into changes in media around and post-9/11.

NOTHING HAPPENS UNTIL IT IS CONSUMED

—DON DELILLO


4. For more on the cinematic mediations of the Red Army Faction, see also Christina Gerhardt, Screening the Red Army Faction: Historical and Cultural Memory (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018).


FILMS IN EXHIBITION

DIAL H-I-S-T-O-R-Y_
1997, Belgium/France, digital betacam, 68 min.
Excerpts from Mao II and White Noise by Don DeLillo
Original music and sample collage by David Shea

LOOKING FOR ALFRED_
2005, Belgium/UK/France, digital betacam, 10 min.

DOUBLE TAKE_
2009, Belgium/Germany/The Netherlands/USA, 80 min.
Story by Tom McCarthy

I MAY HAVE LOST FOREVER MY UMBRELLA_
2011, Belgium, digital video, 3 min.
Excerpts from The Book of Disquiet and O livro do Desassossego by Fernando Pessoa

FROM SATIN ISLAND_
2015, UK/Belgium, digital video, 3 min.
Written & narrated by Tom McCarthy

KISS-O-DROME_
2016, USA/Denmark/Belgium, 1 min.

EVERY DAY WORDS DISAPPEAR_
Michael Hardt on the politics of love 2016,
Belgium, digital video, 15 min.

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ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF_
Johan Grimonprez

PUBLICATION LAYOUT AND DESIGN BY_
Lauren Trangmar

THANKS TO_
Johan Grimonprez, Zapomatik (especially Daan Milius), and Sean Kelly Gallery for help in organizing this exhibition and permission to use Johan Grimonprez's images and films.

SUPPORT FOR THIS PROJECT WAS PROVIDED BY_
Laila Twigg-Smith Art Fund of the Hawaii Community Foundation
SEED IDEAS, University of Hawaii