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## The Image and its Discontent: The 29th Sundance Film Festival and the 18th Pan African Film and Arts Festival

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## On the use and misuse of archival footage – Part 1 – Johan Grimonprez’s *Double Take* (Frontier)

The presence of Johan Grimonprez’s *Double Take* (2009) in “New Frontier” and the enthusiastic response the film received prove the need we have for a section not caught in the hype of US, international or world premieres and seven-figure acquisition deals. In its various avatars – gallery installation, sneak preview – the piece had been seen (and favourably reviewed) since February 2009: at the Berlinale International Forum; the Sean Kelly Gallery in New York’s Chelsea; the Los Angeles Hammer Museum; la Cinémathèque française; the London Film Festival; and various venues in Moscow, Stockholm, Edinburgh, Abu Dhabi and Tokyo. At the time of Sundance, Kino had already acquired the US distribution rights. In showcasing *Double Take* New Frontier functioned more as a media arts centre or a cinémathèque than a market or a launching pad for the new-film-on-the-block. To respond to the diversified tastes of new audiences, an event like Sundance cannot be monolithic – there is room for currents and counter-currents, the mainstream and those who wilfully stray, the stockbrokers of the entertainment industry and the film lovers.



Like his film, Grimonprez felicitously

assumes his status as a divided subject. He spends his life between Brussels and New York (where he teaches at the School of Visual Arts), and splits his artistic activity between the film world and the art world. His first well-known piece, *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* (1997), about the representation of skyjacking in the media, existed as both a film and an installation. *Double Take* sprung from *Looking for Alfred*, a film installation combined with an exhibition of drawings and photographs, revolving around the casting of Hitchcock's doubles that Grimonprez conducted in New York, Los Angeles, London Rotterdam and Gent. (2) During the process, he met the jovial Ron Burrage, a former waiter and airline steward who had been a Hitchcock impersonator for years, even going to Locarno in 1999 with Tippi Hedren to celebrate the screening of a restored print of *The Birds* (1963) ...as well as the 100th birthday of the Master. "People always do a double take when see me," comments Burrage, thus giving the new project its title and inspiring its icon – the only composited shot of the film: the Hitchcock of *Stage Fright* (1950) looks suspiciously at a younger version of himself reading the newspaper in the London street of *Foreign Correspondent* (1940).

In one of these coincidences that Grimonprez revels in, Hitchcock and Jose Luis Borges were both born in August 1899. They both manufactured public personas that became as cumbersome as Hitch's celebrated bulk, explored the uncanny (when the familiar looks at you in a strange way) and reformulated the myth of the doppelgänger. In Borges' *The Circular Ruins*, a magician dreams a man in his image, only to discover that someone else is dreaming him. In *Borges and I* the writer expresses his irritation at reading news about his namesake in the papers, and concludes "I am not sure which of us has written this page." In *The Other* an old poet meets young Borges in his students days. An inverted variation, *August 25, 1983*, (3) imagines the writer finding an older version of himself in an Adroque (4) hotel room. English novelist Tom McCarthy reworked *The Other* in a story entitled *Negative Reel*, (5) which tracks Hitch at La Guardia Airport, where he is a shooting a scene of his Cold War thriller *Topaz* (1969) on location; waiting to use a payphone, he encounters his younger self. While crediting McCarthy and using some of his lines, Grimonprez patterns the film around Borges' second variation. "The other gentleman – who preceded Hitchcock on the stairs – was *older*" says the janitor. (The shot of the staircase is lifted from *Psycho*, 1960). The story now takes place in a Hollywood studio, in which Davidson's Pet Shop is reconstructed for *The Birds*. So the year is 1962. The Berlin Wall is in its second year of existence; the Soviets still have the upper hand in the space race, having just sent Yuri Gagarin, the first cosmonaut; the Cuban missile crisis is unfolding. On 12 August, 1962 (the date of Grimonprez's birth), a Frenchman arrives on the set with a tape recorder to interview Hitchcock, for what will become the legendary *Hitchcock-Truffaut* book. (6)

In assembling *Double Take* after years of archival research, meticulous storyboarding and hours of videoshooting, Grimonprez seems to have espoused the ultimate Borgesian temptation (lovingly deciphered by his friend Néstor Ibarra) of "exposing in every writer, every man, the spokesman of a conspiracy of which he is not aware and that is not aware of him, that lies to him and betrays him". (7) He takes Hitch and Borges, and their retinue of doubles, seriously, as twins walking the roundabout paths of our contemporary consciousness. He pairs them with more disturbing twins: Nixon and Khrushchev at the 1959 "Kitchen Debate"; Kennedy and Khrushchev in the 1961 Vienna Summit; Kennedy are Nixon debating on television during the 1960 presidential campaign; or Leonid Brezhnev embracing Nikita Khrushchev in 1964 while plotting to overthrow him. Over these images, Hitchcock's voice (or an impostor's?) repeats the motto of the film, *If you meet your double, you should kill him*.

It is not only murder that “television brought in the American home where it always belonged” but also the more complex notion of doppelgänger. It all started when, out of expediency, then superstition, finally as a trademark and signature, Hitchcock appeared as a cameo in his films – forcing him to hire a double during rehearsals. In 1955, he started working on television, first for *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* that ran till 1963, and then for *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour* that was launched in 1965. These series were marketed through the image of Hitchcock presenting the programs, his famous profile appearing as a shadow, or an abstract drawing on the wall. Paradoxically, Hitchcock hated television – this bastardised, distorted mirror of cinema, and kept making jokes about it while introducing his own programs, in precious moments that are quoted in *Double Take*: “Television is like the American toaster; you push the button, and the same thing pops up every time”. He also made fun of the practice of interrupting the programs with advertising “to keep you from getting too engrossed in the story”.... and got away with it. He was, after all, Alfred Hitchcock...or was he? Maybe it was an impostor, a double, a twin brother (Hitch courted all possibilities) while the “real Hitchcock”, the feature filmmaker, was somebody else.

Grimonprez collages and overlays footage from the paranoid years of the Cold War or from our recent history, sifting through the grid of the Hitchcockian uncanny. The 1948 “disaster on 34th Street” involving hundreds of birds flocking into the Empire State Building triggers unspoken referenced to 9/11, but also to *The Birds*. The anxious gazes of American scrutinising the sky in fear of a nuclear attack parallels the panic of the schoolchildren screaming and running while chased by the birds in Bodega Bay. Folgiers Coffee commercials, exploiting the paranoia of housewives (confined to the home after the war), attest what a powerful selling point fear is: is my husband going to leave me because the girls at the office make a better coffee than me?

If it is true, as it has been said about Borges, that *erudition is the modern form of the fantastic genre*, then *Double Take* is one of the best fantastic film in recent years. It is also one of the most unsettling: at any given moment, it is difficult to know “who speaks”. Some reviewers have even written that Hitchcock’s voice is nowhere to be heard – which is an intriguing, yet inaccurate proposition. A few minutes into the film, a recording in which Hitch explains what a McGuffin is (or is not) to Truffaut is woven into the soundtrack, while in between phrases, Helen G. Scott translates his words into French. With headphones on, a man (Mark Perry), works at reproducing the tone and delivery, in order to “become” a real “voice double”. This short scene, that appears in brief fragments throughout the film, is vertiginous, in particular through the intervention of the female translator, another level of embodiment (she speaks the words of another) as well as a go-between between Hitch, Truffaut, Perry and Grimonprez. In this polyphony, the filmmaker presents simultaneously a synecdoche of his work, his *mise-en-abyme* and his deconstruction.