

## Hitchcock Meets Himself

Filmmaker Johan Grimonprez on his unclassifiable *Double Take*

BY GRAHAM FULLER

**I**f you meet your double, you must kill him, or he will kill you” is the eerie watchword of Johan Grimonprez’s *Double Take*, which opens at Film Forum next week and is the third film directed by the Belgian gallery artist/academic following *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* (1998), his prescient history of skyjacking, and *Looking for Alfred* (2004), a short about Hitchcock look-alikes. A partly dramatized essay-doc, ultimately uncat-egorizable, the new film is nothing if not Hitchcockian in its droll but dread-laden analysis of how our culture of constant catastrophe originated in the convergence of the Cold War and television’s newfound

hegemony in the early ’60s. The star—and the MacGuffin—of the film’s romp through American-Soviet sparring is the eponymous prankster-emcee of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1955–62) whose specialty, suspense, became the Cold War’s sine qua non.

*Double Take* intertwines Hitchcock’s movie cameos and television appearances with footage of Nixon, Khrushchev, Kennedy, the space race, the Cuban Missile Crisis, Sputnik, Telstar, and, finally, Rumsfeld riddling “knowns” and “unknowns.” It also folds in a conversation with the late Hitchcock impersonator Ron Burrage, and a mini-thriller, adapted by novelist Tom McCarthy from a Jorge Luis Borges story, that’s cut around the historical collage. In the thriller, Hitchcock breaks from directing *The Birds* in 1962 to confront his deadly 1980 doppelgänger. One of them drinks from a poisoned cup of coffee (as did Ingrid Bergman’s character in Hitchcock’s *Notorious*).

The symbiosis between the USSR and America in the film echoes that of the two Hitchcocks. “They become doubles

for each other,” said Grimonprez, 47, in Manhattan last week. “One of the Hitchcocks says, ‘I hate your face—it’s such a parody of mine,’ and the other one says, ‘I hate your voice, because it’s a mockery of mine.’ That story of one Hitchcock trying to get rid of the other is played out metaphorically at the height of the missile crisis when Kennedy and Khrushchev are substitutes for each other.”

*Double Take*’s structuring absence is 9/11. Grimonprez strategically omits all news footage from that day—as he does the Zapruder footage from his coverage of the Kennedy assassination. “I initially had a shot of Kennedy descending into Dallas, and a long dissolve of that into one of the 9/11 planes,” he said, “but I took out every direct reference. There’s always an echo of today when we rewrite history, and that seeps through, but I wanted to work with the Hitchcock imagery and make a coherent film from that. We show a moment of Kennedy in the car, but then we cut to a shot of the birds coming into the house. What I like is that all the historical footage we use

is recontextualized by *The Birds*, which is recontextualized by the politics—given that the Cuban Missile Crisis occurred when *The Birds* was about to be edited—and the rise of television at that moment, and by the anecdote that Kennedy invited Hitchcock to the White House and the letter was post-marked the day before Kennedy was shot.

If you take all these serendipities and put them into place, then you cannot but look at *The Birds* from that political angle. It has no ending, so it’s always open-ended what the birds stand for.”

When asked if he believes that images thus create reality, per French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, Grimonprez said, “It goes back and forth. WMDs were a fiction, but that became a horrible reality, and that horrible reality comes back through images that again propagate fictions. When you compare the Iraqi Riverbend blog [a now-defunct blog by an anonymous Iraqi woman who goes by the name “Riverbend”] with what’s being shown on Fox, what’s reality? There’s so much manipulation, we don’t know what is real anymore.”