History Repeats the Old Conceits: Johan Grimonprez on *Soundtrack to a Coup d'Etat*

by Christina Zachariades in Director Interviews, Directors, Interviews on Sep 18, 2024

Fall 2024, Johan Grimonprez, Soundtrack to a Coup d'Etat

Soundtrack to a Coup d'Etat, by Belgian artist and filmmaker Johan Grimonprez, is an essay film of many dimensions: the high tensions of the Cold War, the activism of the Black Civil Rights movement in America and its solidarity with the independence movements that were sweeping across Africa, the power grab between the East and West for control over minerals and resources in the Congo and the relentless espionage attempts to undermine those efforts, including the CIA sending jazz ambassadors to covertly gain intelligence.

Plunging viewers into the historical events surrounding Congolese National Movement leader Patrice Lumumba's leadership and assassination at the start, Grimonprez doesn't always present actions chronologically. But there is an associative, time-skipping logic to the film. It's one of the reasons the film is both gripping and worthy of rewatching. One of many striking sequences comes at the beginning, with the first notes of Nina Simone's ballad "Wild Is the Wind" playing as we are introduced to Andrée Blouin, Lumumba's speechwriter. Grainy black-and-white footage sourced from her domestic archives accompanies the longing of Simone's song. Wind agitates the trees, and rain starts to pour to the downbeat piano as Marie Daulne, the Belgian-Congolese musician of Zap Mama, lends her voice to Blouin's memoirs recounting the details of Congo's independence movement.

Soundtrack is classic Grimonprez in this way. Each of his films has the quality of being a dissertation and an indictment. Media manipulation and the duality of the East vs. West ideological divide are common refrains/concerns refracted through his mixed media and essayistic approach. His first feature, 1997's *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, charts the history of airplane hijackings alongside the rise of television news from the late 1960s until the '90s. Nikita Khrushchev is featured in 2009's *Double Take* as a doppelganger to Hitchcock, drawing a parallel between East and West fear-mongering during the space race, while 2016's *Shadow World* reveals the underbelly of the global arms trade and privatization of war toward the latter part of the Cold War up to the 2000s.

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Soundtrack brings us back to the 1960s of Grimonprez's first feature, when tensions between the East and West were particularly inflamed, but it also brings us into the present day. In this sense, time travels in circles, and history is an endless loop. This repetitiveness is another quality of his work. Over and over, the same images resurface across his films and within—objects being shot up in the air or crashing down, floating in space and underwater, perhaps in an attempt to jolt us out of a fixed or static perspective. The film is out November 1 via Kino Lorber.

Filmmaker: How did you come to film as a medium of artistic expression? Is it true you have a background in anthropology?

Grimonprez: Yes, cultural anthropology. I was studying in Belgium but was part of a theater group as well, a Wooster Group or Pina Bausch sort of thing. At the same time, I was studying photography and running to classes at the cultural anthropology department. At one point, those things started to combine, and I felt a little bit dissatisfied with theater because the things that I really wanted to explore in storytelling were more apt for film. I then studied in New York at the School of Visual Arts. A big input was also the Whitney Independent Study Program—all these introductions to Slavoj Žižek, Jacques Derrida. Thursday was the academic meeting where you had input from the critical studies program, the curators; then, Tuesday was the dialogue group. Yvonne Rainer had a film program as well. That's how I got to know [her, when she was] giving feedback on my first endeavors in film. So, that was very special. I got to know this group of filmmakers—Su Friedrich, Leslie Thornton and Yvonne—and the New York avant-garde filmmakers' way of storytelling. It opened up the way you could tackle narratives. It was [also] a moment where post-colonial discourse was on the agenda: Homi K. Bhaba, Gayatri Spivak.

Before coming to New York, I had a grant and spent one year in Indonesia, on the Papua New Guinea side in the mountains. That was quite a peculiar experience because I stumbled onto a group of separatist guerrilla fighters called OPM, Organisasi Papua Merdeka, and that really marked me—people coming to tell me, "Oh, my mother's being shot, my brother's being shot." And the transmigration projects were something that really marked me politically. The World Bank was shipping poor Javanese farmers to Irian Jaya, which is a Malaysian culture, where they were protected by the Indonesian military. That half of Papua New Guinea was given to Sukarno by John F. Kennedy because he was freaking out that [Sukarno] was getting too close to Khrushchev. A little bit further was the Freeport copper mine, where the villagers were being napalmed. The Asian Human Rights Commission released a report about it. That was a big confrontation for me that marked a sort of itinerary of what I was about to set forth in the stories I wanted to tell. The first film that I made was *Kobarweng or Where Is Your Helicopter?*, dealing with that subject matter, and that was while attending the Independent Study Program at the Whitney Museum.

Filmmaker: It's interesting that your entry into film was not from the cinema space but more from the art world. And many of your films cross over from exhibition. Not many artists are able to do that. How do you think about the screen when working on your projects? Or, how has that impacted the way you think about the screen or approach your projects?

Grimonprez: It's a bit similar to what Yvonne Rainer would do when stepping over to cinema from dance or how David Lynch wanted to extend painting. Maybe it's because you step into

cinema from that angle that you explore storytelling in a very different way. But also the sponsoring, yeah? *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* was cosponsored by two artist organizations, the Centre Pompidou and Documenta X. And that film grew out of a video library that I had curated for the Municipal Museum of Contemporary Art in Ghent. They wanted to invite it to Pompidou. At the same time, they said, "We're gonna give you money for a new film," which became *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*. That premiered in Pompidou as a diptych with Chris Marker's *Immemory*, his CD-ROM. But there was not a lot of press because there had just been terrorist attacks in Paris. Ten days later, it was at Documenta X, and eventually, it crossed over to Arte. I was surprised that it crossed over to television.

Filmmaker: Many themes run across your works. The impact of mainstream media and advertising is certainly among them, but I noticed this recurring interest in the Cold War as a pivotal geopolitical moment. I'm curious, do you consider this to be one of your main artistic concerns?

Grimonprez: Well, I'm a kid from the '60s, so I grew up on television. And television, to me, is the fear box. It frames that ideological divide between East and West. *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* is about television as catastrophe culture, and *Double Take* was specifically about the rise of fear told through the space race. The space race was satellite technology, which also made it so that we got television across the oceans. But at the same time, [it led to] the rise of the culture of fear, right? And that culture of fear was on both sides: East versus West. It's the idea of the doppelganger and television as a doppelganger of cinema. When television came about, a lot of cinemas were closing doors, so cinema had to be redefined. And, in *Double Take*, the commercial break sets the plot in motion, and indeed, you also have Nikita Khrushchev as a doppelganger for Hitchcock in that film.

For *Soundtrack*, I was always fascinated by Khrushchev's shoe-banging at the United Nations, but I did not know that was because of my country [Belgium]. That was a point of departure. I was researching at the UN Archives and translating Khrushchev's speeches, and I was surprised because he's holding up the mirror to a society where media manipulation is so much a part of everyday life. And here is the villain who's holding up the mirror. That's also something Hitchcock says: If you want to have a good story, you make your villain as handsome and articulate as possible. So, in *Soundtrack*, we have Khrushchev, who's not a saint. What he did in Poland and Hungary is immediately preempting the [idea] that he's a saint. Also, when Khrushchev enters the narration in *Soundtrack*, he immediately says, once you make a mistake, the memory will haunt you forever.

Filmmaker: Was he referring to Hungary?

Grimonprez: The film refers to that—the image of the spinning cloud of ash is in Budapest. People who were born in Hungary will know that image right away.

Filmmaker: It's interesting to see how Khrushchev is treated in this film compared to his presence in *Double Take*. In *Soundtrack*, there is a sense of humor around him—we see him being used as a punchline in mainstream media, but even more surprising is that he was a strong voice for decolonization and demilitarization.

Grimonprez: Well, he was mistranslated, literally: "We're gonna bury you." The U.S. American mainstream media was portraying that in a way meaning imperialism and the United States, but that's not what he said. Dizzy Gillespie jokes about the fact that he didn't say, "We're gonna bury you," meaning America, [but meaning] we're gonna bury colonialism. When I translated bit by bit and listened to what he was saying, there were other things I found where he talked about the history of the United States in relation to the Native American Indian population.

Again, he's not a saint. When he was serving under Joseph Stalin, he was complicit, of course; hence, the signposts at the United Nations: "Murderer," "Get Out of Ukraine," "We're never gonna forget." That's acknowledged in the film. But he did denounce Stalin in 1956 and released 20,000 or 30,000 prisoners from Siberia. And there was an opening happening in the Cold War in 1959 when Khrushchev was invited to the [United States] [by Eisenhower]. Before that, no other Soviet leader had stepped foot in the United States. But that opening was then smothered again by the U-2 [spy plane that the Soviets shot down] in May 1960. That was right before the independence of the Congo. So, when Khrushchev arrived at the United Nations in October 1960 [the month after Lumumba was removed from power in a coup], the Cold War was at its height again, and it set in motion a whole other different agenda.

I was surprised 1960 was referred to as the "Year of Africa," with all these newly independent African countries admitted to the United Nations, amongst [which] Congo is one. That triggered a political earthquake within the UN because it shifted the majority vote to the Afro-Asian bloc and away from the old colonial powers. I think that's a crucial evolution in 1960. Both the East and West are trying to play the global South, and you have the nonaligned movement.

Of course, Khrushchev wants the global South on his side, and it's true he introduced the decolonization resolution, [and] you have the Belgians using *that* to portray Patrice Lumumba as a communist to get America on its side. Lumumba always said, "I'm not a communist, I'm an African." The resolution was signed, but the flip side of that resolution was the killing of Lumumba. It sets the example of how the West will treat that sort of independence movement as a neo-colonial grab—we're going to kill him because he was threatening what was going on with the Union Minière in Katanga. Actually, what's happening in East Congo is the same template. So, that East and West divide was how the world was defined—not only then, but also today.

Filmmaker: You mentioned the shoe being a point of departure, but I'm curious, how did the project evolve, and when did the jazz musicians come in?

Grimonprez: The point of departure was the banging of the shoe and realizing that it had to do with my country, but as I set forth researching, the empirical data change[d] the course of narration. So, for example, I fell from my chair when I listened to the Columbia archival audio of William Burden where he says, "Well, I didn't think it would be a bad idea. Lumumba was such a damn nuisance that it was perfectly obvious the only way to get rid of him was through political assassination." This is the U.S. ambassador to Belgium, the president of [the board of trustees of] MoMA, and he has investments in Katanga in the Union Minière, and he was also a secret CIA agent. So, it was like, wow.

The jazz ambassadors came in later. I knew Louis Armstrong was [in the Congo] while the coup was happening, but digging further in the archives, [I found] that there was a bigger story with the CIA and the U.S. State Department. And then, stumbling onto the full concert of "We Insist! Freedom Now" by Max Roach and Abbey Lincoln, broadcast on Belgian television in 1964, at the same moment when the genocide was happening in Congo, and realizing Abbey Lincoln, together with the women's writer coalition in Harlem, organized the protest and crashed the Security Council because of the murder of Patrice Lumumba. We said, "OK, that's going to be the end of the film." We had the ending before anything else. And it's also the first thing in the film.

Filmmaker: I'm curious about your relationship to time. I was struck by how you build up to the storming of the UN in this nonlinear fashion. We aren't always oriented in the chronological order of events from Lumumba's rise as the first leader of an independent Congo to his assassination that incited the protest action at the UN. There are moments in the film where we suddenly jump ahead past the assassination, and other times we slip further back into the past. And there is also this added layer of collage that creates, for me at least, the sensation of being completely suspended in time. Can you talk about the nonlinearity aspect of your approach, in terms of narrative and also aesthetics?

Grimonprez: It's basically layering horizontal and vertical time. The horizontal timeline is the dramatic movement, and the vertical timeline is the layering [of the archival with the music]. There is the drama and suspense of going from Congo becoming independent and the hope that it brings throughout Africa with the nonalignment movement and the idea of the United States of Africa, and that joy and political agency through the music that leads to how that gets smothered. So, I made choices based on that dramatic movement. That scream at the very end of the film can be [felt as an expression of] what happened to the Lumumbist movement and how that movement ended in a genocide by the Belgians with the help of the United States and the United Nations.

So, I run a bit ahead, but then I go back. And of course, doing justice historically by naming the dates and all the sources. I even put footnotes and page numbers because the film hasn't been released in Belgium, but I know I'm going to get grilled if I call what was happening in East Congo in 1964 a genocide, which it's never been called in Belgium. I have to back it up with the data. It's like an academic PDF as a feature music video.

So, you have music taking you in a more emotional direction, tied to musicians who were political agents. So, for example, the layering in that scene with "Wild Is the Wind" by Nina Simone—there is the archival footage, and the voice of Zap Mama reading Andrée Blouin's memoirs which is the vertical storytelling. One reenforces the other. "Wild Is the Wind" helps to give emotional depth.

What is sometimes more interesting is layering with juxtapositions. Somebody tells something, but you see or hear the opposite, or the music tells an opposite emotion. That's what cinema can do, and I like to explore those things: What you see and feel can sometimes be contradictory; what you hear and read can go against one another. And it opens up a whole arena, that poetic justice of how one can tell that story.

Filmmaker: But it also can have a disorientating effect that jolts us from a passive position of viewing the film. It's activating.

Grimonprez: Yeah. When in the edit, I sometimes like to think, where could you go from here to open that up in a way where it's really a wake-up call? And literally, at one point when In Koli Jean Bofane is talking about the African World War in the '90s, there is that abrupt cut to an iPhone advert. It's not gratuitous; it's literally leading to the fact that indeed $28 trillion is still under the ground in mineral wealth, and so many women have been raped as a weapon of emptying villages because they have to grab the minerals.

Filmmaker: Bofane was incredibly revealing and brought this historical issue to the present day. It's an ongoing issue. This is not a historical documentary.

Grimonprez: That was his role. *Congo Inc.* is a template. Every mineral for every big war in the 20th century came from the Congo, starting with rubber for the First World War, then uranium for the Second World War; Vietnam, the copper. And then the cobalt, which is the war in space. It's all this talk about satellite war, and et cetera, et cetera. Again, minerals—lithium for Tesla or the iPhone. I was looking at [*Congo Inc.*] as a template and how what was set in motion at the time is still happening today. Because of Kagame, who's a big part and is being propped up by the West, women are being raped on a daily basis. I don't know if you know the story of Denis Mukwege, who got the Nobel Peace Prize, who's trying to take his cause to the United Nations. They don't want to listen. He wanted to have Kagame held accountable for the genocide in the Congo. There'[re] also a lot of women activists who are very much involved with that, holding distribution points for minerals accountable. It's called the Nengo Project, where they are lobbying also the United States Senate. [The film] ends with a quote about how many women are raped, and we had to change that number. It was 45,000, but then we verified with Denis Mukwege's website, and it's actually 80,000. That's the [number of] women he treated in the last decades.

Filmmaker: That was an update that you had to make? Because when you started the film, it changed by the time you ended the film?

Grimonprez: We were already on the sound mix, and somebody said, "Let's verify this." And it was almost double what we had put in the film. We had to change it to 80,000. The titles were done at the very end, so we could still verify sources.

Filmmaker: Women play a significant role in your film. I wanted to ask about Andrée Blouin, Lumumba's speechwriter. How did you discover her? Because the pairing of her with Nina Simone and the voiceover of Marie Daulne is a revelation.

Grimonprez: The story of Andrée Blouin was literally written out of history. I only found little references to her in all these anthologies and history books about the Congo, in which she's hardly mentioned, and it's like, "this courtesan who's befriending all heads of state in Africa." So, I thought, "That's interesting. Why is she always labeled like that? Let's try to find the memoirs." They were published in the '80s but forgotten. Eve Blouin, her daughter, is translating them and republishing them in French and English in January 2025. She became an advisor for the film and was wonderful. She said, "Yeah, go ahead and use anything from the memoirs, but I also have this undeveloped film reel. Do you wanna bother to look at it?" and sent it to us.

We were also in contact with the Sûreté de l'État [the Belgian intelligence agency], and they said "Yeah, we collected everything we could find [on her], come and get it." And then we went, and they said, "Oh, all the material has disappeared." It was like that story can't be told. But there's a chapter in her memoir of her first meeting with Patrice Lumumba, and, during that meeting, Lumumba was reading from a stolen intelligence report that he had from the Belgians, and they were laughing that both their names were on a death list: "I'm on a death list, but look here, there's this woman, Andrée Blouin, and she has to undergo the same fate." Gromyko, the [foreign] advisor to Khrushchev, hated her because she was very outspoken, and so they labeled her a communist so that the Belgians would put her on the death list.

Filmmaker: I'm curious about the combinations and choices of connecting jazz musicians to political leaders. It's not always so, but it does seem that certain musicians are placed in close proximity to certain leaders. For instance, Nina Simone with Andrée Blouin. Lumumba with Max Roach—there's a doubling.

Grimonprez: For me, they become markers. So, the drums of Max Roach become a marker for Patrice Lumumba. Roach claims, "On accasions, we do use the music as a weapon against man's inhumanity toward man." He says in the film that drumming is his tool. Or, when Max Roach references Art Blakey as "the best at maintaining independence with all four limbs"—of course, it's another meaning, but it was interesting [to actually watch] his drum solo [and see] his four limbs moving independently and start to embody what Patrice Lumumba was doing. And Art Blakey as a marker to interrupt Gaston Eyskens, the Belgian prime minister, when he demanded that Patrice Lumumba apologize for [denouncing the king] in his speech at the independence ceremony.

When Lumumba was released from prison and came to the round table [in Belgium], the L'African Jazz musicians Joseph Kabasele and Dr. Nico [Kasanda] were in Brussels, too, and on the night when independence was granted, they composed "Indépendance Cha Cha," and it became a hit all over the continent of Africa and also the name for the independence movement in Rhodesia. So, it's not gratuitous that the music is there. Music was very much a part of that independence movement. Max Roach and Abbey Lincoln were very much inspired by the independence movement, and, of course, jazz is coded. A lot of the jazz musicians were at the protest movement in the Security Council. We had a big part about Paul Robeson in the film and had to cut it out. He was actually the first one to drag the United States in front of the United Nations and started a lawsuit against the United States for lynching Black people. He was also there during the UN Security Council crash. We have so much other information that was so crucial, but we could not—the film was four hours.

Filmmaker: I'm reminded of a quote from Hitchcock that you had in *Double Take*, something like, the length of the film corresponding to the human bladder.

Grimonprez: [laugh] Oh, yes—the length of the film should be equal to the endurance of the human bladder.

Filmmaker: That was it! Can we talk about your approach to duration? Because *Soundtrack* does run longer than your other films, which are usually a little over an hour.

Grimonprez: Well, music does help to accelerate. If you would take the music away, it would feel like a longer film. A lot of people say the film doesn't feel like two and a half hours. But at the same time, it was necessary to have that time to tell the story. For me, it was crucial to come to terms with my Belgian history, and that story needed that bigger context of what's up with the world body, which even today is still in a dire state. The United Nations is still a tool of imperialism. But it was coming to terms with sort of things that I've never learned at school, which is a black page in our history. The whole architecture in Brussels is still the same. It's all rubber money.

We now have a Lumumba Street, but it doesn't do justice to the shit that happened to really fuck over the Congo. For me, the time span of two-and-a-half hours is still very little for all the layers: the bigger context of the mining industry, of the nonalignment movement, that sense of hope that there was solidarity between all those global South leaders—all of that was crucial for me. Also, my background and coming to terms with my past and telling a different story about the jazz we all grew up with. We watched Max Roach and Abbey Lincoln, not realizing that at the same time there's a genocide in l'empire du silence—the Empire of Silence, as it was called. What's not said was not told in history, and I don't think you can move forward if you don't come to terms with that.

Filmmaker: I noticed repeating images within the film, the elephant and the falling house. But also across a recycling of images across your films, as well. There are lots of planes and objects parachuting. Pipes and Magritte also make cameos from time to time. I wonder what coming back to these images and recontextualizing them means to you?

Grimonprez: Yeah, the home falling from the sky is an image from *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*. That film was inspired by Don DeLillo's novel, *Mao II*, where he says, "Home is a failed idea." If you think about it, aren't we all living in a home that is falling from the sky? It's like the whole world has this trauma; we are living in a world that is maybe about to disappear. So, we're actually living in a house that's falling from the sky, if you want to embed meaning to the metaphors. But sometimes they become free-floating signifiers in the way they are cut into the film. For me, a big part of working with archives and those images is listening. It's like when a novelist is writing his novel and puts the character in extreme circumstances to see how that character will react. Very often novelists say, "Oh, it's the characters who wrote my book. It's not me." Right? It's the same with cinema—maybe a bit different because you work with images, but you try to listen to the images and give meaning to where they belong.

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