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## ART TORRENTS

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### Johan Grimonprez - Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y (1998)

Tuesday, April 17, 2007

DIAL H-I-S-T-O-R-Y, the acclaimed hijacking documentary that eerily foreshadowed 9-11. We meet the romantic skyjackers who fought their revolutions and won airtime on the passenger planes of the 1960's and 1970's. By the 1990's, such characters were apparently no more, replaced on our TV screens by stories of anonymous bombs in suitcases. Director Johan Grimonprez investigates the politics behind this change, at the same time unwrapping our own complicity in the urge for ultimate disaster. Playing on Don DeLillo's riff in his novel Mao II: "what terrorists gain, novelists lose" and "home is a failed idea", he blends archival footage of hijackings with surreal and banal themes, including fast food, pet statistics, disco, and his quirky home movies. David Shea composed the superb soundtrack to this free fall through history, best described in the words of one hijacked Pepsi executive as "running the gamut of many emotions, from surprise to shock to fear, to joy, to laughter, and then again, fear."

«Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y» is a video film structured in two fifty-minute parts, presented in the form of an installation. The guiding visual thread of the piece is the almost exhaustive chronology of airplane hijackings in the world. The soundtrack is constituted of a fictive narrative inspired by two Don DeLillo novels—«White Noise» and «Mao II»—which, for Grimonprez, «highlight the value of the spectacular in our catastrophe culture.» (...) «Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y» blends photographic, electronic, and digital images, interspersing reportage shots, clips from science fiction films, found footage, and reconstituted scenes filmed by the artist. The work denounces the media spectacle and seeks to detect the impact of images on our feelings, our knowledge, our memory.



### Art Torrents

We have a very limited number of invitations at the moment, but mail us a few lines about yourself and material you'd might be able to contribute with and we will get back to you as soon as possible.

We haven't written any of the text on this blog, almost every post is copy/paste and therefore created by other people. One more important thing to have in mind when viewing some of the work we share at this blog, is that it's often intended to be installed/presented in a gallery.

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Questions of Hans Ulrich Obrist to JOHAN GRIMONPREZ via e-mail

**Hans-Ulrich Obrist:**

A question about digital television: so far, digital channels are being watched by very few people. Does this non-Audimat situation create a laboratory, an openness for experiments?

To finally go beyond programme television whose "homogeneity ... is intrinsically hostile to art" (Alexander Kluge).

**Johan Grimonprez:**

By way of introduction: "MTV SMACKED UP ONLINE: IF VIDEO KILLED THE RADIO STAR, WHAT WILL INTERNET DO TO MTV?" Playlist lets you be the veejay; select your faves and they'll be played one after another! Here's where to get the groove: „, and

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AKA Still Life (1997)  
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Harun Farocki - I Thought  
I Was Seeing Convicts  
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Johan Grimonprez - Dial  
H-I-S-T-O-R-Y (1998)

Learning Book #001 &  
#002 by Learningsite

Gregor Schneider,  
Catalogues  
(1985-2002)

Hubert Sauper - Darwin's  
Nightmare (2004)

Adam Curtis - The Trap:  
What Happened to Our  
Dream...

William Basinski -  
Disintegration loop 1.1  
(2001)

Trashing the Neoliberal  
City: Autonomous  
Cultural ...

(Newsweek May 7, New York 1999)

**Hans-Ulrich Obrist:**

Couldn't homogeneity possibly trigger a creative context to read mainstream imagery in deviant ways, to read against the grain?

**Johan Grimonprez:**

Homogeneity as a vocabulary actually did provide a huge source of inspiration to explore certain themes in "dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y".

**Hans-Ulrich Obrist:**

How do you struggle as an artist or filmmaker to position yourself vis-a-vis mainstream media ?

**Johan Grimonprez:**

Art and mainstream media seem to remain mad twin sisters, always arguing. Hence the rivalry between a novelist and a terrorist staged as a metaphor in "dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y". In this plot it's the terrorist who's at the winning hand, since he's able to play the media. The narrative is taken from DeLillo's book Mao II, which contends that the novelist's role within society has been replaced by that of bomb makers and gunmen. "What terrorists gain, novelists lose!", says the book. The end of the film though alludes to the fact that media nowadays might even be outplaying the terrorist.

With 600 channels soon provided on New York cable, might the overall homogeneity not desire the other part: the urge for an extreme diversity, a kind-of-supermarket-idea with specialized departments, evidently to push the viewers' quota. The recent corporate merger of ATT-telephone, Media One and Microsoft might very well give new meaning to the act of zapping. Impossible to surf every channel in a nitetime. Destined to keep the finger on the push-button-program of the remote, we will rather plug in the computer-browser, let the search function pop up our favorite clips from the scifi-channel or the history-channel. We could also let a random-veejay-option simply perform the zapping for us, click for: TELEVISION ON MUTE and tune the stereo to some inflight groove.

**Hans-Ulrich Obrist:**

Homegeneity of mainstream imagery doesn't necessarily have to dictate a homogenous perception of that imagery?

**Johan Grimonprez:**

Video-viewing rituals amongst the Warlpiri community at Yuendumu (Central Australia) for example seem to sustain cultural invention. Decodings of Jacky Cheng movies or australian TV-soaps like "Neighbours" would be interpreted along kinship obligations and different story-lines proper to Warlpiri narrative. (see Eric Michaels, Hollywood Iconography: A Warlpiri Reading, 1987).

**Hans-Ulrich Obrist:**

Similarly the gossip culture of catholic mothers in Northern Ireland would claim Joan Collins from the feuilleton "Dynasty" as an emancipatory icon: wasn't Joan rich enough to act independently and trash all those men?

**Johan Grimonprez:**

Translation of global culture across geographical (and political) boundaries can be read in most contradictory ways: commercials were the most powerful messages of the West, remarked East German writer Heiner Mller.

**Hans-Ulrich Obrist:**

The television viewer is maybe not a passive consumer: isn't there always a sense of appropriation, creating one's own terms to read mainstream imagery with a certain iconoclastic pleasure?

**Johan Grimonprez:**

It became the point of departure to set up a mobile video library: "Beware! In playing the phantom, you become one", a project made in collaboration with film critic Herman Asselberghs, and that has been travelling since its intitution in 1994.

**Hans-Ulrich Obrist:**

"Beware! In Playing the phantom, you become one" is your mobile video library and archive, it includes films, documentary films, commercials soaps and sitcoms. The programme changed from Kassel to Paris where it was shown after documenta X. How do you related global issues of a travelling archive with local adaption and local necessities.

**Johan Grimonprez:**

It is interesting that the programme in Paris was different, it is no longer possible to send homogenous exhibitons on tours and impose them to places but the terms have every time to be (re)negotiated.

**Hans-Ulrich Obrist:**

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How do you integrate participatory elements into your films and other works in general?

**Johan Grimonprez:**

McLuhan speaks of hot and cold media, cold media being participatory media with few details, like paper, while hot media offer little possibility for participation, for example television. In this context the question of black and white footage is very interesting. The fact that in the middle of color there appear black and white moments causes a disturbance. In an interview I recently made with Alexander Kluge he said that he tried to make films which are also "the ideology of zapping which can be an extreme form of poetry, going much further than collage."

**Hans-Ulrich Obrist:**

Could you tell me about this last point, about how zapping transcends collage, where does it lead?

**Johan Grimonprez:**

The participatory elements would be sometimes as simple as a cup of coffee. We would never install our video library without having the cookies, the smell of coffee and the remote control. These elements already induced a platform of conviviality, an atmosphere for chatting. You were invited to grab a cup of hot coffee and pick up the remote to zap through your own selection of videotapes, in a way become your own curator, select your own film programme from a stack of tapes that ranged from twisted commercials, underground documentaries and alternative MTV to mainstream stuff spun off from Hollywood and CNN. It would imitate a bit the domestic banality of everybody's home video library, and the visitors were also invited to include their own home-grown camcorder tapes: their honeymoon horrors, UFO-testimonies, their top ten of the Oprah Winfrey Show.

The library alluded to the fact that the very act of watching television contains already a participatory nature in itself, the way we receive, contextualize and recontextualize images. It's exactly what we do with the zapping tool (say: "zaptitude"). Zapping buys into the supermarket ideology, but at the same time it can embody a critical distance as well. It stems in fact from video-deck terminology: zapping, i. e. fast forwarding the videotape past the commercial. Commercial break = zapping time.

No need to zap though, the poetry is right there on CNN. CNN has totally surpassed the way Eisenstein and Vertov envisioned montage as a revolutionary tool. Similarly in how the avantgarde filmmakers of the sixties and seventies have become displaced by MTV's nature to swallow every different sort of novel style. The arrival of MTV on Moscovite TV in Russia was even trumpeted in the Russian press as the biggest event since the 1917 October revolution! Vertov reconsidered through the eyes of MTV. Making a collage of color and black and white footage could easily be reduced as merely an esthetic choice. A zapping mode would splice blood and ketchup, like CNN: images of war cut with strawberry ice cream. It would rather point at an epistemological shift in how a "zaptitude" has transformed the way we look at reality. A jumpy fast forward mode has replaced our conventional models of perception and experience. Sometimes I don't even know anymore if we're still in the middle of the commercial break or whether the film has already started. Soon we'll mistake reality for a commercial break.

**Hans-Ulrich Obrist:**

The taboo of visible death is usually kept from public sphere into private realm. "dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y" evokes Holbein's sarcophagus painting where the viewer is both inside and outside, the active and passive view coincide. Allegorical death and death as a dumb fact. We are inside and outside, there is the obsession with death in "dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y" (You elsewhere described TV's complicity with death as "the desire we have for the ultimate disaster is one aspect of our relationship with death"). It reminds of what Georges Didi Huberman wrote about Sarcophagus: "Ce que je vois, ce que je regarde." In your text "Kobarweng or where is your helicopter" you write: "The observer observed."

**Johan Grimonprez:**

Virilio remarked once that television turned the world into an accident, and that with the advent of virtual reality the whole of reality will be accidented. Each technology invents its own catastrophe, and with it a different relationship to death. The boat invented the sinking of the boat, the airplane invented the crash of the airplane, just as television has reinvented the way we perceive reality and the way we relate to catastrophe, history and death.

TV has turned our notions of private and public inside out, but more importantly the representational modes for portraying actuality and imagination have become intertwined: CNN borrows from Hollywood and vice versa. The everyday talk show has zapped the family away from the couch right on TV and in the opposite direction catastrophe culture invades our living room. The territory of the home overlaps with the space of TV in a much more profound and psychological way than we are possibly aware. In that respect the gap between spectator and history has been narrowed totally. "dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y" ends also with a scene of a hijacked, crashing plane accidentally framed on camcorder by honeymooners. They're immediately invited to host Larry King's talk show on CNN to tell how they were able to shoot the footage. The dynamics of abstract capitalism had already turned the revolutionary hijacker into an anonymous suitcase bomb, push-button history now turns the spectator into historian. The spectator has become the hero and political issues are simply reduced to explanations of how to operate a camcorder. Mellencamp (Patricia Mellencamp, High Anxiety, 1990) calls it the shift from catastrophe to comedy: "We can't change the world, but we can change our socks," according to a Nike ad: "It's not a shoe, it's a revolution."

Share Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y from 1998 via [demonoid!](#)

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