

# COLLISION

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The Missed

A new genre of speculative writing created by the Editors of *Evental Aesthetics*, the Collision is a concise but pointed essay that introduces philosophical questions raised by a specific aesthetic experience. A Collision is not an entire, expository journey; not a full-fledged argument but the potential of an argument. A Collision is an encounter that is also a point of departure: the impact of a striking confrontation between experience, thought, and writing may propel later inquiries into being.



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Campos, Isabel Sobral. "Grimonprez's Chimera," *Evental Aesthetics* 1, no. 2 (2012): 81-87.

## ABSTRACT

Johan Grimonprez's *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* has been critically surveyed for its use of mass media: this film, a masterful feat of editing, appropriates found footage from television newscasts to examine the history of hijacking. My reading of this piece further analyzes Grimonprez's use of appropriation, locating the image of the chimera featured in the film as a symbol of the method of montage that *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* uses, and of the links that this work makes between violence, homelessness and art making. The chimera stands for the artwork itself, for the latter's rapid sequence of disparate images functions as a grafted body. As a figment of the imagination, the chimera also stands for the constructed nature of the news event, which the film assays. Furthermore, the eloquence of the chimera's image bespeaks the body that has lost its home. In this film, hijackings are related to homelessness; Grimonprez implies that wellsprings of violence arise from radical histories of displacement. By way of the chimera, he also suggests that art can impact society only by hijacking the images of mass culture, thus relating art making to violence.

## KEYWORDS

Johan Grimonprez, *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, film, appropriation, violence

# Grimonprez's Chimera

Isabel Sobral Campos



The chimera appears near the end of the film: a mouse with a human ear grafted onto its small back. Fidgeting inside an open glass bowl, it sniffs around the edges, trying its paws on the glass as if wanting to get out. The film features other animals in captivity: trapped birds float in a kind of depressurized chamber, hopelessly looping and turning, caught in a zero-gravity zone, and laboratory mice writhe inside a cage; but the image of the chimera, its body turned into a tottering appendage, overlays the captivity of the other animals with presentiments of a more terrible fate.

*dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* (1997) is not a film about the Human Genome Project, the ethics of animal experimentation or the wayward ways of science. On the surface, it non-chronologically chronicles television's coverage of hijackings between 1931 and 1996. Made of found footage from CNN and ABC news archives, it also includes various images such as cartoons, advertisements, propaganda and Hollywood films, camcorder shots and didactic videos. Yet in a wider sense, *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* surveys the earth from a bird's-eye view, featuring

political and public, private and domestic environments, and inhabiting the liminal spheres of airspaces and TV screens: the places of homelessness. The opening shot of a plane approaching an airfield indicates this ambition, as does the footage of outer space and of the flying house uprooted by a sudden wind. Originally intending to make a film about goodbyes at airports, Belgian artist Johan Grimonprez instead looked back on a personal history of geographic dislocation – from Ghent to New York, Paris to Brussels – and on a global history of division and struggle – the global North versus the South, the Iron Curtain, the East against the West.<sup>1</sup>

Many scholars have commented on Grimonprez's appropriation of images. For Eben Wood, *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* remixes visual materials, juggling different types of images and their levels of resolution. A remixing of sorts also occurs with the excerpts from Don DeLillo's novels, *White Noise* (1985) and *Mao II* (1991), which make up the film's voiceover narration.<sup>2</sup> Following Serge Daney's notion that television images lack the ability to reference the other and lack an awareness of this lack, Vrääth Öhner sees the film as a history of blindness.<sup>3</sup> Contrastingly, in Alvin Lu's view, Grimonprez's editing technique opposes imagery and meaning to create an "elliptical dialectic."<sup>4</sup>

I suggest approaching the use of appropriation in this film from another angle. The chimera, as I see it, emerges as the matrix shot or the emblem for the film's method of montage, which mounts image upon image, grafting a chain of the most disparate contents, situations, tonalities and forms. An aberration, the chimera is also a figment of the imagination, wild hallucination as much as a final terror imposed on a living organism. As a flight of the imagination, it embodies *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*'s proper dread. A raid on the archives of mass culture, the film seizes their lexicon of images and the types of narratives they create. It imitates the rhythm of television programming, mimicking the movement from newscasts to advertisements, and the haphazard way extraordinary events become news as catastrophe interrupts the comfort provided by daily shows, such as soap operas or sitcoms. By juxtaposing images from different contexts, Grimonprez reflects on the constructed nature of TV reporting: he presents the status of the televised news event as chimeric construct by intensifying the grafting gesture of editing. In Grimonprez's film, the televised coverage of the hijackings acquires an aura of unreality, which contrasts with the historical nature of the events, making us sense both proximity and distance in relation to the news

presented: we see the coverage of the hijackings; we know they happened; yet the rapid succession of images troubles their legibility, asking us to notice the role of editing in the production of meaning. Moreover, as Öhner alerts us, Grimonprez's film shows almost nothing of what happens during the hijackings, only showcasing the aftermath and the confused debris of stunned faces, the distant smoke and fire.<sup>5</sup>

Along with the mouse-ear, one image in particular points toward the chimera or grafted body as a symbol for the use of appropriation in this work: the image of a house on top of a flying airplane as red flashing letters spell alternately "dial" and "history." It is part of the film's initial credit sequence, after images of Lenin and of another house speeding across the sky have already implied the link between homelessness and political struggle to which I will return shortly. Although the film uses montage to order found footage as well as a few original camcorder shots, the shot of the airplane-house is the only frame in the film that uses montage to compose an image, juxtaposing disparate images within a single frame. As part of the opening credits, it indicates the formal approach that the film will use throughout. This image, in which the intervention of the artist is more evident than in any other composition, directly parallels the image of the chimera appearing later on. It is in itself a chimera – half house, half airplane – an image that has lost its proper place. As the airplane-house fuses two spheres of reference, the place we call home and the homeless space of the airplane, the mouse-ear fuses two biological domains. Both are images of alienation; one tampers with mimetic verisimilitude, the other with biological limitations. These chimeras symbolize the significant restructuring of our sense of reality by the artificial mediums through which we ascertain the world, including animals and people, landscapes, fictions and events.

As previously noted, the connection between homelessness and political struggle is central to *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* and its use of appropriation. Most of the hijackings featured in the film link terrorism with the loss of home. From the Vietnam veteran Raffaele Minichiello, who in 1969 seized a TWA jet to fly to his dying father in Rome, to the displaced Palestinian hijackers and the Black Panthers' self-exile into Algeria, the film presents these histories of violence as springing from policies that dislocate and alienate populations and groups. While this link is well-known, the film further connects this geographical dislocation to the final dislocation the chimera undergoes as it embodies the living organism dislodged from its own species and from its own body. The

airplane-house and the mouse-ear images forge this connection, at the same time that they relate homelessness to violence. By placing an uprooted house on top of an airplane, the airplane-house literalizes the claim that homelessness leads to violent acts, such as hijackings, as much as violence generates homelessness. Furthermore, since the airplane-house and the mouse-ear symbolically parallel each other, they comment on one another. The airplane-house turns the chimera's displacement from its own species into a kind of homelessness. In its turn, the mouse-ear, as it resonates with the airplane-house, which announces the technique the film will employ, proposes that the artwork itself is also a product of violent displacements: because the film displaces images from their particular contexts and conjoins them, forming a disparate sequence, it too functions as a grafted body, which places side-by-side the most diverse political contexts. Via montaged images, it puts into dialogue such diverse groups as the Japanese Red Army, the German Red Army Faction, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Black Panthers, alongside footage of Mao's and Stalin's funerals, Castro's ascent to power, and Nixon's speeches. Overall, in Grimonprez's work, appropriation emerges as a method of critique of television news coverage, of capitalism and of tyranny as a much as a method of art production.

To clarify the use of appropriation as a method of art making, I end these brief remarks by turning to the voiceover narration in *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*. The film's narrator reads a monologue by the main character of DeLillo's *Mao II*, writer Bill Gray, in which he claims that the terrorist has usurped the novelist's ability to affect society. "What terrorists gain, novelists lose. Years ago, I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now, bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness. What writers used to do before we were all incorporated."<sup>6</sup> This claim hovers over Grimonprez's film, as the latter questions the role of the artist in the contemporary world: can an artist affect a society of fast and blind circulation of products, images, words? What happens to the deep things dug from common wells: histories brought out to face (re)presentation, exposed to the force of the image? DeLillo's character does not believe in artists' ability to refer to these common wells and thus to effect transformations; the brutal labor of violence has replaced art's ability to affect and transform, because only a terrible act stands out amidst the ongoing stream of news reports. Grimonprez's film, however, strives to reinstate the force of art by using

television news coverage as art-making material, emulating its tactics and rhythms, creating what the artist has called the poetics of zapping.<sup>7</sup>

The violence of contemporary culture must also be acknowledged. Featured throughout the film, it coalesces in the chimera as the scientist assumes the role of the artist, making forms out of living organisms. In turn, artists have begun to use biological organisms as artistic material: 1997 was both the year of *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*'s première and of Eduardo Kac's coinage of the term "BioArt" to describe the work of artists using genetic engineering, cloning and other techniques to manipulate living organisms. The originality of Grimonprez resides in his suggestion that the chimera has been all along the quintessential symbol of late twentieth century art, for its body literalizes the deep ties between this century's forms of violence, which arise from uprootedness, and a visually and informationally saturated society, which forces the artist to use "violent" methods, displacing images from their contexts.

## • Notes •

<sup>1</sup> Grimonprez speaks of his initial intention: "But initially I wanted to make a tape about people saying goodbye in airports, to trace how that has changed in just thirty years. It was to be something more autobiographical, a recollection of memories in relation to my little daughter who was at that time living on the other side of the Atlantic; reunions always happened in airports." Quoted in Catherine Bernard, "Supermarket History: An Interview with Johan Grimonprez," in Datalle, Benoit, ed. *It's a Poor Sort of Memory that Only Works Backwards: On the Work of Johan Grimonprez*. (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011), 231.

<sup>2</sup> Eben Wood, "Grimonprez's Remix," in Datalle, 247-266.

<sup>3</sup> Vrääth Öhner, "On Seeing, Flying and Dreaming," in Datalle, 243.

<sup>4</sup> Alvin Lu, "Mind Terrorist," in Datalle, 197.

<sup>5</sup> Vrääth Öhner, "On Seeing, Flying and Dreaming," in Datalle, 243.

<sup>6</sup> Don DeLillo, *Mao II*. (New York: Viking, 1991), 41.

<sup>7</sup> Regarding the poetry of zapping, Grimonprez says: "The ideology of zapping could be defined as a new sort of Brechtian rupture. It can be an extreme form of poetry, going much further than collage." Quoted in Catherine Bernard, "Supermarket History: An Interview with Johan Grimonprez," 229.

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