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Johan Grimonprez: History as Spectacular Narrative

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DISCUSSES THE MEDIATION OF CATASTROPHE WITH

Johan Grimonprez

There is no moment on certain days when he is not thinking terror. In boarding areas he never sits near windows in case of flying glass. He carries a Swedish passport so that's okay, unless you believe that terrorists killed the prime minister. And he uses codes in his address book for names and addresses of writers, because how can you tell if the name of a certain writer is dangerous to carry....On the other hand he knows in his heart that he is going to die of some dreadful slow disease.' (Don DeLillo)

Don DeLillo's commentary from his novel *Mao II* (1991) is transposed to the off screen narrator in *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, foregrounding the themes of Johan Grimonprez's film, with its juxtaposition of world events with the 'innocent' individual. Banality becomes media spectacle, as global politics are reduced to witnesses soundbites. The narrator becomes a key element in shaping how events are perceived. *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* exploits the voyeuristic role of the media in disasters and acts of terrorism. Desire and repulsion fuel the viewer. We create the monster which forms before our eyes, provoking macro-lenses to leap on a hijacker at the point of death, or scramble to get the best shot of a mother screaming in agony at the death of her child. Grimonprez understands our desires, at the same time as questioning them. Actual plane crashes become filmic special effects. A media collage from hijackings to a psychiatric expert, scientific breakthroughs, hamburgers and cartoon characters, are gloriously packaged together, a kaleidoscopic commentary on a society that can never, it seems, be sated with imagery. *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* exploits the M.T.V generation, as images are zapped forward and back, human tragedy reduced to the soundbite. Gravity, death and disaster as a swan dive are recurrent themes. Grimonprez's latest work, *Inflight*, again reiterates the concerns of *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, but this time in the magazine that you'll read whilst flying. The metaphoric twist is that the magazine will infiltrate the giant aviation corporations, equivalent to concealed explosive.

'The first incident was unimportant because it was only a series of phone calls. The second incident was unimportant because nobody got killed.' DeLillo writes in *Mao II*. *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* leaves a question hanging in the air.

Jean Wainwright: Can we talk about *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* and the development of that work into *Inflight*, the issues it reveals about banality, wit, the media...

Johan Grimonprez: *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* (1995-1997) is based on a double narrative. It traces the history of global aeroplane hijacking, from the beginning of passenger flights until the ammo suitcase bombs in the nineties, exploring how those hijackings and terrorist acts have been represented in the news. How the news has changed during a very short span of media history. Secondly, underneath there is fictional narrative, based on Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and *Mao II*, where a discussion is spun between the novelist and the terrorist. The writer is meditating on his role in society, and Don DeLillo more or less contends that the terrorist has taken over the writer's role, that bomb makers and gunman have more of a voice than the writer nowadays. So it's a statement about the media, and how I as the film-maker position myself against the TV or media landscape. How you place yourself within that arena, as an artist or as a film-maker.

J.W: You trained as a photographer in Belgium and as a film-maker in New York, are these your preferred media?

J.G: That depends, I have also produced work in other media so they are merely tools. Just as a film would be a way to express certain ideas, and explore certain narratives, the *Inflight* magazine produced for my current show, (at the D'Offay gallery) would be another way of telling things. I had too much material, having researched extensively during the making of *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*. There was so much that didn't get included and I thought it would be interesting to do something with the texts. I wanted to present the work in another way and it turned into the *inflight* magazine. The publication takes on the same themes but also embraces what is happening on the net. There is a chapter called <HACKTIVISM> thanks to Ricardo Dominguez who put me in touch with people that are also involved with doing actions on the net. I talk about what's going on within New York; things to do with the company eToy, how eToys attempted to buy etoy.com from the European art group.

J.W: Just to go back to *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* and then to continue with the magazine. When *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* was shown in Documenta X, it really touched people. I was in that room where it was screened and people were really shocked at some of the scenes, in particular the ones that have been written about in the press: the cleaners mopping up the blood, the banality of death as well as wit and humour, the juxtaposition of the music and the text. Can we talk about when you first conceived of this hijacking narrative, what was your drive to document them?

J.G: Well one thing definitely, seeing what was going on C.N.N or on the news itself, which was so much more obscene. At least, *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* was very moral and I thought that people would have a problem with that. On the contrary, people got stuck on the imagery, but never really listened to what was being said. I thought maybe that confirms what is going on in the film as well, that maybe the terrorist has taken over. Finally images have so much more impact than what is being said, and I didn't hear people saying 'what was going on between the narrative and the terrorist'.

J.W: I think what was picked up on were some of the phrases, the woman at Lockerbie who was blasted into her TV set



as she was watching *This is your life*. I think what happened was that people focused in on some of the sound bites rather than the general narrative of the film. But what fascinated me particularly was the way that you had selected these clips. The sections when the flights take off or land, and they crash, the inevitable repetition of action that is so mesmerising.

J.G: Well it's an exploration of all the vocabulary that is happening on TV, and the way it's edited, its not an over-critical mode. This is not a one dimensional presentation, of how things should be or not, it's very much questioning that kind of language. Not only is the questioning in the narrative, but also in the text, the quotes from *Mao II*, how images are set against each other, how the music is juxtaposed with the imagery. You see how certain images come before a certain event, you see how Donald Duck at the McDonald's in Moscow is just before the end scene when Yeltsin is singing caralinka caralinka. Even in the imagery you have a critical note which you don't find anymore on TV. Its like TV is so much more obscene. When you start zapping, in the way you actually look at TV, is in a very poetic way, but in a very obscene poetic way. Commercials are spliced with news footage. It's a strange bombardment of imagery.

J.W: One image that I recall out of many is where the film projects 'insert commercial here', and that takes you back to what it's all about.

J.G: Yes, it's all about that gap, it's what Brecht would do in his theatre. He would interrupt and say to the audience 'hey listen guys' and in a way, that would draw you in. The music (in the film) is going on in a very seductive way, taking on that seductive language, but spinning it around. There was lots of criticism because I took it on, but I think that nowadays, if you don't take on that seductive language you get lost in all the rubbish.

J.W: Can we talk about that criticism?

J.G: Well there was this thing of positioning yourself outside the media in the sixties, like coming up with global TV and trying to invent the counter TV. I think that counter TV is so out of the question, it's not possible any more. I think your place within the media is now so much more schizophrenic. While you are being absorbed by it and take on the same language you can still be critical. You know you're also playing at the edge. It's so important to take on that language and go beyond. Because if not, you are not heard, then you are somewhere in the backyard digging, like Adorno, and making up your critical note, but it's not being heard. I think that it's important to take on that language, the M.T.V. language. Since the beginning of C.N.N and the entry of M.T.V, the way we look at images has changed, everything has been speeded up. When M.T.V. was introduced they had a cut every four seconds - it had been eight seconds or even more. Now the soundbite has got shorter and shorter. You see how C.N.N. adapts M.T.V. to talk about reality, to talk about the news, or even adopts Hollywood aesthetic



codes and fictional codes to talk about it. You have all the newsbeats and sound bites and when you see the Gulf War it's like M.T.V. This is what the film is also about, how that vocabulary has changed and how we also slowly adapt. It is also the way in reality that we walk around and go shopping. We have a supermarket shop and put our stuff into the supermarket trolley, and it's the way we perceive, more or less, reality these days.

J.W: Getting back to what is happening here, your *Inflight* lounge, your installation, can we talk about the way you have put this together?

J.G: I have taken a familiar setting and spun it around. If you look at the logo's in the lounge for credit cards, the Visa and Mastercard become Jack and Master Jack. You can see how I am taking everyday banal imagery and am twisting it around so that it becomes something else. I think it's interesting to play around with those known visual codes. You can produce some gaps and draw attention to the fact that something else may be going on.

J.W: Looking through the *Inflight* magazine I noticed how much you enjoy doing that. You have the familiar 'apple' logo transmuted into a pear with the words 'who owns the dot?' You look at it and you are initiating a dialogue, questioning because it is so much part of our language. So can we talk about the process of selection, the way the *Inflight* magazine has been put together. You said at the beginning you already had a great deal of research that you had not used when making *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*.

J.G: The magazine starts with Bart Simpson saying 'maybe the sky is really green and we are just colour blind'. This is kind of a model for what's going on, its gained the same schizophrenia. We live in the middle of this language, but then suddenly it's interesting to show the short sequence in that language, to show the space that could be critical. So the first chapter 'NO MAN'S LAND' takes on the whole theme of *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* and the history of aeroplane hijacking, but all the little stories have funny twists. The T.W.A. hijacking of 1985 had is all the fuss about a credit card where they couldn't have fuel unless they had one. Another example is Leila Khaled, her skyjack diary, (recalling events of August 29th 1969) when she is in the plane sitting next to this man who is nearly proposing marriage to her, while she is a about to get up with a gun and hijack the plane.

J.W: Can I ask you about the source material for this, because looking at the credits at the beginning, you have taken the material from books and reportage on the original events. Did you insert the twists at the end?

J.G: I have an amazing stock of

documents. I'd already had the selection for five years. I tried to find everything that deals with hijacking, for the purpose of *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*. What you see in the film is the tip of the iceberg and it is only what you see in the film that you really focus on. The selection that you take are maybe the funny bits, but I don't want it only to be funny, there is always a double, a false, bottom. I always like to try to make connections that have a three or a four double bottom reading to them. People can also have their own reading to it. In *Inflight* it also varies from chapter to chapter. So you have the Skyjack diary and the history of hijacking and what is going on in Cuba. In Cuba hijacking became so popular they had to extend the runway and the tax free shop, and whenever an aeroplane landed in Cuba Castro would ask for about three thousand dollars extra from the airline, as extra tax and entertainment expenses, so it also became a business.

J.W: That business aspect is interesting, you cite that and later develop it in all kinds of different ways.

J.G: It is all the little details that fascinate me. For instance, the hijacker that wants to disguise himself. He is struggling with a wig and then he realises that he has left the envelope with all the hijacking details in it . It's all those little banal details that take world politics into the realm of the everyday. Even the hijackers and the pilots all have these stories of their wife etcetera.

J.W: I think there were many moments like that: the birthday of the air



J.W: ...where was she going, what was she doing, what was her purpose, a narrative of innocent questions, that, at any moment could have tricked her or trapped her

J.G: There is also the story of a fake airport being built. The Americans were exploring the idea of building a fake Havana airport in Miami. During the first Red Army hijack, they took a plane from Fukuoka to

PALESTINIANS LEARNED GEOGRAPHY BY GOING FROM ONE AIRPORT TO ANOTHER

Jean Genet Prisoner of Love

stewardess with champagne and cake being ordered by the hijackers, Leila Khaled saying she knew how to deal with all the terrorist scenarios but she didn't know, and hadn't been prepared for, those aeroplane conversations. You suddenly have the unpredictable human element inserted that makes you think more than anything else.

J.G. The very intimate politics, a woman and the man on the plane...

Pyongyang in North Korea. They got stormed in Seoul where they had been deceived into landing. People were dressed up to look like it was Pyongyang with placards welcoming them, but they have American jazz over there and the hijackers turned on the radio, it was that that gave it away. These are the little episodes recounted in the *Inflight* magazine, or phrases like 'your words have reached my ears' which was a cockpit conversation and becomes the title of the show here. The next chapter is chronological, from the suitcase bomb to cyberjacking. There is an entry on David Hubbard, a psychiatrist who specialised in hijackers. The concept of an *inflight* magazine is for it to be read in the sky, above the clouds. You could take that on as metaphor, because it is also about dreaming and the utopia being projected. You hijack a plane, you are on the way from one country to another. Hijackers take a plane to 'no mans land' to another country, a hostile country. With Khaled she claimed her own country, she did not have a country to fly to, so she declared 'we claim a no-mans land and baptise it into our territory' and she renamed the plane as Palestine because she didn't have a territory to fight a war. So they take an in between country, in that sense it is also like a utopian projection, but in the sky. When you board a plane, and definitely when I come back from New York, you close a moment, because you go from one space to another. You go back to Europe, you have a moment to think and then you realise your hopes and your dreams, and maybe you are going to see your beloved, it's an important moment, and that's the moment that the *Inflight* magazine is supposed to be read. That moment exploring your dreams, in a small sense and also in a big sense. This is what Hubbard takes on, his theory, but it is



MOUNA ABDEL MAJID
PALESTINIAN COMMANDO / HIJACKER
AMMAN, AUGUST 1970



HONEY, WE'RE GOING ALL THE WAY!—TO CUBA



WELL, HONEY, IF YOU WANT A DIRECT FLIGHT, I'VE GOT A GUN YOU CAN BORROW[®]—Skyjacker to Stewardess



January 1972: Havana Hijack
PACIFIC SOUTHWEST AIRLINES



Here is a man who has really no sexual experience at all, who looks at the hostess as a sexual symbol and when he takes his gun and sticks it in this goodlooking girl's belly and says "Honey, we're going all the way!—to Cuba", he may very well be making the first sexual gesture in his life.

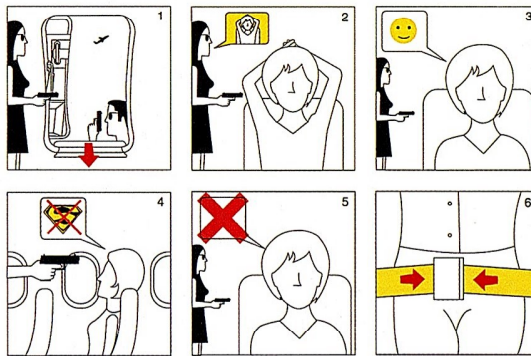
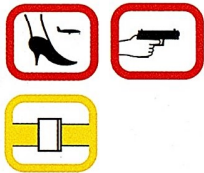
THERE'S A BIT OF THE SKYJACKER IN ALL OF US

DR. DAVID G. HUBBARD

NOTORIOUS

The basic dream described to me again and again by skyjackers I interviewed is this: "I can fly, not like in an airplane but all by myself, I can simply move my arms like this [flaps arms] and go where ever I want." In such a dream, one defeats gravity, the ultimate physical force, without the expenditure of energy and the use of mechanical devices we require in real life. The persistence of this dream among skyjackers, long after the time when most adults have given it up, is intimately related to their limited grasp of reality and their fantastic expectation, they fail at everything. Their failures increase their self-deception, and their need to perform some notorious act.

Skyjack Air ✈️ safety on board



linked with what was going on between East and West, it's very much rooted in Cold War politics. What you see towards the end of the eighties and even at the end of the seventies, when everything has collapsed with the Soviet Union is hijacking changing slowly into the ammo in the suitcase bombs. You could almost say that the dynamics of abstract capitalism have reduced the act of hijacking. The Faisalabad hijack was a piece for TV, when you have a suitcase bomb, and you see governments start playing terrorists.

J.W: *Inflight* is intervening. You are infiltrating...

J.G: I would love to. I am definitely going to take some when I go back to America and put them in the seats.

J.W: Your safety instruction card is also an intervention.

J.G: Yes we also tried to get Austrian Airlines involved. It is so hard of course, and that is what I am doing with the *Inflight* movies with their themes of disasters. There is also my motion discomfort bag, and the safety instruction card. This is the executive survival cyberjack.

J.W: Like an executive game, you go on board knowing that this is going to happen.

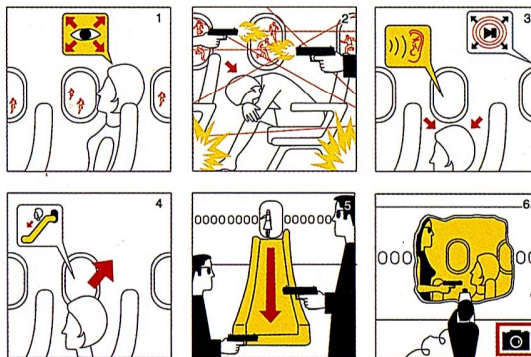
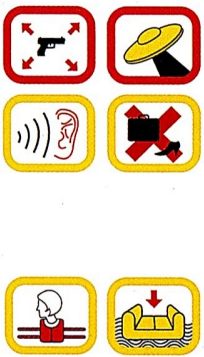
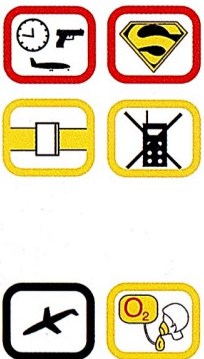
J.G: This was inspired by what was going on in Japan. When I was at the video resource centre, on the internet you could plug into all these notes on hijacking. You just punch in a keyword and you get all these documents. One of the documents that I traced was a tourist hijacking in Japan, where about three hundred to four hundred people enrolled to have themselves hijacked. You also see how in the nineties hijacking has become a tourist business, which is interesting.

I like the fact that this work is not only reduced to realm of the art world, I love the idea that the

magazine is on the newspaper stand, so that it is also outside of those artistic boundaries. You can take the magazine on, that it's not only questioning the art world, it's also about something else, the news media, the magazine world, codes, that are being questioned.

J.W: So you question all these areas, advertising, the credit card mentality, the way the system works. The sound bites...

J.G: ...and if you look at the Pan Am commercial you see that it is also about the Wizard of Oz, where the house starts floating into the sky. The wizard of Oz is also part of the video library in my inflight lounge. I like that as a metaphor. It is an interesting film. The house is uprooted and becomes an aeroplane flying across the rainbow and into the colourful land of Oz, which is



PLEASE DO NOT REMOVE FROM AIRCRAFT

also rooted in the seventies. He was mainly studying and working with psychotic hijackers. He depoliticises what the hijacking really stands for, reducing the political aspect to merely a sexual act. He also adds something else to that, his theory that the male hijacker is actually struggling with gravity. After studying all these cases of psychotic hijacking, he suddenly noticed that many of the subjects were actually suffering from vestibular disturbance. They had a problem with their inner ear, which stabilises the body, so they have a troubled relationship with gravity. He postulates that from childhood on, the child is struggling with gravity. In the beginning he is always held by his parents and never touches the floor. Then once he starts walking and tries to stand up there's the struggle with gravity. Hubbard is purposing a new Freudian theory but in

relation to gravity. He says that Freud didn't do that because we didn't have aeroplanes at the end of the nineteenth century, but in the seventies it's a different thing. He projects this Oedipal triangle on the plane, there is 'mummy' stewardess and 'daddy' pilot. The hijacker is Oedipus trying to overcome this mini community. When he forces the stewardess to take him to the cockpit, and he overpowers the pilot, he has total control over the little country in the sky. Hubbard suggests that when the hijacker, in his terminal moment, stands up from his seat with his gun, this act of standing, struggling with gravity, taking a position, is very important. He is also not identifying with the mum, who was very passive, he is struggling with his violent father and overcoming him. But Hubbard also explored what was going on with the space race. If you explore hijacking it's very much

commenting on the colour TV, the utopian land of dreams - saying 'there's no place like home'. But once we have the eighties and the ammo and suitcase bomb, we get into the chapter which takes on the David Hubbard discussion, which takes us into the nineties. David Hubbard was exploring the relationship between the space race and the symptom of hijacking in American society. He says there was a crisis, this is true because the Russians were much more advanced with space research. The space race becomes a metaphor for the Cold War and Hubbard sees it as also being linked with his gravity theory and how man positions himself in society. In Russia it was different because you had women cosmonauts, but in America the emphasis was on the family, the woman staying at home. The press would interview her and get her story. When the space shuttle crashed the space race changed totally. It was the first attempt at having a woman, but a democratic version. She was a teacher and she was a symptom of the space race being in crisis you have the crash, and you see how everything got internalised.

A development is also the activism on the net where web sites are hijacked. What Ricardo Dominguez does at one point in Grasse 1997 or 98 was a virtual sit in. He wrote a programme that reboots the server which you actually plug into. People surfed the net and while there they crashed the web sites of the Pentagon and the Mexican President. This is the contemporary way of getting attention for a certain cause, a similar way of hijacking but through the net.

J.W: You are producing this work through at artistic space at the moment, it is going onto news stands, but *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* has toured to museums and galleries.

J.G: The biggest audience it had was a screening in France on Arte, and it's also going to be shown at Technics. It's spinning things around on the net, the more I can open up a discussion and the bigger the audience the better. I would love to have it in a different space, it does not have to be restricted to the art world.

J.W: There are in *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* some pretty harrowing moments, for example when the mother screams 'my baby, my baby'.

J.G: Yes that is her daughter, who is nineteen years old, and she had just heard the news.

J.W: When people saw that image in Documenta there was a sharp intake of breath and people were quite shocked.

J.G: I also still get goose bumps when I see that image.

J.W: And everybody that was there, especially for me as a mother, the hairs on the back of the neck stand up. ...that primal scream.

J.G: Yes I know, I know, and it's very voyeuristic, but if you look closely at the image you will see it's much, much longer. I took that moment when the cameras are jumping on the woman. You could say that that image is obscene, but it's very critical as well, it's voyeurism of voyeurism, you see all those cameras jumping on top of her, and the point of view is of the camera behind all the other cameras. I didn't film that myself, it's part of something I found at ABC news. For me what's amazing is that you see the movement of the camera jumping. From the first moment that she screams, these cameras are turning around and literally engulfing the woman. There was a huge discussion, in the media particularly, about that image, of how the cameras were placed and how the media was dealing with a certain kind of voyeurism. To come back to that woman, there has been lots of criticism of the film, particularly that specific moment. People get touched and take on a very extreme emotional reaction, and of course you can take on a discussion of voyeurism of voyeurism, but then the right person to ask about this was the woman herself. There was a book that analysed how the media dealt with Lockerbie and she was interviewed and she said 'I was so happy that when I was screaming on the floor, it was on every television screen.' She said the first time she saw it she was shocked to see herself, but it helped a lot, because she became an activist, and took on the agenda about security on flights. So the Lockerbie dads and mums of the kids that died on the plane, they had support groups and that image helped to do something. The activist group really had a voice. In a sense it is really hard to deal with this imagery and the real people to ask are always the people portrayed. So if that woman says 'I am really happy to have that image on TV' which is an extreme intimate movement...

J.W: The second very voyeuristic moment is when the anonymous skyjacker has been shot in the stomach in St Petersburg. What horrifies

you there is all the cameras, and the microphone bearing down on his moment of death asking him to talk, to comment.

J.G: Yes that's true, and also for me it's the image of what's going on with our political stand, the media is right there with the microphone in your face, and they ask what is your political point of view, why did he want to take the hostages. He can't even answer because at the same time he is actually dying, his life ebbing out before our eyes. For me these images are very important. The film at the end is cynical, very pessimistic, but, the fact that it provokes a discussion is also an opening. The fact that the film is there reveals there is still a possibility to say something. But at the conclusion of the film, you have Clinton laughing until he cries with Yeltsin, and you think this is defeatism, what can you take on as a political stance. How can you position yourself within the media. I think in the *Inflight* magazine, the piece on hacktivism, there is still a positive note there. Maybe since the film was made something has changed.

J.W: In your 'Jet hits town section' you have the Lockerbie testaments 'I got something from the fringe and suddenly there are bodies falling from the sky', this surreal juxtaposition of banality and drama.

J.G: Very surrealist, but I liked that chapter in the magazine, that all these people are watching TV and suddenly there is this plane falling out of the sky. I took it as a metaphor to talk about TV because that chapter is all about zapping.

J.W: You mention zapping, you do have a running order in your *Inflight* lounge of the films you have selected, but you do encourage people to take control.

J.G: They are parts of scenes such as Larry King Live and *Inflight* commercials as well as air disaster films. You come up with your own *Inflight* disaster. There is *Alien Autopsy* and different genres and different types of movies. Also when you are in the airport they have TV's mounted on the walls and they blare all this stuff at you. C.N.N. have an airport channel which is an interesting idea. With the *Inflight* magazine I also wanted to explore the history of the zap tool and eventually I cut all that out, but it could become a project on its own. The first zappers were invented in the fifties and they were advertised as a way to zap away from commercials. They were advertised as 'now you don't have to hear all those boring commercials, you can just turn off the sound'. In the eighties, the remote control became more popular because of more channels, because of VCR. The zapper is actually a VCR tool zipping and zapping. Zipping is fast forwarding through commercials. By the eighties, 1985 ninety percent of TV's were sold with a remote control, and you saw the advertising industry, trying to find a way of making a zap proof commercial. The advertising industry was freaking out because people were starting to take control, they wanted to see their own programmes make choices. Before that you actually had physical zapping, people grab a beer or go to the toilet during commercial breaks.

J.W: Where did all this stem from, was it projects you did when you were a graduate?

J.G: My dad was an inspiration for what I am about, stemming from what was going on in my home. My dad had a zap tool, and it's also to do with gender politics about the zapper, and what goes on in the domestic home. Again the home could become a metaphor, in the plane you make yourself 'at home' and the stewardess brings a cup of coffee and also at home mum brings the TV sausages and dad has the zapper.

J.W: You have some great quotes 'nothing happens until it is consumed' and 'home is a failed idea'.

J.G: In *The Wizard of Oz*, catastrophic culture invades the home, where the twister takes the home and lifts it up it. This is in 1939 when they put the first antennae on the Empire State building in New York and it's the beginning of TV. Through the window you see Judy Garland spinning herself from black and white into the world of colour TV. It's about how catastrophic culture has invaded the whole world and how it's a great metaphor.

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