CURIOSITIES

Double Take (Johan Grimonprez)
Perrier's Bounty (Ian Fitzgibbon)
The Good, the Bad, the Weird (Kim Ji-Woon)
Beetle Queen Conquers Tokyo (Jessica Oreck)

Watching Double Take, an extraordinary film by Belgian director Johan Grimonprez (from a story by British author Tom McCarthy) was one of the oddest experiences I’ve ever had in a movie theater. The continuous rapidity of the scenes passing before my eyes (and of the sounds impinging on my ears) eventually induced a kind of hypnagogic state in which the film seemed to be accelerating while my vision of its flickering scenes was switching off and on at a rate of about once a second—an experience that ended as soon as the film was over and my vision (along with any other neural or sensory changes involved) returned to normal. Surprisingly, I had been able to make reasonably legible notes throughout.

The film’s images are always on the move and are often distorted, truncated, and overlapping even when it’s easy to see what they’re depicting. They consist of two concurrent series of events. One (more visually distorted than the other) focuses on excerpts of major East–West incidents during the Cold War—such as the kitchen debate between Nixon and Khrushchev and the standoff between Kennedy and Khrushchev over Soviet missiles in Cuba. Meanwhile the other series focuses on Hitchcock, offering many brief examples of his work as a filmmaker and TV entertainer during the same tense period. The sardonic verbal touches of unease and horror in Hitchcock’s TV introductions and postscripts fit well with Double Take’s visual distortions of the Cold War encounters.

Since Hitchcock died in 1980, Grimonprez extends his life by using at least one convincing lookalike—thus bringing in further opportunities for sinister playfulness, uncertainty, and entertaining confusion. But the living Hitchcock had from time to time also made films that were more deeply disturbing than usual, such as the lengthy scenes of near-darkness in Strangers on a Train, the slow tempo and play with mysticism in Vertigo, and the nonhuman cast members of The Birds. Double Take’s references to some of Hitchcock’s later and less interesting films, especially Torn Curtain and Topaz, connect again with the Cold War but for just once in Grimonprez’s extraordinarily wide-ranging focus they are too brief and colorless to add any impact. Except of course that I still remember them.

The Anglo-Irish Perrier’s Bounty has an interesting cast (including Gillian Murphy, Jim Broadbent, Brendan Gleeson, and Jodie Whittaker) and a screenplay that its producer describes as “dark, funny, and romantic.” It does indeed offer some effective night shooting, but neither it nor the daylight scenes evoke a lot of romance. Almost right at the start there is Brenda, so angry with having just been dumped by her boyfriend that when she finds her neighbor Michael being maltreated by a henchman of a powerful gay crook named Perrier to whom Michael owes a thousand quid, she grabs a gun and shoots the henchman. After Brenda and Michael go on the lam the latter’s apparently rolling-stone father turns up convinced that if he falls asleep he’ll die, but fortunately the film’s generally rowdy action manages to keep him alive.

There’s a lot of that action, along with a continual buildup of tension and curious situations such as Michael and Brenda outwitting and sidelining two policemen in order to save themselves from the crook’s heavies. Action is long while the time to appraise it is short. Occasionally it’s vice versa, as when Brenda and Michael are hiding out on a hill at night overlooking the lights of Dublin. Perrier’s Bounty is something of a roller-coaster ride all the way to its baffling happy end.

The Good, the Bad, the Weird, an aptly titled South Korean film by Kim Ji-Woon, left me baffled and exhausted but also somewhat impressed. There were four people (including me)
at the first New York City press screening and not one of us walked out. When (as here) a sequence right at the beginning of a 140-minute film opens with a mid-desert double train crash that leads on the spot to chases, clashes, multiple shoot-outs between three men on the make as they grab what they can from the train’s government officials before heading to other sandy parts, you realize that the filmmaker has either shot his bolt or is able to keep on raising the tension until the end. Whatever else he may lack, Kim has that ability.

He doesn’t have quite the same ability to make it continually clear who is who and what they’re saying, but that can be a problem with any subtitled film involving a large number of angry or forceful people, especially if some are meant to be Russian or Chinese as well as Korean. Although the film may never be used to teach history, it did prompt me as soon as I got home to look up the historical background from which Kim had whipped up this rich confection.

Despite its comic-strip title, its visual extravaganzas, and its ear-popping soundtrack, *Beetle Queen Conquers Tokyo* is not a wild attempt at science fiction. It is simply a brilliant documentary that occasionally looks and sounds like science fiction. Directed by the American entomologist Jessica Oreck it gives a vivid account of the longtime attachment between the Japanese people and such flying insects as beetles, crickets, dragonflies, fireflies, cicadas, and so on. At the beginning of the film we see two young men collecting popular insects to sell, dislodging them from the tops of not very tall trees by thumping on the trunks. At the end of the film one of the men drives away in a Ferrari he just bought with the income from his latest insect sales.

In city scenes the camera winds its way through alleys filled with insect-sellers and buyers and the occasional child’s tragedy (“All my crickets have escaped, can you help me find them?”). For nearly everyone else in the film, however, the mostly flying insects are sources of pleasure and joy. All the same, Oreck’s film reminds us that centuries ago an emperor dubbed Japan “Isle of Dragonflies” and that early samurai respected dragonflies for their martial valor.

Children (girls as well as boys) may be the most obviously enthusiastic of insect aficionados, but parents aren’t far behind. In one lengthy sequence a group of families and friends celebrate together at night with large bonfires whose rising sparks illuminate and seem to dance with the hovering insects. I certainly can’t forget the smiling man who watches a firefly fluttering around, comments that it is always changing, and adds, “it could be a deceased relative.”

**William Johnson** is a former New York Editor of *Film Quarterly*. 