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Johan Grimonprez

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Johan Grimonprez, *Double Take* (2009), double still

In Johan Grimonprez's *Double Take* (2009), a *faux* Alfred Hitchcock murder plot is set at the centre of Cold War politics; vintage footage tracks the psychological parry and thrust between the capitalist West and Communist Bloc. The two stories sit comfortably beside one another; after all, Nikita Khrushchev and Hitchcock's films were both creations of the fear industry, produced in the West and consumed nearly everywhere this side of the Iron Curtain.

In a story written by Tom McCarthy and indebted to Jorge Luis Borges' short story 'August 25, 1983' (1982), in which the author meets an older version of himself, Grimonprez' thriller has Hitchcock (played by an uncanny look-alike) meeting his doppelgänger in 1962, with the twist that his double lives 18 years in the future – meaning that they are meeting in the year of Hitchcock's death. This temporal riddle is spliced into a series of historical newsreels from the early 1960s: a raging space race, the low-brow Kitchen Debate, the Bay of Pigs fiasco, petrifying nuclear bomb tests.

Along the way, *Double Take* offers us enough distance to ponder the ways in which Hitchcock's films were inflected by contemporary events. Did *The Birds* (1963) reflect the growing terror of an invasion from above, six years after the launch of Sputnik 1? Was the brilliance of Hitchcock's cinema done in by the commercialism of television? The question springs from a string of silly television advertisements for coffee and original footage of Hitchcock's own on-air mockery of them. Commercials, he tells us, assure the audience will not become too engrossed in the story. There are other highly telling moments too: Sputnik 2, the 1957 Russian launch which carried Laika, a female dog, into orbit,

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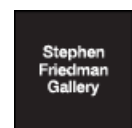





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causes an American woman (an avatar of Feminism) to remind television audiences, 'There's a female up there circling Mother Earth.'

Grimonprez has a gift for editing impressionistic scenes to mix deep significance with sensationalism, adding humour as necessary. During one mysterious scene in which a ship creeps through a nightmarish mist, we hear Hitchcock say, 'I think my Mother scared me when I was three months old. She said "Boo!".' We have a nervous laugh, but one seriously wonders what would have happened if John F. Kennedy's or Khrushchev's mothers had ever said 'Boo!'. Grimonprez' film invites the fear industry of the 1960s and its minions – Hollywood, advertising, media and the politics they served – to walk the plank of their own choosing, simply by letting them speak for themselves. Double Take is essentially a historical film, and the lessons it teaches are seen in hindsight, but it nudges us to wonder what we're not seeing today when we go to the movies.

Ronald Jones

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