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Double Take

by [Chris Cabin](#)



Alfred Hitchcock rises from the dead and takes a number of guises in Belgian media artist Johan Grimonprez's new essay film *Double Take*. The master of suspense's voice, approximated by actor Mark Perry, comes crawling over the soundtrack and spins a slow-burn tale of a fateful murder that hangs over clips of what looks like a low-budget student film, *Meanwhile*. Hitchcock's presence dominates the screen, courtesy of a wealth of old television footage. Thematically grounded in the master director's assertion that if anyone were to meet their double they'd have to kill them, the film goes on to introduce Ron Burrage, a professional English waiter who made extra money as a professional Hitchcock lookalike, including an appearance at a film festival restoration of *The Birds* with Tippi Hedren. By several measures, *Double Take* is the most indefinable film currently playing in theaters; it also happens to be the most madly entertaining.

Though numerous apparitions of Hitchcock are central to *Double Take*, the third of the filmmaker's prominent story threads is indebted to Hitchcock on more ideological terms. We see then-Vice President Richard Nixon politely battle Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev during a tour of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, the infamous Kitchen Debate at which Khrushchev boasted about the Soviet Union's advances in space exploration and weaponry while Nixon informed him about the innovation of the color television set in America. Then we see a more glowering Nixon debate his other "double" -- a young man with a nice smile named John F. Kennedy -- becoming a victim of that wonderful technology he boasted about in Moscow.

Peppered with dollops of The Supremes' "Baby Love" and an ample helping of hilariously dated Folgers Coffee commercials, *Double Take*, based partially on a story by Jorge Luis Borges, presents the Soviet Union and the U.S. as doubles in a series of power plays attempting to assure the other's demise. And, refracted in the "student film" narrative and echoed in Burrage's cheerful remembrances, Hitchcock's mastery of elegant paranoia becomes the perfect allegory for the precise, factory-sealed brand of fear that became as normal as a blue sky during the Cold War; not for nothing do all the Folgers commercials tap into domestic fears, including male impotency and troubled marriages.

Indeed, Grimonprez suggests, in not so many words, that the Space Race, the Cuban Missile Crisis and even the Cold War were productions as well-choreographed and uneasy as the small terrors Hitchcock deployed on his weekly *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* programs. Towards the end of this playful whatsit, Grimonprez offers a line-up of more current face-offs, ending with Bush, Putin and a dizzyingly mush-mouthed tirade about "unknowable" knowledge from Donald Rumsfeld. (In a recent interview, the director mentioned his excising of a bit of 9/11 footage from *Double Take*.) The film's connection

to our recent decade-in-the-dark is funny and fitting: Our current limbo between surreal fictions and "reality" would have made perfect fodder for the droll, endlessly self-deprecating Hitchcock.