

Pop Matters

'Double Take' Is a Brilliant Look at Hitchcock, War, and TV

By Cynthia Fuchs ON June 11, 2010 Rating: 10/10



Smuddering

Good evening television consumers. This misty bit of ectoplasm forming on the inside of your television screen is one Alfred Hitchcock.

—Alfred Hitchcock

I've got this burning, burning, yearning feeling inside me
Ooh, deep inside me and it hurts so bad.

—The Supremes, "Where Did Our Love Go?"

"The word 'MacGuffin' comes from a conversation between two men in a railway train," says Alfred Hitchcock's voice. When one asks the other about "the package you have above your head on the luggage rack," the second answers that it's a device "for trapping lions in the Adirondacks of New York." Informed that there are no lions in the Adirondacks, the second man answers again, "Well then, it's not a MacGuffin."

A version of this story opens *Double Take*, Johan Gimonprez's brilliant meditation on the vagaries of Hitchcock, history, and nuclear weapons. It's possible that every story that follows is a sort of MacGuffin, from Hitchcock's encounter with his future self to the making of *The Birds*, from the Kitchen Debate in 1959 to the first televised presidential debate in 1960. As each of these stories (and others) weave in and out of one another, providing layers of context, commentary, and pointed comedy. Picking at myths and truisms, spoken and not, the film makes all of them grist for questioning. You think that John Kennedy and Richard Nixon are only opposites? That commercial capitalism is the reverse of communism? That Hitchcock was singular? Think again.

Screening at New York's Film Forum, the film, much like Gimonprez's *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* (1998), assembles pieces of the past in the form of film, television, and soundtrack clips, played over one another and over again. Based on a story by Tom McCarthy, inspired by the essay "August 25, 1983" by Jorge Luis Borges, it reframes memories as sensory effects, unstable and meaningful nonetheless, each moment simultaneously profound and trivial, random and determinative. Hitchcock appears repeatedly—as himself in interviews, as himself in his film walk-ons, as a reenacted version (Ron Burrage, who also talks about playing Hitchcock's double), and most frequently, as himself on *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. His many clip make a certain narrative sense, helped by the fact he returned to themes and ideas, as well as his own abiding interest in "doubles."

The movie uses these starting points to contemplate the process of reading even as it reads its many and recurring objects—Sputnik footage, *Birds* reenactments, and mushroom clouds, Folger's coffee commercials and Hitchcock's famously clever and self-knowing intros to his TV series' episodes. Each recalls as well the moment it was made, housewives concerned that their husbands don't like their coffee, crows gathering on the wires outside the Bodega Bay schoolhouse, Khrushchev informing a visibly flustered Nixon that, "For 42 years, we have gone ahead."

As you ponder these fragments, Hitchcock intervenes, explaining the structure that seems not to be one. On TV he explains, commercials are a means to "keep you from getting too engrossed in our story." It's a format he mastered as he had mastered movies, of course, and *Double Take* suggests that this second aspect of his long career is its own sort of doubling—for the artist, for the art, for the audience—as well as a deep and provocative understanding of how television works, how it creates and recreates memories, how we know ourselves by what we watch and how we watch it.

That's not to say that television only works in one way. If coffee is sold across eras and national borders (one funny segment has Castro and Khrushchev meeting in Cuba, sipping from cups as a commercial voice-over proclaims that Folger's has the "richest taste," that it is indeed, "delicioso!"), it also reports, records, and shapes disaster. An early scene recalls Manhattan, 28 July 1945. "New York City was shrouded in a smuddering blanket of fog," asserts a reporter, "when scores of people heard a low flying plane heading south. Then an explosion." As you catch your breath in remembering a more recent version of this newscast, the black and white footage shows streets from a distance and the reporter says,

An army bomber lost in the overcast had crashed into the towering Empire State Building, parts of it blasting completely through the 79th floor and landing across the street in a disaster that remains the most singular in New York City's history.

Whether or not "singular" might be measured in degrees whether one disaster might be "more" singular than another, the narration insists that history is a function of repetition and forgetting. Over an image of Khrushchev and JFK that eerily echoes the image of Khrushchev and Nixon, Hitchcock's voice intones, "They say when you meet your

double, you should kill him. Two of you is one too many.” Individuals might come and go, but patterns persist, in the forms of politics and ideologies, power dynamics and expectations. Mutually assured destruction is a function of fear as well as offense, an anticipation that your other will act or think as you do. From the Bay of Pigs to Dallas, from Walter Cronkite to Tippi Hedren, the stories that prop up cultural (or national) identities and ideas are recycled and repurposed, never quite new but too often surprising.

It's not just that the film reflects on political motivations for inspiring dread and promising annihilation, it also ponders a kind of collective resilience, however unlikely or pathological. Both are premised on reiteration and recollection, and both are only possible by forgetting.