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Double Take

Alfred Hitchcock meets himself in this disturbing fantasy

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No better way to mark the 50th anniversary of *Psycho* (the rerelease is reviewed on page 8) than with this bizarre and distinctly inspired mash-up by writer Tom McCarthy and film-maker Johan Grimonprez. Their ever so slightly mad cine-essay, based on a Borgès short story, and perhaps influenced by British film-maker Chris Petit, is a delirious bad trip, imagining that Alfred Hitchcock, working on the set of *The Birds* in 1962, is visited by his own double: the near-dead Hitchcock from 1980, who enigmatically hints at how cold war history may or may not turn out. (The older Hitchcock double is of course only slightly better informed on this subject than the younger.)

Double Take

Production year: 2009

Country: Rest of the world

Cert (UK): 12A

Runtime: 80 mins

Directors: Johan Grimonprez

Cast: Delfine Bafort, Mark Perry, Ron Burrage

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Grimonprez and McCarthy achieve their fiction with a drawling Hitchcockian voiceover narration with staged fragments on video, an interview with a professional Hitchcock lookalike, along with clips of Hitchcock movies, a swirling recurrence of Bernard Herrmann's *Psycho* score, and a quite brilliant reuse of Hitchcock's jokey and little-remembered appearances fronting his TV show, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, in which the Master's clowning-around and dressing-up assumes a potent and sinister character: fleeting images of a remembered dream.

In 1962, the United States was at the height of its Cold War "Sputnik" fear: it had the

edge in consumer prosperity, but the Soviets were the masters of something more important: outer space. I thought of the opening to Robert Redford's excellent 1994 movie Quiz Show, in which a 1950s car salesman, showing off a gorgeous automobile, flinches at the eerie sound of Sputnik's Telstar bleeping.

Perhaps any point in time is haunted by its "double" – the possibility that things could have gone another way – never more so than in 1962, when the world could have seen a US-Soviet nuclear war, or simply the beginning of Soviet communism's world dominance while western freedoms receded. Hitchcock is the master of high anxiety, and made movies explicitly about the cold war, and about the "double". But it isn't simply this that makes him suitable for a doppelganger fantasy: it's something to do with his sheer cartoonish visibility, his enigmatic, unreadable persona, and those hallucinatory corner-of-the-screen glimpses in the films themselves. On the set of *The Birds*, Hitchcock received and accepted an invitation from President Kennedy to luncheon at the White House: an occasion which did not take place because Lee Harvey Oswald got in the way. So Hitchcock himself personally intersects, or fails to intersect, with the course of political history. This is arguably a rather cerebral and indulgent reverie, but there is fascination, and something genuinely disturbing, in every frame.

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