

ARTS

TELEVISION EUNY HONG-KORAL

# Ghosts make way for aliens

The television programmes we watched as children have a special place in our memory, and in later life they prove powerful in their ability to evoke disconcerting waves of nostalgia.

One such unexpected madeleine is the forthcoming two-hour cartoon special,  *Scooby-Doo and the Alien Invaders*  (The Cartoon Network, Sunday, November 25 at 7pm ET/PT). Unlike other reunion specials of television shows from the 1970s, such as last winter's unwanted TV movie from Mary Tyler Moore, we don't have to hear about the gang's failed marriages and careers.

The programme debuted in 1969, intended as an alternative to superhero cartoons. The plot lines, however, proved no less formulaic. As Shaggy self-consciously explains in this updated film: "Hey, man, why mess with a classic look."

The formula: four California high school teens and their Great Dane drive around in the Mystery Machine, ostensibly looking for a beach. Instead they discover that every town has two types of people: waitresses with bouffant hairdos who call customers "Honey", and desperate businessmen who hope to gain control of some property by dressing up as monsters.

While sticking to the original spirit of the series, this movie keeps up with the times, with tongue in cheek. Fear of a haunted house has been replaced by fear of alien abduction. In one

scene, Shaggy and Scooby get snatched by a UFO and narrowly escape a bodily probe, while making a dig at HMOs: "Sorry, man, but our health plans don't cover physicals."

Self-reference in a TV programme is often not terribly funny, but it's vital when revisiting a show that took so many absurdities for granted. Cartoons don't necessarily have to bring back childhood memories to be enjoyable for

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grown-ups. A new series called  *Sheep in the Big City*  is unlike any cartoon I have seen, yet thoroughly addictive. (Cartoon Network, Fridays, beginning November 17, 9.30pm ET/PT.)

The programme chronicles the madcap adventures of a sheep named Sheep. He has been so christened by the unimaginative Farmer John, who maintains high morale among his farm animals through weekly livestock therapy sessions.

("Let's see how all you sheep did on last week's leadership exam. Oh. You all failed.") In this post-cold war era,

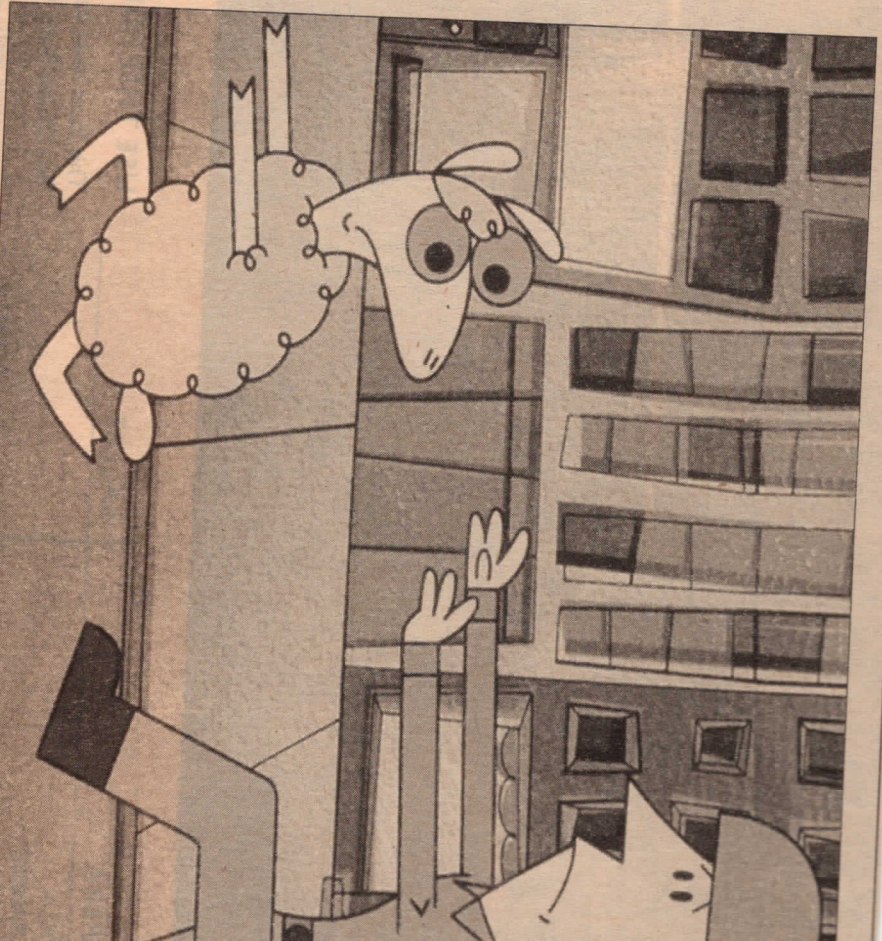
Soviet villains such as Bullwinkle's Boris and Natasha have been replaced by domestic villains within the US power establishment. Sheep's diabolical figure is General Specific, a corrupt military official with vague plans to conquer the earth. In the said endeavour, he faces another post-cold war complication: "Most of the mad scientists have gone to the private sector."

Yet he has managed to dig up such a scientist, who protests: "I'm not mad, I'm angry! I'm an Angry Scientist!" In the pilot episode, he unfurls his new invention, a sheep-powered raygun. The enormous weapon has a sheep-shaped imprint cut out of it like a pastry mould, into which one is supposed to insert the sheep. The sheep is the fuel, not the projectile. Get it?

As it turns out, only one sheep will fit the imprint: Farmer John's Sheep. Seeing that his presence endangers the farm, Sheep woefully leaves for the big city, in a segment entitled "Sheep on the Lam".

One of the fun things about cartoons is that the anthropomorphism of animals can be arbitrarily inconsistent. Sheep doesn't talk; he bleats, yet he is able to hold down a telemarketing job in the city.

This programme has successfully leveraged the advantages of animation. Slight gags that would be too extreme and overwrought for live action can work well in a cartoon.



Additive: new series 'Sheep in the Big City' sees the woolly hero take on the diabolical General Specific

because the animator has complete control over the appearance and duration of those gags.

Last, for those who can't get enough cartoons, The Museum of Television and Radio of New York and Los Angeles is hosting its 9th International Children's Television Festival (until November 26). The highlights of this programming marathon include  *Die Blume* , an

unexpectedly touching, six-minute German claymation about a man who cures his loneliness by caring for a potted flower.

And don't miss  *Purim Rock* , a claymation rock opera from Israel that chronicles the Biblical story of Queen Esther.

What such selections demonstrate is the paradox that producers of children's television face: children are easily bored,

but what goes hand-in-hand with this is their natural attraction to creative ideas and intolerant clichés.

In US television, a bad season can last for ever, but a bad cartoon usually cannot sustain the stiff Saturday morning ratings war for more than one season. If only grown-ups so lucky. Perhaps this is why I find myself continually watching repeats of  *Looney Tunes* .