RePossessed

From Auteurs to Digital Amateurs: Exploring Vertigo, New Media and Gender Controversies with RePossessed

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Hitchcock has often been represented as the great control freak, a man who constructed his narratives so tightly that he maintained a dictatorial grip over cast, crew and audience. As Robin Wood asserts: 'The desire to control, the terror of losing control: such phrases describe not only Hitchcock's relationship to technique and to his audiences but also the thematic centre of his films.' (1989, p217) *Vertigo* (1958), in particular, has often been read (most notably by Donald Spoto) as a metaphor for Hitchcock's lust for control and possession of women.

The myth that Spoto propagates offers a distorted image in two areas. The first is at the level of production where it makes the assumption that Hitchcock's films can and should be read as the expression of an individual ego, that of the director. The second error is to assume that films and their meanings are simply consumed by audiences. The myth fits in with a model of culture which assumes that there are individual producers (particularly film directors and businessmen) at one end and a mass of undifferentiated consumers (audiences) at the other end. In place of this distorted model, it is much more accurate to say firstly that film making is collaborative. *Vertigo* is the work of director Hitchcock; writers Samuel Taylor, Alec Coppel, Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac; composer Bernard Herrmann and costume designer Edith Head all contributing their ideas. Film making is, of course, also commercial (shaped by

budgets, anticipated profit margins, the risk calculations of investors and the requirements of marketing departments).

What we are used to calling 'production' in reality turns out to be far from individualistic. It also turns out to be underwritten by the consumption of previous forms of culture (as Hitchcock himself acknowledged, all the previous films, books, paintings etc that film makers have unconsciously drawn from), so that at this end we are already having to think about not just the production of films but the production/consumption of culture more generally. The more accurately we acknowledge the actual processes of feature film production, the less it makes sense to talk of *Vertigo* as the product of Hitchcock's individual ego and the expression of his personality or subjective ideology. Of course, many celebrated studies of Hitchcock's films have chosen to see them as the expression of a broader set of social ideologies, eschewing biographical readings of his films. (eg. Wood 1989, Modleski 1989) Undertaken at a time when feminism, Marxism and psychoanalysis were preferred positions from which to criticise film, these studies tried to locate signs of a patriarchal capitalist 'unconscious' at work in the culture industries. Yet these studies are themselves open to criticism: firstly because ideology is not considered in relation to the routine commercial negotiations and practical decisions that subtend the making of each film. The failure to root ideological considerations within the detailed material conditions of industrial production gives rise to a situation in which the broad terms of theory float free of the thick history of production itself. More recent books (eg. Rebello 1990, Gottlieb 1995, Auiler 1998, Krohn 2003, McGilligan and Moral 2005) provide invaluable insights into the industrial and collaborative dimensions of Hitchcock's films, although these studies lack a strong critical perspective on ideology.

At the other end of the process, we find the second problem of the production→consumption model, is that past studies of Hitchcock's films have too often ignored real life audiences or anticipated their responses according to totalising theories such as psychoanalysis. So the second problem with ideological analyses of Hitchcock's films is that the actual diversity of

audiences, and their conscious capacity to creatively make narratives and interpretations for themselves has rarely been considered. So-called 'consumption' of films, then, turns out to involve production in that audiences use their imaginations and creative faculties to construct their own narratives of and about films.

What goes on the pages of scholarly publications might often seem to be of peripheral significance to the way in which the public engages with Hitchcock and his films. Yet it seems clear that some of what has been written about Hitchcock has helped to shape the public's perception of him. In particular, it is striking how widely he is perceived as woman hating and how tightly this perception seems to dovetail with the way in which people talk about his films in a non-academic context. For instance, the successful play *Hitchcock Blonde*, which is premised on the assumption that Hitchcock had a murderous hatred of blonde actresses. However, it looks increasingly wrong headed to assume that Hitchcock hated women. The popular attempt to link films such as *Vertigo* to such a myth is in no small measure due to the success of Spoto's book. (Haeffner 2005) However, it is unlikely that reasoned reassessments will change the perception of the public in the near future because Spoto's myth is one that society predisposes us to believe because it is so caught up with our own Romantic assumptions about human subjectivity and creativity.

In the less fervid atmosphere of academic publishing, critics such as Charles Barr (1999) and Robin Wood (1989) have advanced the less publicity-worthy notion that there is striking sympathy for women in many of Hitchcock's films. However, this should come as no surprise to those who read the credits of the films. Again and again, Hitchcock adapted the work of women writers or collaborated with women on the scripts of his films. Among these were, Marie Belloc-Lowndes (*The Lodger* 1926), Constance Collier (*Downhill* 1927), Clemence Dane and Helen Simpson (*Murder* 1930, *Under Capricorn* 1949), Josephine Tey (*Young and Innocent* 1937), Ethel Lina White (*The Lady Vanishes* 1938), Daphne Du Maurier (*Jamaica Inn* 1939, *Rebecca* 1940, *The Birds* 1963), Dorothy Parker (*Saboteur* 1942), Sally Benson (*Shadow of a*

Doubt 1943), Czenzi Ormonde (*Strangers on a Train* 1951), Patricia Highsmith (*Strangers on a Train* 1951) and Jay Presson Allen (*Marnie* 1964).

In fact, Winston Graham, the writer of *Marnie* stated, 'I may be an instinctive feminist but I think that women on the whole have had a pretty raw deal.' (in Moral, 2005 p1) Why would Hitchcock, the supposed misogynist, have been so enthusiastic about this writer's work?

The myth propagated by Spoto seeks to contain the problem of women's representation in Hitchcock's films at the level of a colourful story told about the sick mind of the film director. However, we only need to look at *Vertigo* with less prejudiced eyes to see that this won't do. *Vertigo*'s star Kim Novak has recently explained the appeal of the film to her at the time she took the part:

> When I read the lines, 'I want you to love me for me', I just identified with it so much…It was what I felt when I came to Hollywood as a young girl. You know, they want to make you over completely. They do your hair and makeup and it was always like I was fighting to show some of my real self. So I related to the resentment of being made over and to the need for approval and the desire to be loved. I really identified with the story because to me it was saying, Please, see who I am. Fall in love with me, not a fantasy. (in Auiler, 1998 p25)

So who are *they* -the 'ones who want to make you over completely'? Clearly not Hitchcock, for Novak had not worked with him before she read the script. The myth of individualism that Spoto appeals to has the effect of denying that there is a problem at the level of social institutions, in this case the Hollywood film industry where bullying and controlling starlets had become commonplace by the 1950s. In fact, if there was one 'author' of Novak's suffering it was not Hitchcock but Harry Cohn. Dan Auiler explains: 'Novak, the star, was the problematic creation of Harry Cohn, the head of Columbia Pictures.' By the time she appeared in *Vertigo*,

she 'had had plenty of experience being told how to dress and act by an older man.' (Auiler, 1998, p21) Cohn called Novak (who was of Polish origin) 'the fat Polack' and kept her locked in her trailer so that she could only eat the food he had approved for her.

Spoto makes unspoken assumptions about Hitchcock's masculinity and his sexuality. He interprets *Vertigo* and other Hitchcock films according to stereotypical ideas about heterosexual masculine desires for domination and possession. Yet it is far from clear that Hitchcock fits the stereotypical lustful straight male that Spoto represents. One of Hitchcock's oldest friends, John Russell Taylor has recently revealed that the director told him he feared that he might have turned out gay if I had not met Alma. Why do most writers make the assumption that Hitchcock was conventionally heterosexual in his desires?

Scriptwriter Jay Presson Allen has said of Hitchcock's relationship with his famous blonde characters 'I think he identified with the blondes'. Similarly rejecting stereotypical ideas about gender, Ken MacKinnon has analysed *Vertigo* and other films trying to steer the conversation on to the complexities of men and masculinity. (MacKinnon 2002) The work of Souli Spiropoulou in *RePossessed* questions the extent to which *Vertigo* makes sense according to conventional ideas about gender and chooses instead to explore the notion of gender fluidity.

So the Spoto myth has obscured the more subversive possibility that Hitchcock and his films did not conform to social and cultural stereotypes about gender and sexuality but rather upset or questioned them. But it has also perpetuated an unhelpful view of artistic production in the film industry. By encouraging the view that Hitchcock was obsessed by control and that he usually achieved it over his films, the myth has obscured the reality that chance, chaos and collaboration were major factors in their production, often welcomed by Hitchcock. (Krohn 2000) Furthermore, it has failed to allow that audiences indulge in active spectatorship, creatively producing their own narratives and interpretations from the films.

As Bill Krohn has argued, 'one of the most pernicious effects of the Hitchcock myth on criticism of his films has been to promulgate the idea that there is one recipe or blueprint for a Hitchcock film, which the critic only has to apply to films as different as *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), *Rear Window* (1954) or *Psycho* (1960) when Hitchcock was above all an experimental film maker.' (2000, p16) Rather than being a pre-planned exercise, forced into being by Hitchcock's need to force his personality and his will on them, the films came about with the aid of interaction, collaboration, experimentation and chance. As Krohn puts it, 'Each film, in other words was an adventure' (ibid.) Even the famous storyboarding of every sequence is revealed by Krohn to be a myth, eagerly perpetuated by Hitchcock himself who even went so far as to fake storyboards for *North by Northwest's* (1959) crop duster sequence after it had been shot.

Myths may not be entirely false but they function effectively to silence contradictions in reality. Thus the myth that Hitchcock's films are the realisation of his (dark) vision silences the contradiction that they are also creative products of our culture, of the film industry, of producers, novelists, scriptwriters, actors, technicians, reviewers and fans. Their meaning cannot be embalmed and explained forever after according to Hitchcock's supposedly wicked intentions. Spoto's image of Hitchcock owes more to a Romantic stereotype of an artist than to the actual man: for instance, he is represented as a man of extravagant, perverse (in short, Byronic) sexuality when, in fact, he was probably sexually impotent and almost certainly celibate for most of his life. (McGilligan 2004) If the films were somehow an outlet for his frustrated desires, then these fantasies were created and also authorised with the collaborative assistance of his wife, Alma, whose approval was vital to him.

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Following a version of the auteur theory, Spoto treats Hitchcock as the author of meaning in his own films. Yet Hitchcock's films belong not only to Hitchcock but also to his collaborators and his audiences, who also make their meaning. In recent years, artists have appropriated

Hitchcock's work to make interventions concerning a variety of ideas ranging from gender (for instance, the photographs of Cindy Sherman which recall the imagery in some of Hitchcock's films) to gesture (eg. Douglas Gordon's *Feature Film*, which is a film of James Conlon's hands and head as he conducts the score of *Vertigo*). A number of high profile art exhibitions have showcased work based on Hitchcock's films. These include *Notorious*: *Alfred Hitchcock and Contemporary Art*; *Fatal Coincidences: Hitchcock and Art* and *Cut: Film as Found Object in Contemporarary Art*. (Windhausen 2003/4, Brougher 1999, Paini and Cogeval 2001 and Basilico 2004) Some of the leading figures on the international art scene have created work inspired by Hitchcock, including Christian Markley, Pierre Huyghe, Chris Marker, John Baldessari, Victor Burgin, Judith Barry and Cindy Barnard. Those experimenting at the forefront of new media have created interactive CDs and websites such as *The Rebecca Project*, *Multimedia Hitchcock* (created by Hitchcock scholar Robert Kapsis) and Steven Mamber's *Digital Hitchcock*.

As mentioned above, the public also creatively make meaning from Hitchcock's films. Increasingly, however, the public make not only meaning but also media itself. We live in the age of the digital amateur where audiences are practitioners too. Film and media studies, as taught in British Universities, have not succeeded in reconciling the claims of the theory and practice. (Elliot 2000) It is tempting for theorists, historians and critics to set themselves above and apart from the practical processes of making, emphasising instead the discipline of criticism and interpretation. (Cubitt 2005) But it can be argued that making itself needs to be at the heart of media studies. Sean Cubitt has recently argued that rather than endlessly repeating the gesture of criticising the world we live in, media studies should emphasise making 'because in making we seize responsibility for our own futures.' (Cubitt 2006, pxvi) One of the most important ideas behind *RePossessed* is that it is an exhibition in which the audience makes the content.

RePossessed has been built on the principle that the audience can take possession of images and narratives, normally sold to the public as a locked down assemblage in DVD format. In *Vertigo* (1958), the narrative structure of this assemblage has been sanctified by no less an authority than the greatest auteur in the history of film, Alfred Hitchcock, while the DVD itself has been encrypted so that the viewer can't modify it without breaking the law. Our audience is invited to re-think, re-experience, re-shoot and re-assemble parts of the film for themselves. Yet many of our initial ideas for *RePossessed* turned out to be illegal under new DRM (Digital Rights Management) legistlation. Some special software, *ReFrame*, had to be written to enable the audience to navigate the commercial DVD in unorthodox ways without violating copyright restrictions.

The exhibition thus highlights the potentialities and pitfalls of our new media environment. All home computers now come with digital imaging software, which allows the domestic user to modify and construct photographs, films and music. Every consumer is invited to think of her or himself as a budding auteur. Yet these activities are often private and alienated, created alone in bedrooms and gadget dens. They are also heavily constrained by limitations built into the software and by recent laws prohibiting the de-encryption of any commercially available DVD.   In spite (or even because) of corporate control of the mass media, websites such as *YouTube* are flourishing by encouraging their users to re-appropriate commercially produced content within an amateur context. *YouTube* is buzzing with movie trailers re-edited by amateurs - a testament to the growing army of skilled enthusiasts taking on the commercial professionals. As these creative possibilities expand, they are anxiously viewed by commercial interests, seeking to hold onto feature films as possessions. In such a world, this exhibition highlights these possibilities and constraints, asking whether it might not still be possible to re-possess cinema as a common culture in which we all are stakeholders and in which the public are not only consumers but also producers.

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www.re-possessed.com

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