

Jan Speckenbach

On the Remake. A cinematic phenomenon.

Part One. Money, Copy, Quotation, Motive, Genre.

Money is of little help

The answer one usually gets wondering about the existence of the remake is a reference to the economic structure of cinema. The producers - so the argument - take a story that has had success and sell it again in a modernised version.

That sounds easy. The remake would be the logical result of movie business, which is, as we know, all about making money. But does that argument really explain anything? Does it give information about the fact that sometimes the remake is emphasised as such in order to promote a new film as "the remake of" (let's take for instance *Cape Fear* by Martin Scorsese) while sometimes everything is done to hide or deny such a connection (as Anthony Manghella felt obliged to put right that *The Talented Mr. Ripley* was a new adaptation of the novel by Patricia Highsmith, not a new making of *Plein Soleil* by René Clément)? The argument obviously does not do so or at least demands specifications (of the kind: an adaptation of a novel sells better than a remake, a remake done by a famous author sells better than one done by a nobody etc.).

Actually, I believe that the money argument is of very little help for an analysis of the remake. The phenomenon is more complex. There seem to be millions of motivations to remake a film, maybe as many as there are remakes (maybe even more remembering that a film is not only done by its producer. Director, actors and technicians will have their reasons, too). Considering that multiplicity, the question for the remake becomes equal with the question for film in general. "What is cinema?" we can ask and it gets obvious that "money", i.e. economy, would not be a satisfactory or exhausting key for our matter.

However divergent the motivations for a remake might be and however different the remakes on their own are there is

one thing they all have in common: they are based on an earlier film. Even if this observation seems evident constituting the very meaning of the word "remake" it is important to insist on it. The facet that the remake does not represent something entirely new makes of it a topos where originality as principle of art does not have the first word: The remake is always repetition. On the other hand it is produced because it differs from its reference point. In fact, the whole idea of the remake is based upon the difference to its source. We therefore find a creation that need not be inventive but must be dissimilar. The remake has a rather paradoxical disposition.

The remake need not be inventive but must be dissimilar

The moral indignation we often encounter in the reactions towards a new remake has its roots in the violation of the originality-principle. There is something of a sacrilege in the act of remaking. Alain Masson for instance criticises Gus Van Sant's *Psycho*. He has a closer look on the assertion of the shot-for-shot-remake and finds a number of differences between the two Psychos. His analysis now tries to show that all of those distinctions are lowering in rank the film and he comes to the accusation of the remake as a plagiarism. One sometimes might agree with his arguments, e.g. concerning the decision to let Norman Bates masturbate during the shower sequence, which deprives the following murder of being an act of substitute. Sometimes one does not necessarily have to accept Masson's grievance, as for the short cut to some cows on a meadow during the death of the detective in the stairwell (which I personally find very imaginative).[1] But it is not the point whether Masson is right or wrong. Criticising any difference to the film of Alfred Hitchcock, Masson implicitly - and quite comically - tries to commit the remake to its source much more consequently than Van Sant ever could have done it. He lays claim to a *Psycho* that in the end would be nothing but the Hitchcock film itself.

Masson's account is illustrating a popular position. A film, being the result of a historical moment as well as the expression of a unique imagination (we do not need the auteur theory to speak of the latter) should remain its own memorial. It should stay untouched. The more the reputation of

the remade film is widespread, the more its protection seems to be demanded like a moral affair. But not only spectators feel a need for regulation. When at the end of the credits we read: "This film is protected under the laws of ..." we find the effectuation of that wish from the side of the makers.

Nobody may copy the film, steal from it, or use it for his own benefit. The simple signature coming out of the visual arts tradition, as we find the name of Georges Méliès in the scenery of his films or the initials of D.W. Griffith in the framework of the title links, quickly turns out to be no sufficient defence for clandestine misuse. To protect the rights of the makers, i.e. the profit of the sellers, a rule for the flow of products has to be installed.

The logic of invariable variability

We are used to see the beginning of History in the invention of writing by the early Greek - at least for the occidental culture. Any occurrence before that date is esteemed to be prehistoric. Even if Plato's complaining about writing is known (he sees in it the death of natural memory, Phaidros 274c-278b) the self-awareness of the occidental educated man is connected to the capacity of writing. Writing is so important, because it allows the fixation of an art of time. It is the medium of literature that particularly with regard to its origins has to be seen as a performing art: a choir or a singer recites literature, its connection with music is obvious. Writing is the somehow paradoxical possibility of an immobile support for an amorphous, mutable, not precise content. Even if writing has been developed out of a plastic art expression (drawing), the invention of a reduced number of letters signifies the decisive shift. Later, writing can get an aspect of visual art again, be it the praxis of calligraphy or the intentional composing of a text, e.g. a modern poem's appearance. But first of all, writing differs fundamentally from the media of plastic arts, because as a reduced system of symbols (letters and marks) it will not become identical with the content it presents. Of course, looking at musical notation (that came out of writing) this observation has to be put in perspective. The development of occidental music cannot be separated from the development of the notation system. But it is difficult to answer the question whether the music demands the amelioration of the storing medium or

whether the medium ameliorates the music - or whether there is no amelioration at all, but only mutation. (The very question does interest us with regard to the change of the storing medium for cinema.) However, modern music has brought the notation system in the 20th century to a break. The electronic possibilities of sound creation at last can hardly be written down.

Though writing is the first medium for literature and maybe even for the arts of time in general, it quickly becomes a prerequisite. The performing arts will be more and more based on a written source. The importance of writing turns out not only to consist in the fixation, but the foundation of content. The arts of time can be described as the performance of a (written) source, as its revision, reinterpretation, redirection, and re-production. In contrast to the plastic arts, i.e. the arts of space, the performing arts do not deny the distinction of their content and their form. They are based on it. The performing arts therefore could be called reproducing arts as well.

The medium as spatialisation

Performance and reproduction are deeply connected. Only in the first one the aspect of change is more important, while the latter - although having the same relation towards a source - apparently has the opposite function, the fixation of change. Reproduction has become a synonym for multiplication. What used to be unique becomes multiplied, what used to be transient becomes repeatable. The reproduction of the arts of time signifies a double shift: the reproduction of the reproducing arts. Their fixation brings them closer to the arts of space. We can talk of a spatialisation (Verräumlichung) of the arts of time. Its history begins with the mechanisation of reproduction (again a double shift), i.e. book printing. The necessity of copyright from this point on underlines the fact that manual copying (having been practised before) can be seen as the prehistory of reproduction and is therefore neglected in the discussion of reproducibility.

In fact, some twenty years after the invention of the book press with identical and movable letters in the fifties of the 15th century, the first regulations are installed. The new circumstance of fast and widespread book production and

selling leads to regulations, which at that early state are nothing but censorship in order to prevent the uncontrolled spreading out of new and probably unwelcome ideas. However, already one hundred years later the problem of piracy (verbatim copying) is concrete. The printers and booksellers themselves now try to fix the rules. Though, until the 18th century the misuse cannot be controlled. The English right with the Statute of Anne in 1710 marks the beginning of modern copyright. Nevertheless it still takes time to internationalise the law of the different countries. The Berne Union in 1886 is an important date in that struggle, the Universal Copyright Convention in 1955 another. Both conventions have been reviewed in 1971 in Paris. Following the development of the media, however, changes are going on until today.[2]

The frequent reviews of the copyright in the different countries since the mid-fifties show the outcome of the new media. Television first, video, games, and Internet later are changing the mode of reception and professional usage. Not haphazardly the United States join the International Union for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works (with 77 country-members) in 1988 when the importance of the new audio-visual market is predictable. All these dates signify that the copyright in its modern form is a result of the mass culture. On the one hand, the original is highly overestimated (not so much for its originality, but for its affordability); on the other hand the quote as the only way of free usage of pre-existing ideas gets new value. Culture becomes a deliverer of useful quotable pieces and can hardly be seen any more as a tradition in which by definition ideas are continued.

The inner distance of the quote

The post-modern discussion of the quotation as paradigm of intertextuality is precisely reflecting that context. The quote is an identical representation of a segment of a literary, artistic or somehow different source. The citation historically is used to prove the striking error of a reference point or - more often - to guaranty the positioning of the own publication in a certain succession and to underpin an argument with help of the authority of a commonly respected instance

- be it the bible, a philosopher or another apodictic source. Its exorbitant use, however, brings about the loss of the quote's authority. The cited past masters formerly have been the adjustment of the collective erudition. The quote now gets the opposite motive: it can veil a source. It illustrates the absence of a collective knowledge and expresses the non-sense of the referring habit as a strictly formal matter. This sense of absurdity in the quotation is already present in the dadaist usage of the found object - if we agree to consider the latter as a citation of a segment of life. You will, of course, find it again in pop art and literature of postmodernism.

The quotation within an artwork, nevertheless, is a juridical most complicated field. It has to be shown that the inner distance of the new work to the older one is sufficiently important. In a way, this jurisprudence is unreasonable, claiming the quote to do something that is against its own definition: deforming the reference point. The jurisprudence apparently has not complied with the changes that particularly in the arts have taken place during the 20th century. The intertextual discussion has not yet reached the legislation (being an intertextual structure itself ...). On the other hand, the jurisprudence somehow does take the quotation's new role into account, when it is asking a quotation not to be faithful. The irony as dominating figure of speech of the post-modern expression has found its way into law. Considering the copyright as the direct consequence of the mechanical reproducibility including its acceleration during the last century, artistic irony therefore can be seen as the indirect consequence of technical development.

The appropriation gesture

The problem with quoting in the arts is the missing of quotation marks. Their task is not so much to indicate the presence of a citation, but to stress the frontier between quote and text, to isolate the quotation as a fragment within an entity. The absence of inverted commas makes of the quote an allusion. The allusion can grow. It can expand in all directions until it reaches the size of the surrounding medium itself and loses the fragmentary character. The quote

becomes the repetition of the original it is referring to. We are speaking of appropriation in that case.

In the age of reproducibility, the act of appropriating seems absurd, since making a copy is not even a financial problem any more. But the interest of the procedure is not there. Claiming an object to be art, as in the readymade-method, being - after Boris Groys - appropriation of first order, or claiming an art object by copying it to be a new artwork, as an act of second appropriation, is not manipulating the material, but the context. Redoing an art object in a different historical situation means to un-historise it.[3] The anachronistic performance of a manual copying process is replacing the object by the act. The new artwork only signalises: "Look at me. I am not what I am. I am the repetition gesture having become form." The object becomes the trace of something that has happened. Rosalind Krauss has shown how Duchamp's concept of the readymade is based on the photographic act. The readymade is a kind of imprint of the reality.[4] One can easily turn around that conclusion and say that the photography is a readymade, considering the photo as found and a testimony of something more global than itself.

If we accept the idea that the gesture of the first appropriation is a photographic one, the second appropriation (the copying of an art object) becomes comparable with the printing of a photography, i.e. the reproduction of a reproducing art. Modern society with its omnipresent reproductions in media, on walls etc. is re-performing again and again the same play. It is not surprising therefore that the copy is rehabilitated in that context. Since the arts of time deny the difference between performing and creating, the arts of space have to answer that way.

The copy plays an important role in the history of art, because it questions the notion of the original. In some cases, the copy gets most interesting, namely if it is not clear, whether it is one or not. Leonardo da Vinci is giving an example. His painting of *The Virgin of the Rocks* exists in two versions. One is exposed in the Louvre in Paris, the other in the National Gallery of London. The dispute about the original is entirely based on the question, which one of the two paintings has been painted first. But could we not

consider the first one as a sketch only and the copy therefore as the original? And, actually, what does the knowledge about original or copy change for our appreciation of the painting? However, da Vinci's painting is teaching us one thing about modern appropriation: it is entirely based on the knowledge of the new artwork's copy character. If it were bought as the original, it would lose all of its own artistic meaning. Confusion about copy and original therefore never is taking place. From that point of view, appropriation does not un-historise the artwork. To understand anything of the new artwork, we have to know the older. Appropriation is a deeply historical method.

anachronistic repetition

In *The Repetition*, Søren Kierkegaard suggests that repeating is to modern men what remembering was to the ancient.[5] Well, appropriation seems to do exactly what he describes. It is not an act of continuity like that of a traditional culture, but rather an act of rupture by insisting on the distance between the original and its appropriation. The *mise-en-abîme* of a particular style or motive refers to the past that is not remembered, but repeated. Now, is the remake an appropriation? Even if the parallels are convincing, I feel that I have to answer no. At least for the majority of remakes. If we ask the question reversibly - is the appropriation a remake? - the answer would be much easier. In fact, the artist is remaking an earlier artwork. But the cinematic remake seems to have a much larger meaning. If it is true that the appropriation is a self-reflective gesture and a historical method, I would deny that for the remake in general. There are examples in history where the opposite has been practised: Having remade Marcel Carné's *Le jour se lève* (1939), the RKO Radio Pictures Incorporated bought all copies they could get of the French film and destroyed them in order to bring out unperturbedly Anatole Litvak's *The Long Night* (1947).[6]

The remake as anachronism: Psycho

It is the merit of Gus Van Sant to have done - to my knowledge - the only example of a remake that comes out of the logic of the appropriation gesture. With *Psycho* he has done

the "purest" remake ever and therefore the most fascinating work. As a film on its own it does not convince, of course, because the second appropriation object does not want to be considered as an object, but an act. Watching Van Sant's *Psycho* is like being in the wrong movie. The shots, the montage, the music, the acting, the light, everything seems wrong apart of, perhaps, the colours (being the invention of the remake). We are watching a new film that appears at the same time to be an old one. The impression to be the victim of a deceit might be at the origin of the strong indignation the film has caused. Reactions as Chris Bolton's remark that "the 'recreation' of *Psycho* is the worst, most offensive idea in the history of film", and the succeeding call for a boycott of the remake ending with: "Tell the studio whore mongers that you despise this cinematic grave-robbing by putting your money where it belongs: in the original classic" show that Van Sant apparently has broken a taboo.

Reshooting Hitchcock's film almost faithfully is bringing up two consequences. The first one is the reflex of verifying Van Sant's promise. The examination shows that he was not entirely faithful. He has taken the freedom to leave the model concerning the colour, the casting, the camera movements in the beginning and the end, some cuts, gestures, glances etc. Doing so, Van Sant is practising a sacrilege, because "The Master's" *Psycho* had already reached "visual perfection" (to take once more two of Bolton's terms). Anything else therefore must be worse than the original and appears as a presumptuous correction of the original. The unfaithfulness of Van Sant's remake will interest me later for once more. It shows that his attempt to become a cinematic Pierre Menard failed and had to fail.

Secondly, remaking *Psycho* shot for shot in the nineties has a revealing effect on the film. All of a sudden, the lapse of time between the film and us becomes perceptible. It gets evident that *Psycho* is a result of its time and that its form - seen with eyes of today - is awfully funny: the close up on Marion Crane in her car, driving under the rain with the famous music off; the insisting panning on the envelope with the money; the static mise-en-scene; all that can be found in bad television-series of today. In other words: the anachronism of Van Sant's *Psycho* does not only have an effect on the remake, but, what is more, on the original. Hitch-

cock's film is dateable. It is not visual perfection in a timeless sense. *Psycho* belongs to the past.

The remake as the first cinematic invention

The remake seems to be the post-modern artwork par excellence. It refers to a previous source, it refuses originality, and its interest lies in the intertextual discussion. It is not surprising therefore that the post-modern theories lend themselves to an analysis of the remake. Only, the remake exists long before postmodernism appears. The entire work of Auguste and Louis Lumière is already founded on the remake. They send cameramen all over the world to film again and again the same motives, i.e. to remake all over again the same films: Trains arriving in Japan, people walking along roads in Russia, filmed in a diagonal angle, and so forth, and so forth. The remake is the first cinematic invention after the technical realisation of the moving image.

At that state, when film and take still form a unity, the remake seems the derivation from a habit of the pictorial series, i.e. from a phenomenon of the arts of space. In painting, the repetition of a motive is widespread custom, be it in the tradition of the icon (doing again and again a picture like a meditative practise) or in the naturalistic correspondence of painters specialised on landscape, portrait, interior, still life, and so on. Photography continues that usage though adding a new overtone to the serial practise: already Nadar's portraits of celebrities, more explicitly August Sander's portraits of representatives of the social classes show that repetition of a similar motive creates a common base in order to compare different elements. The serial photography of Bernhard and Hilla Becher is the consequence of that ambition. They look for motives that resemble but are not the same. Their search is unlimited, the more found objects they show, the more each of them loses its exemplary aspect. Their pictures of hundreds of water towers equal the cleaning out of the individual motive. The world is registered, it is archived - another term of post-modern mythology. The archive as an aesthetic idea stands for the general concept of a structure. Its content does not matter.

The new overtone of repeating is due to the believe of photography as testimony of a true moment. The accumu-

lation of many single true moments therefore must lead to the truth in general. One picture cannot represent an entity any more not being a composition, but a fragment. The lost general vision of the whole resembles an archaeologist gluing together pieces of a vase. Mostly he does not have all the pieces, but some already get him further. If he has found and glued enough, he will have a general idea of what the vase looked like. Since he wants to reconstruct one particular vase, he is looking for similar pieces that nevertheless differ in detail. The less the single piece is remarkable on its own, the more the vase on its whole becomes perceptible.

The outer distance of the remake

What entity does the vase represent? The photographer taking one portrait after the other, the painter making one landscape after the other maybe are remaking one particular motive, but they are not remaking one singular image. Each picture is the realisation of a theme that does not find one single expression. The totality of portraits of famous people of the late 19th century gives the general idea of the upper class's face of Nadar's time. The whole of cubist still lifes refuses a harmonic and naturalistic vision of the world and establishes a concept of a reality. The addition of Andy Warhol's newspaper prints finally leads to a pathetic rising of the journalistic photo while paradoxically at the same time the figurative sign is undermined. One single picture would not have been enough to capture the concept. The serial principle of modern art reveals itself as the modern analogy to the classical genre (i.e. the vase).

The repetition of the remake, however, does not function with that logic, although the early examples of Lumière's work seem to suggest so. The remake is not a genre. It needs an outer distance towards its source that represents the up to then single expression of a specific theme. That distance towards the original can be historical, cultural/social, in regard to the genre or to the medium. (Most of the following film examples are taken from the very enriching publication *Play It Again, Sam. Retakes on Remakes*. [7])

1st, between the remake and its source lie several years. The frontier is around 20 years, if we look at often-remade

films like *Dracula* or *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. (*Dracula*: Murnau 1922, Tod Browning 1931, Terence Fisher 1958, John Badham and Werner Herzog 1979 and Francis Ford Coppola 1992. The only nine instead of 20 years that lay between Murnau's *Nosferatu* and Tod Browning's *Dracula* are due to the media shift to the sound film as well as to the different culture Germany - America. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*: Don Siegel 1956, Philip Kaufman 1978 and Abel Ferrara 1993.)

2nd, the remake and its original separates a different cultural background. Classical examples are the Hollywood remakes of French films that can almost be considered as an own current of the Hollywood production. A closer look at the remakes of the Lumière reveals that they fit into this category: the original French films are remade in new exotic places. Two of Akira Kurosawa's Samurai films, finally, have become Western classics (*Shichinin no samurai* 1954 gives the American *The Magnificent Seven* 1960, *Yojimbo* 1961 the *Per un pugno di dollari* 1964). This example leads to the

3rd category of the genre switch. A great part of musicals is based on former films and may serve as example. (*Show Boat* 1951 becomes *State Fair* 1962, *The Philadelphia Story* 1940 *High Society* 1956, *Ninotchka* 1939 *Silk Stockings* 1957 etc.) Another striking example is the mutation of Ingmar Bergman's *Jungfrukällan* (1960) into Wes Craven's horror debut *Last House on the Left* (1972).

4th, the new or modified medium as reason for a remake becomes apparent with each technical important invention be it the sound film, the advent of colour, the wide screen, television or multimedia. It quickly becomes uncertain, whether the retakes still can be considered as remakes, when we look at TV-series (*M*A*S*H*), cartoons (the children series of *Men In Black*) or videogames (James Bond, Planet of the Apes etc.). The original often only serves as deliverer of ideas.

The greater the distance of original and remake, the less strong is the provocation the remake constitutes. If it differs visibly from its original, the similarity of the story can be more easily accepted. The first category however stays the most ambivalent. Since I do not want to discuss the demarcation of the remake from the series, the sequel, etc. , I will

concentrate on the remake whose only reason lies in the time past since its original realisation.

End of part one.

Jan Speckenbach

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[1] See the leading article *Améremake* by Alain Masson of an interesting dossier on the remake in the French monthly *Positif* no. 459, May 1999, p. 78. *Positif* no. 460, June 1999, pursues the topic.

[2] Historical and juridical information from *The Encyclopedia Americana*. International Edition. Vol. 7. Article on the copyright by Stanley Rothenberg. Danbury, Connecticut, 1983: Grolier incorporated, and *Collier's Encyclopedia*. Vol. 7. Article on the copyright by Jon A. Baumgarten. New York, Toronto, Sydney, 1997: Collier.

[3] Boris Groys. *Apropos Appropriation*. In: *der Schnitt*. Das Filmmagazin. No. 18, Bochum, Germany, February 2000. p. 10.

[4] In: *Das Photographische. Eine Theorie der Abstände*. Transl. from French by Henning Schmidgen. Munich, 1998 [1990]: Fink.

[5] Søren Kierkegaard. *Die Wiederholung. Ein Versuch in der experimentierenden Psychologie von Constantin Constantius*. Transl. from Danish by Emanuel Hirsch. Gütersloh, 1998: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Mohn. [Kopenhagen 1843.] p. 7.

[6] Jochen Manderbach. *Das Remake - Studien zu seiner Theorie und Praxis*. Siegen: MuK 53, 1988. p.18.

[7] *Play It Again, Sam. Retakes on Remakes*. Edited by Andrew Horton and Stuart Y. McDougal. With an Afterword by Leo Braudy. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1998: University of California Press.