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## Planet of the Remakes

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## PLANET OF THE REMAKES

**T**HERE IS A WIDESPREAD critical and popular aversion to remakes of classic—and even not-so-classic—films. They will almost certainly be inferior pieces of work, and if the original is a canonized masterpiece, the remake might even taint its aura. Can the film lover ever see his cherished classic again without thinking of its horrible new *Doppelgänger*? A telling website reaction to the news that Harrison Ford and his new love Calista Flockhart were planning a remake of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* begs:

ALL I CAN SAY IS DON'T DO IT! If Ford and Calista want a film to exhibit their undying love . . . WELL, don't do it in a remake. Find a director that understands love on camera like Paul Thomas Anderson or Patrice Leconte and develop a new project with them. Be ORIGINAL, not Memorex. *Breakfast at Tiffany's* is one of the few perfect films in this world or any other. Leave it be, please.

Such an impassioned plea is more likely to turn up on the internet than in the film critics' columns of the newspapers; but here too there is often a deep antipathy to the very notion of a remake—not just to individual bad examples. The dislike of them is of course fuelled by plenty of uninspired or downright awful remakes, and by the recognition that Hollywood is generally more willing to reprocess ready-made 'content' than to produce a film by an *auteur* like David Lynch, who is forced to seek funding in France. Even more than retreads of previous Hollywood movies, remakes of foreign films are a staple of contemporary us film production, thus transmuting cultural difference into the 'natural' idiom of the American mainstream. Recent examples are *Vanilla Sky* and *The Ring*. This type of copying has the advantage of an original that is less of an obstruction, since it is not so familiar to us audiences. In either case, the studios (now a rather nostalgic name for the film branches of multimedia conglomerates) would rather fall back on

something that has proved to be successful than take anything remotely resembling a risk. One might also point to the phenomenon of the inter-media remake: film versions of tv series (*Mission Impossible*, *Charlie's Angels*, *The Fugitive*), and tv cartoons (*The Flintstones*, *Scooby-Doo*).

If it has reached a new degree of intensity in the past ten years, the tradition of remakes is as old as the culture industry itself. For the classical studio system this was a logical way to exploit its copyrights and its large staff in an industrial manner—often remaking quite recent films. In the mid-fifties *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) was turned into the Cole Porter musical *High Society*. At around the same time, Hitchcock remade his English *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934) in Technicolor with James Stewart and, sadly, Doris Day. Howard Hawks remade his own *Ball of Fire* (1941) as *A Song is Born* (1948), another Technicolor musical. Going back to the French pioneers of the film industry, the Lumière Brothers, one finds that even the mythical 'first film' was a remake. There are three versions of the film of workers leaving the Lumière factory in Lyons—the first made in the late summer of 1894, apparently as a trial run, on paper; a second, shot on film, in March 1895 and shown in the legendary first film screening in Paris on March 22nd; the third, which was for a long time believed to be 'the first film', was shot in the summer of 1895, with the workers wearing more festive clothes. Perhaps this was supposed to give a more positive image of the Lumière factory. But repetition was already a pillar of the culture industry before the arrival of cinema, in the mass literature of newspaper serials, or *feuilletons*.<sup>1</sup> The same model was also transferred to film: screen serials thrived from the silent days to the 1940s. Each week, one could see part of a continuing story about a hero such as Flash Gordon or Dick Tracy, with a cliffhanger at the end.

In recent decades, sequels and series have been the dominant modes of repetition in film. Aside from the remake, probably no other kind of film has as bad a reputation as the sequel, for which *Another 48 Hours*, *Die Harder* and the ironic *The Naked Gun 2½* and *Naked Gun 3½* are telling titles. Many sequels are indeed a facile cashing-in on recent box-office success—rather than on an older or overseas hit, as in the case of the remake. A sequel usually continues the story of the preceding film, which often means that the same tale is told again with minor

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<sup>1</sup> Also in painting: 19th-century painters often made 'variations' of their own works, and their studios painted copies. The Goupil art firm even had its own stable of copyists, who churned out replicas of works by famous Salon painters.

differences. One sequel can lead to another and they may come to be described as a series, although some attempts at definition propose a clear distinction between the two—arguing, for instance, that a film series presents separate stories with the same characters, while sequels continue a story where it left off. But do not the various *Die Hard* or *Scream* films amount to a series, each part presenting a more or less distinct plot, although each new film is also building on the earlier ones, as sequels do? On the other hand, the *James Bond* films clearly are not sequels; they form a series with many variations on a basic narrative scheme, without the suggestion of continuity or historical succession between the parts.

### *Time and return*

In his reflections on the vicissitudes of historical time Guy Debord noted that modern temporality, measured in abstract units, is dominated by the alternation of labour and ‘free time’, thus reproducing something like ‘the old cyclical rhythm’ of pre-modern societies. History is perverted from within, thus creating the ‘pseudo-cyclical time’ of spectacle.<sup>2</sup> In the writings of an author like Mircea Eliade, the ‘old cyclical time’ became the object of a reactionary-romantic idealization. Eliade exulted in the fact that traditional societies knew how to keep history—which is a series of catastrophes—at bay by the ritualistic repetition of mythical archetypes. Eliade complained that today’s quasi-mythic experiences, such as ‘killing time’ by reading or watching a film, are impoverished descendants of his cherished ancient myths. Debord also regarded the time of spectacle as a perverted and impoverished version of the cyclical temporality of myth, but his dialectical analysis is rather less one-dimensional than Eliade’s nostalgic projection.<sup>3</sup> Debord notes that a conflict was installed within cyclical time—the ‘childhood of time’—as rulers tried to impose their genealogies and aims on society. The ‘masters of time’ thus managed to give a sense of direction to their culture’s agricultural cycles, creating a new temporal mode *within* the world of cyclical returns that continued to be dominant.<sup>4</sup> Later, more advanced masters of time would go further in this direction, until capitalist modernity unleashed the

<sup>2</sup> Guy Debord, *La Société du spectacle* [1967], Paris 1992, p. 151.

<sup>3</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, New York 1965, pp. 21, 34; ‘The Myths of the Modern World’, in *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries. The Encounter Between Archaic Faiths and Archaic Reality*, London 1968, pp. 23–38.

<sup>4</sup> Debord, *Société du spectacle*, pp. 129–32.

forces of history to the full. But it is precisely then that a reversal occurs, as an apparently triumphant linear history is transformed into pseudo-cyclical returns. This is still within the framework of the historical direction created by the capitalist juggernaut, but these pseudo-cyclical returns tend to create a 'false consciousness of time'—spectacle, or parcelled and industrialized myth. Just as myth once established a reign of returns, of *Wiederkehr*, so now our media culture does the same, but in a much more planned manner. Not only the alternation of work and spare time but the media products, so important within the latter, are ruled by repetition. William Burroughs contended that the mass media play a similar role, in this respect, to the ceremonial Mayan calendar, a complicated construction with which a priestly elite 'in effect controlled what the populace did, thought and felt on any given day'—creating a pre-ordained cyclical empire-time run by temporal masters.<sup>5</sup>

Eliade's mythical archetypes were located in a distant, sacred era, before the time of man. By contrast, the semi-cyclical returns of modern series and sequels are ruled by models which lay claim to no origin of any kind. They are *de-historicized* myths, apparently timeless programmes. The characters of soap operas seem to inhabit a world that consists of the eternal returns of a limited number of plots, as do the protagonists of film series like *Die Hard* and *James Bond*. All Bond films seem to follow a certain archetypal plot, of which one version may be a better approximation than another, but not a more original one (although there is, of course, nostalgia for the time—in the sixties—when the Bond formula seemed fresh). What differentiates remakes from such serial repetition is the fact that the remake has a specific historical source: the 'original' film. This can be regarded as a *historicization* of the mythical, archetypal model. Because films that are remade exist in historical—not some primeval, mythic—time, their repetition raises protests from those who revere the original. Whether they offer any of the healing rejuvenation of time which Eliade ascribed to the older myths' repetition is obviously questionable. Of course, the repetitions and returns of mass culture clearly entail a *Lustgewinn* for the viewer: although similarity must be alleviated by variation, enjoyment comes at least as much from the reproduction of what is familiar as from its modulation by what is new. But the one-sided exploitation of repetition in its most facile forms, to streamline production and minimize financial

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<sup>5</sup> 'Control', in Daniel Odier, *The Job. Interviews with William S. Burroughs*, New York 1989, p. 38.

risks, deadens rather than recharges time—even if the consumers feel momentarily rejuvenated.

### *A thousand eyes*

An exemplary case of the interweaving of remakes, sequels, serials and series is offered by the avatars of the *Mabuse* character. Dr Mabuse was created by Norbert Jacques as a master criminal, within the *feuilleton* tradition of *Fantômas*—a mythical super-villain who time and again fools the law, making him the perfect ‘hero’ of his own series. After being serialized in print Dr Mabuse was brought to the big screen by Fritz Lang in *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* (1922), a two-part UFA prestige production. Lang used lavish sets, leading actor Rudolf Klein-Rogge and a meandering storyline to paint a panorama of a decadent society—Weimar Germany—so weak that it can easily fall prey to the evil master-mind Mabuse, a hypnotist who can submit people to his will. One of the most memorable scenes shows Mabuse’s head, facing the camera against a black background, growing ever closer and appearing to hypnotize the audience as well as his unfortunate opponent in the film. With its overt ambition to give a portrait of the times, and Lang’s highly stylized and sumptuous scenes, the first *Mabuse* film claimed both artistic value (as opposed to ‘unsophisticated’ Hollywood entertainment) and *kulturkritische* ambition. Weimar cinema, and Lang’s in particular, could certainly put on airs; Siegfried Kracauer mocked the fact that at the première of Lang’s film *Spione* (1928), Thea von Harbou’s novel—a movie tie-in—was offered to the viewers bound in leather, as if it were a literary classic.<sup>6</sup> But the master-criminal Mabuse could not shake off his origins in mass culture. For all its production values and aspirations to social critique, *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* has a hopelessly hackneyed and melodramatic plot.

At the end of *Der Spieler*, the hunted Mabuse goes mad from fear. This suggests that Lang did not consider the possibility of a sequel. A decade later, however, he made *Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse* (1933), his last German film for years to come. Lang and von Harbou chose a remarkable approach: rather than miraculously restoring Mabuse to health, or simply ignoring the end of the previous film, they show him still in the lunatic asylum. Whereas the parts of series such as Sherlock Holmes or Bond films return to a stereotyped beginning each time—

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<sup>6</sup> ‘Film 1928’, in *Das Ornament der Masse*, Frankfurt 1977, p. 306.

thus putting in train a story that combines well-known elements with some variation—Lang’s Mabuse (again played by Klein-Rogge) has a history. In contrast to Holmes or even Bond, who merely adapt themselves to historical changes in order to remain the same, Mabuse does not exist in a cyclical universe. To be sure, he is in the grip of compulsive repetition: Lang shows him in his cell, frantically scribbling notes on paper—the ‘testament’ of the film’s title. Even in this condition, he is still planning evil deeds. When Mabuse-like crimes start to occur once more in the outside world, Kommissar Lohmann (Otto Wernicke) investigates whether he might be leading a criminal organization from his cell. The asylum’s director assures Lohmann that this is impossible. When Mabuse dies, later in the film, the crimes go on. It turns out that the director himself has been acting as a new Mabuse, using the plans scrawled by his patient. By means of a double exposure, Lang suggests that Mabuse’s spirit has somehow taken possession of the doctor. In killing his first protagonist and making the asylum director his ‘successor’, Lang suggests that ‘Mabuse’ is not so much a character as a role, a position in the symbolic realm that can be filled by various people. Nevertheless, this still entails repetition, even if not here by the ‘original’ Mabuse, but his stand-in. Lang’s attempts to historicize the character were thus frustrated by the need to use a recognizable Mabuse-pattern, in order to have a reason to make a *Mabuse* film.

Kommissar Lohmann was a familiar character from Lang’s previous film *M* (1931), with which *Das Testament* has much in common. The latter thus not only functions as a sequel to *Der Spieler*, but also as an ‘unofficial’ sequel to *M*—a double return. The virtually autonomous world of the mob in *M*, and its ruthless mock-trial of the Peter Lorre character, have habitually been interpreted as an allegory for the rise of Nazism in Germany, a view sometimes extended to the *Mabuse* sequel. But although the Mabuse character can be described as a kind of anarcho-fascist, the connexion with Nazism is not made explicit in *Das Testament*. It was only in his final *Mabuse* film, *Die tausend Augen des Dr. Mabuse* (1960), that Lang would draw an overt parallel. The film was the result of Lang’s collaboration with German producer Artur Brauner who, in the late fifties, tried to interest Lang in directing remakes of his Weimar films, including *Die Nibelungen* (1924) and a musical version of his 1921 *Der müde Tod*. Instead, Lang and Brauner remade a film that Lang had co-scripted but had not been allowed to direct: *Das indische Grabmal* (Joe May, 1921). Almost at the end of his career, Lang

revisited his beginnings in the film industry, trying to rewrite his own history by finally shooting *The Indian Tomb* himself. But the resultant two-part film, *Das indische Grabmal/Der Tiger von Eschnapur* (1959) was a half-hearted attempt to recapture past glories. There were some apparent 'modernizations' (sound and colour being the most prominent), but a film that might have been an interesting clash of the contemporary and the anachronistic managed only to be corny and formulaic.

### *Escape routes to history*

Brauner then coaxed Lang into reviving Dr Mabuse. Lang signed on, in the knowledge that Brauner now owned the character's copyright and could make a *Mabuse* film with or without him. But he only consented to bring back the role, not the individual: 'No, the bastard is dead and buried'.<sup>7</sup> Once again, the historicity of the *Mabuse* universe was affirmed. Lang also refused to give in to Brauner's demand to make the new character the biological son of Dr Mabuse; the role was not to be restricted to members of the same family. In the resultant film, *Die tausend Augen des Dr. Mabuse*, one of the policemen explains to his colleagues that Dr Mabuse had been a master criminal, active just before 'Hitler and the brown spectre' came along. The real-life counterpart of the anarcho-fascist can now, finally, be named. The new 'Mabuse' has taken over a hotel built by the ss for spying on important foreign visitors and equipped it with the latest cctv equipment, in order to blackmail the guests. He wants to wreak as much havoc as possible and rise to power once more on the ruins of a crumbling world. 'Mabuse' is being hunted by Gert Fröbe—later to play Goldfinger in the Bond film of the same name—as Kommissar Kras, a fat Prussian in the style of Lohmann. But the 'Mabuse' he hunts is only a name and a mentality. After all, 'the bastard is dead', and it is another criminal genius who is continuing Mabuse's work in a variety of disguises. It is as if Mabuse were a neurotic, driven to constant repetition: '[the patient] is driven to *repeat* the repressed matter as an experience in the present, instead of *remembering* it as something belonging to the past, which is what the physician would much rather see.'<sup>8</sup> Psychoanalysis attempts to reintroduce history on an individual scale, breaking through the individual's world of eternal return.

<sup>7</sup> Patrick McGilligan, *Fritz Lang: Nature of the Beast*, New York 1997, p. 437.

<sup>8</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920), in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*, London 2003, p. 56.



In trying to historicize Mabuse, Lang functioned as the doctor's analyst. But the treatment was only partially successful. Not only did Mabuse's typical behaviour linger in his films like a neurotic repetition, even after the doctor's death, but Mabuse himself was resurrected after *Die tausend Augen*—Lang's last film. Critics like Jonathan Crary regard the *Mabuse* films as a Fritz Lang trilogy, but in Brauner's eyes Lang's final work was just the stepping-stone for a profitable series of low-budget movies.<sup>9</sup> Companies churning out serials—Edgar Wallace thrillers, Karl May Westerns and Heinz Erhardt comedies—dominated the postwar German film industry. Brauner's enterprise was one of them, and in some respects his *Mabuse* films are comparable to the popular Edgar Wallace series. Both abound with formulaic horror and suspense, and teem with master-criminals possessed of secret identities and ruthless organizations. *Die tausend Augen* already bore a certain resemblance to the Wallace films, although it is made more interesting through the surveillance plot device, which is rather less silly than many of the storylines that would follow. In these films, Dr Mabuse has risen from the dead, for which no explanation is given at all. He is even played by Wolfgang Preiss, who played the 'new' Mabuse in *Die tausend Augen*.

Without Lang, Brauner was at last free to dispense with Mabuse's historicity and make him a comic-book villain, endowed with eternal life. One of the post-Lang films was a 1962 remake of *Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse*, in which Mabuse dies yet again, but this time without any consequences for subsequent films. Historical logic is further undermined by the fact that Gert Fröbe, who played Kommissar Kras in *Die tausend Augen*, plays Kommissar Lohmann in the *Testament* remake. An immortal Dr Mabuse and an archetypically fat Prussian policeman with varying names seem to be trapped in an eternal mythic-neurotic return of bizarre plots—a cyclical rather than historical world. Mabuse, the serial villain, has been reclaimed by the repetitive culture industry from which he originated.

### *Variora of Lem*

The recent attempt to integrate Stanislaw Lem's science-fiction novel *Solaris* (1961) into this industry proved to be a rather more difficult undertaking, which ended in artistic as well as commercial shipwreck.

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<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Crary, 'Dr Mabuse and Mr Edison', in Kerry Brougher, ed., *Art and Film since 1945: Hall of Mirrors*, Los Angeles 1996, pp. 262–75.

Lem's novel, itself a highly cogent meditation on historicity and repetition, revolves around the mysterious planet Solaris and the (future) science of Solaristics, devoted to its comprehension. Solaris is covered by a strange ocean, about which there has been much speculation—some consider it to be a living and sentient being. Solarist Kris Kelvin is sent to the space station Prometheus, orbiting the planet, where he finds that one of the Solarists residing there, Gibarian, is dead; another, Sartorius, hides in his laboratory and a third, Snow (Snaut in the original), is in a highly agitated state of mind.<sup>10</sup> The station, it transpires, has 'visitors' who materialize at night—three-dimensional reproductions of someone whom the person 'visited' once knew and who are there when they wake up. Kelvin himself starts awake to find his former wife Rheya, who committed suicide ten years before, in his room.

This disturbing phenomenon appears to be caused by the enigmatic, intractable ocean, and began after the scientists exposed it to radiation. 'Perhaps the ocean reacted to the irradiation with a counter-irradiation, perhaps it probed our brains and penetrated to some kind of psychic tumour', Snow says: 'isolated psychic processes, enclosed, stifled, encysted—foci smouldering under the ashes of memory.'<sup>11</sup> The 'visitors' appear to be distantly related to mimoids, strange plant-like structures which occasionally appear from the surface of the ocean, and which have the habit of shaping themselves into crude imitations of objects that are close to them. Solaris is a mimetic planet. The intention—if any—behind these copies remains unclear. Are the visitors sent to the scientists to torture them, or are they an attempt to communicate?

*Solaris* seems tailor-made for an 'extremely conventional psychoanalytical interpretation' in terms of the Freudian uncanny.<sup>12</sup> As in the case of neurosis, but in a less permanent and pathological way, a repetition-compulsion manifests itself in the uncanny. Freud mentions that he once walked through an Italian town and repeatedly ended up in the

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<sup>10</sup> Names differ in the various versions of *Solaris*. The Polish Snaut became Snow in the English translation of Lem's novel; Hari became Khari in Russian and Rheya in English. Henceforth I will use the names that appear in the English version of the novel, from which Steven Soderbergh also worked, although in his film Kris Kelvin became Chris Kelvin.

<sup>11</sup> Stanislaw Lem, *Solaris* (1961), London 2001, p. 77.

<sup>12</sup> Neil Easterbrook, 'The Sublime Simulacra: Repetition, Reversal, and Re-discovery in Lem's *Solaris*', *Critique*, vol. 36, no. 3 (1995), p. 177.

red-light district, no matter how hard he tried to avoid it.<sup>13</sup> When such things occur, we fear for a moment that the world is alive, haunted by spirits that bear us a grudge; we relapse into a 'primitive', animistic attitude where the self has no clear boundaries. The eminently Freudian phenomenon of the *Doppelgänger* is an after-effect of this phase, but in *Solaris* people struggle with doubles not of themselves but of people from their past on earth, who have somehow been reproduced by the ocean. Kris is thrown into a panic by the first Rheya double, and he sends her off into space. When the second copy (or the third Rheya in all) appears, he gradually comes to accept and love her as another, different person—'If you really were her, I might not be able to love you'. He deludes himself into thinking that they could go on living on the space station, or even travel back to earth.<sup>14</sup> However, 'Rheya' herself, when she finds out the truth, cannot live with the fact that she is not Rheya but a 'visitor'. Like the original Rheya, she commits suicide, creating another repetition. Kelvin seems to be doomed to repeat his history with Rheya neurotically, rather than relegating her to memory. When he sees the second Rheya double as a new Rheya, he sees her not as a faithful copy but as a differing *remake*.<sup>15</sup> But it is exactly this that traps him in neurosis after he has overcome the initial shock of the uncanny; it is the illusion of difference, of newness, that leads to an embrace of sameness. Even if the latter is what is truly desired, it has to be realized through a detour.

In Lem's novel, the visitors stop returning after Sartorius exposes the ocean to transmissions of Kelvin's brainwaves, so there seems to be no hope a fourth Rheya will appear:

I hoped for nothing. And yet I lived in expectation. Since she had gone, that was all that remained. I did not know what achievements, what mockery, even what tortures still awaited me. I knew nothing, and I persisted in the faith that the time of cruel miracles was not past.<sup>16</sup>

What else could the miracle be but another Rheya? At the end of Tarkovsky's 1972 film of *Solaris*, a time of cruel miracles seems to be in full swing, but this does not directly involve Rheya. Tarkovsky's version contains less Solarist debate about the ocean and the problem of knowing an alien intelligence (if such it is), but he attunes us to the strange

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<sup>13</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' (1919), in *The Uncanny*, London 2003, p. 144.

<sup>14</sup> *Solaris*, p. 153.

<sup>15</sup> Easterbrook, 'The Sublime Simulacra', pp. 180–1.

<sup>16</sup> *Solaris*, p. 214.

nature of the planet by including the video testimony of Berton, a Solarist who explored the planet's surface, with traumatic consequences. At the beginning of the film, Berton, now an old man, has come to Kelvin's father's country house to show Kelvin the tape. The space station itself is depicted by Tarkovsky as somewhat dilapidated, a haunted house in space. At the end of the film Kris has apparently returned to earth, as we see him once again near his father's house, familiar from the opening scenes. Tarkovsky's camera once again roves past the brook and the pond until he gets to the wooden house. The camera travels up into the air, and we see that the house stands on a little island in the Solaris ocean. Since we have learnt earlier on that after the radiation experiment small islands formed on the surface of the ocean, we are left to surmise that this is such an island, and the planet's 'cruel experiment' has entered a new phase. The image, of course, is not less staggering and unexplained for that, but it does suggest that Kelvin has fallen back into a circular world of eternal returns.

### *Time homogenized*

Although Steven Soderbergh has emphasized that his version of *Solaris* (2002) is based on Lem's novel and not on Tarkovsky's film, it cannot quite escape being seen as a remake of the latter. It benefits from the fact that 'foreign' remakes seem to have a certain critical advantage in the American press, where they are less frequently, and less negatively, compared to the originals. Soderbergh exchanges Tarkovsky's slow pace for much quicker cuts and his dingy space station for shiny chrome. Only the rain in the scenes on earth seems to be a kind of homage to Tarkovsky—in the form of a facile quote of one of his signature ingredients. In Soderbergh's *Solaris*, the focus is on the humans; despite the computer-generated images, the planet and its ocean have almost been restricted to cameo appearances. The whole science of Solaristics has been scrapped. Kelvin is no longer a Solarist but a psychologist, dispatched to the space station because he happens to be a friend of Gibarian, who has sent a video message requesting his help. Soderbergh takes care to emphasize that the space station has been bought from NASA by a private company, and that its scientists (including a black woman, Dr Gordon, who replaces Sartorius) are looking for ways to exploit the planet commercially. In itself this is a witty 'update' of the story: long deliberations on the possibility of communication with an alien intelligence have given way to the desire to make profit. However,

like many of Soderbergh's contrivances, this tends to undermine Lem's carefully crafted universe. After all, who in their right mind would think of exploiting the bizarre, unapproachable ocean-planet of Lem's novel? But then, *Solaris* has largely been stripped of its alien presence and reduced to a fancy CGI background.

One of the great achievements of Tarkovsky's *Solaris* was its sense of place, in the dilapidated Prometheus station. With it came a sense of time, a sanatorium-time in which normal life and even causality seem to have been suspended. In this unreal temporality, Kelvin's encounter with his late wife can develop its dramatic potential. Narrative connexions are often implicit, and sometimes the action is seemingly arrested for long shots—Berton's car ride back to the city at the beginning of the film, a scene in the snow, a tracking shot over a Brueghel painting—that defy conventional cinematic logic and can function like flashbacks, showing images from a past life on earth. But such parentheses are devoid of the normal rhetoric of flashbacks: they are presented as images that are neither more nor less real than the others—they are simply silent. The problem with the incessant Hollywood-style flashbacks to Kelvin's past life with Rheya in Soderbergh's film is that they prevent the doubles of Rheya from becoming distinct presences. They are anecdotal and talkative, creating a sense of sameness and continuity. It is impossible to sense that Kelvin actually falls in love with the third Rheya as a different person, however deluded he may be. Putting more emphasis on the love story than either Lem or Tarkovsky, Soderbergh no doubt thought he was making a more touching (and more commercially viable) film, but he ended up making a less engaging one. The images of the past obscure the drama of its uncanny re-manifestation in the space station, and gradual transformation into an unreal present.

The end of Soderbergh's film is an unconvincing attempt to outdo both Lem and Tarkovsky. Here Snow—a youngish computer nerd in this version—turns out to be Snow's 'visitor', who has killed the real Snow. This sudden return to the classical form of the *Doppelgänger*, no doubt intended as a mind-bender, only muddles things. Lem and Tarkovsky kept the nature of the other visitors vague, but implied that the 'foci smouldering under the ashes of memory' which the ocean taps have to do with lovers and relatives—those in whom our deepest emotions are invested. In an access of narcissism, this might conceivably be Snow himself; but Soderbergh merely exploits the conceit for a quick thrill.

After this bizarre dénouement, the Snow double points out that Solaris is expanding and drawing the space station into it. Kelvin decides not to leave with Gordon in the rescue pod, but to plunge with the space station into Soderbergh's Solaris. He appears to end up in some kind of New Age heaven, reunited with Rheyra, who assures him that it doesn't matter if they are dead or alive, and that all their sins have been forgiven. This finale is perhaps an attempt to equal Tarkovsky in finding a cinematic equivalent for Lem's 'time of cruel miracles', but Soderbergh veers off into regions closer to the spectacular esotericism of M. Night Shyamalan (*The Sixth Sense*, *Signs*). The repeated use of the Dylan Thomas poem, 'And Death Shall Have No Dominion', also suggests that Soderbergh was less interested in exploring his precursors' dialectic of repetition and historicity, personal or cosmic, than in creating the semblance of a meditation on a rosy-fingered afterlife.

Soderbergh has been commended by some for making a courageous move and paying for it with box-office failure—suggesting that the film was too good for a conservative, manipulated audience. In fact, his version is a half-hearted attempt to make Lem's story more palatable to a film culture in which Tarkovsky's *Solaris*—the product of a very different society, in which it did not exactly fit comfortably either—could not be made. With its ambiguous probing into repetition and historicity, *Solaris* could be used to question the current culture of the remake. As a planet of remakes, *Solaris* is the uncanny double of Planet Hollywood. But by grafting clichéd flashbacks and New Age spirituality onto the material, Soderbergh tried to make it part of Hollywood rather than its double—to no avail. For contrary to the case of Dr Mabuse, there is too much in the earlier versions of *Solaris* that resists. If Soderbergh's space oddity stands out in today's commercial film culture, it does so by default.

### *Appropriating the remake*

The 'actually existing remake' is in the thrall of the original, much as series and sequels are in the grip of formulaic plots and other industrial archetypes. This industry of repetition sparks off reactions that preserve elements from the romantic-modernist cult of originality: 'Be ORIGINAL, not Memorex'. But much as the current practice of remakes and other forms of repetition seem to warrant opposition, mere rejection not only misses what is most problematic in them, but fails to notice the dormant potential of the remake, the promise inherent in repetition. For if

repetition could be perverted from within, exacerbating the newness that disguises sameness until it changed its sign, might there not be a kind of remake in which repetition served difference, rather than enforcing mythic identity?

The Janus-face of repetition becomes especially clear in opposing interpretations of Nietzsche's vertiginous thoughts on the Eternal Return. For Walter Benjamin, whose notion of *Jetztzeit*—now-time—sought to imagine a revolutionary mode of historical repetition, Nietzsche's idea was clearly a case of the return of mythic cyclical time in the commodified dream-world of the late nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup> By contrast, Gilles Deleuze saw in it a hijacking of mythical return for entirely different purposes—Nietzsche would have accomplished nothing less than the liberation of a radical core from the old cyclical conception of time, by suggesting an eternal repetition without original, without model or archetype, in decentred circles not dependent on any original myth.<sup>18</sup> The 'same' that returns is not a repetition of an 'original' in a 'copy'; it is the return itself that is repeated, the act of repetition. This is not a process that creates copies of an original, but one that creates difference by generating 'false pretenders', deviant signs, bad simulacra.<sup>19</sup> Most remakes remain bound to the original, which they attempt to 'modernize' (and, if it is a foreign film, to 'Americanize') by introducing today's style, stars, topics and the like. But a different practice of the remake is possible: one that sees the 'original' not as a *Vorbild* to be followed (if only for its rudimentary storyline), but as something to be questioned and perverted.

This kind of remake could be a free variation or permutation, which actualizes an implicit possibility. A classic Hollywood example that comes close to this is Hawks's *His Girl Friday* (1940), one of various film versions of the play *The Front Page*, in which the male reporter is swapped for a female one. But perhaps the best example of such an approach would not be a remake, strictly speaking, but a kind of hostile takeover of a film series. In *Alphaville* Godard adapted the hero of a cheap B-movie series (Lemmy Caution) and the actor who portrayed him (Eddie Constantine) for his own ends. But this kind of free remake is not the only option. Slavoj Žižek has noted that one could just as well fashion a *literal* remake

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<sup>17</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, Frankfurt 1991, pp. 177–8.

<sup>18</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et répétition*, Paris 1968, pp. 92, 123–5, 383–4.

<sup>19</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du sens*, Paris 1969, pp. 295–6.

that would follow the first film in an extremely faithful, detailed way, allowing the unavoidable differences to serve as symptoms underlining the fact that the exact moment and its meaning cannot be recreated.<sup>20</sup> At the time when Brauner proposed various remakes to him, Lang apparently contemplated such a literal remake of Murnau's *Faust* (1926). Gus Van Sant came close to this with his version of *Psycho* (1998). In a deliberate departure from the dominant practice, he largely refrained from trying to make the film more 'of its time' by closely following the original script and mise-en-scène. In doing so, Van Sant courted critical and commercial disaster, where Soderbergh merely blundered into it. The result is a strange film which lacks the compelling actors and directorial grace-notes of Hitchcock's original, but does afford a somewhat uncanny experience. For precisely by following Hitchcock's film in a way that could be seen as a ritual repetition of a historical model, he poses the question of its specificity—that is, its peculiar combination of relevance and obsolescence. Regrettably, however, Van Sant could not resist making some changes that compromised the conceptual clarity of his exercise.

### *Historicization from within*

The exact, literalist remake can be taken to an extreme by appropriation. After all, a literal reproduction through selection and presentation still alters the original. Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* (1993), in which a projection of Hitchcock's film is protracted over 24 hours (thus appearing as a series of stills), was in this sense a very interesting remake of *Psycho*. If apparent newness can disguise repetition, a literal repetition can produce difference. In either case, the point of such a remake is not to extract a film from its time and adapt it, but to look at our culture from the standpoint of that film—through a version of it. In the media-mythic culture of repetition, the first film becomes an original whose repetition is seen as dependent upon and hence inferior to it. But the remake should be a transformation from within, an auto-deconstruction and reconstruction; not something done to a film, but done from and with a film. The result could yield a messianic now-time, anachronistic non-identity or any number of bewildering admixtures of the two.

A particularly intriguing recent remake, and one that defies easy classification, is Stan Douglas's *Journey into Fear* (2001). This film installation combines elements from Orson Welles's *Journey into Fear* of 1942

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<sup>20</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, New York 2001, pp. 206–7.



(Welles was replaced as director by Norman Foster half-way through filming) and its 1975 remake by Daniel Mann, with excerpts from Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man*. Douglas notes that Mann's remake is 'uncharacteristically, an improvement over the original.'<sup>21</sup> In the admittedly rather mediocre movie of 1942—itsself based on a novel by Eric Ambler—Joseph Cotten plays Graham, an American arms dealer in the Second World War, who tries to leave Turkey by boat. Among the passengers is a German spy called Möller who wants to kill him. In the remake, the 1940s setting has given way to the oil crisis of the early 1970s. Graham has been transformed into a surveyor of petroleum deposits in Turkey, while Möller works for an organization that would gain a large profit if the information Graham is carrying were to arrive in the United States six weeks later. Douglas regards the transition from government operative to agent of corporations as indicative of 'the passage from a world in which power is brokered by politics to one in which finance is the preferred medium of influence.'<sup>22</sup>

Douglas's own 2001 remake, or meta-remake, is a film installation in which a looped piece of film of about 15 minutes is accompanied by a soundtrack with 625 permutations, which takes 157 hours to play in its entirety. The film shows a series of exchanges between Graham (who is here a woman) and Möller, who tries to convince Graham to delay the boat's entry into the harbour, which again seems to entail financial benefits for someone. The dialogue contains lines taken from Melville's novel, in which various avatars of what appears to be the same mythical fraudster trick travellers on the Mississippi steamboat *Fidèle*. With their oddly permuted dialogues on a freight ship, also called *Fidèle*, Douglas's Graham and Möller seem to be trapped in a world in which business means an endless, circular con-game:

Proponents of the so-called New Economy propose that we live in a perpetual present and care as much about the future as they do about the past. *Journey into Fear* is an endless, cyclical voyage but, as one gradually becomes aware of its structure, one can at least intuit how the future became history.<sup>23</sup>

With Douglas, the remake becomes a form of speculative history rather than reprocessed *content*.

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<sup>21</sup> Stan Douglas, *Journey into Fear*, Köln 2002, p. 135.

<sup>22</sup> Douglas, *Journey into Fear*, p. 136.      <sup>23</sup> Douglas, *Journey into Fear*, p. 137.

Contemporary artists like Douglas are in the process of appropriating the remake from the film industry. Perhaps the peculiar economy of the art world makes it a more suitable sphere for the realization of remakes that resist the dominant culture of repetition. But wherever it originates, the hope held out by the remake lies in the liberation of the dormant possibilities of mass culture—its utopian potential. The vicious circle of standardized remake production—its frozen movement of mythical signs—needs to be derailed. It is intrinsic to these signs that such a practice is possible. The myths of the media themselves harbour a potential to generate second-degree myths that offer glimpses of what Barthes called a ‘true mythology’, in which myth is fleetingly transformed by reason and history.<sup>24</sup> This would necessarily involve a more complex interplay of *mythos* and *logos* than the rationalized irrationality of the culture industry permits. Such glimmerings can appear only at irregular intervals. It is not just corporate legal actions against ‘copyright infringement’, serious as these are, that stand in the way. This kind of remake cannot be mass-produced with industrialized, pseudo-cyclical regularity.

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<sup>24</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Paris 1957, p. 222