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CUTAWAY

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Interview: Peter Evans



Peter Evans, Professor of Hispanic Studies and Film Studies is officially retiring this year, but when CUTAWAY catches up with him over a sherry he shows no signs of slowing down. Speaking with characteristic eloquence, he talks about helping to set up Queen Mary's Film Department, his passion for the tango, and his plans for the future.

CUTAWAY: Good afternoon Professor, can you say a little about who you are and how the Film Department came into existence.

Peter Evans: Qui êtes-vous? somebody asked of Catherine Deneuve in *Belle de Jour*. Well I'm Peter Evans, I'm Professor of Film Studies, and I came to Queen Mary in 1995. There were lots of people interested in film in different areas, and pretty quickly we set up the faculty wide MA in Film.

Those of us teaching film had come together in the School of Modern Languages as a Centre for Film Studies. On the basis of the increase of recruitment to the School coming from the direction of students who wanted to study film, we were able to persuade everybody [to incorporate Film Studies as a department]. In 2004 I was appointed Head of the renamed School of Languages, Linguistics and Film, Sue Harris became Chair of Film, and that was the marvellous moment when the department came into being.

CUTAWAY: Since the department was formed by a group of scholars, where does its practical element come from?

Peter Evans: In my view it is absolutely essential to have a production component. If students are aware of the mechanics of filmmaking, that makes them more persuasive in what they have to say critically about an aspect of filmmaking, and it gives people a skill.

Not everybody who comes out of a Film Department is going to want to be an academic, they will want to find some kind of job related to filmmaking, and to have preliminary groundwork in production seems to me to be absolutely essential to that.

CUTAWAY: We understand you're a musical enthusiast, and have a great passion for the tango. How do you combine this with the dry world of academe?

Peter Evans: I take my work very seriously, but popular culture can be as rewarding as a culture of high seriousness. I think that kitsch and camp and colour and over-the-topness deserve analysis as much as seriousness.

But tango is a must, I simply adore the tango, I've been taking tango lessons now for a few years: Argentinian tango, not ballroom tango.

CUTAWAY: What's your favourite tango scene in a movie?

Peter Evans: Now you're talking, I mean Carlos Saura made a wonderful film called *Tango*, so that's worth seeing. But the trouble is that in Hollywood films the tango that is danced is ballroom tango basically, and there's a difference because Argentinian tango is where the couple become as one, no separation. In ballroom tango there's a space between the two dancers and all these ridiculous head movements and so on.

CUTAWAY: What's next for you?

Peter Evans: I've just recently been awarded a British Academy grant to go to LA to research my next book, a BFI classic on a great Douglas Sirk melodrama, *Written on the Wind*. And I just love music, in many of its forms and shapes. I'm a great Wagnerian but I love the musical as well. If you've ever written on a film that includes music, it's just so pleasurable to have the music ringing in one's ears. So one of the things I want to do is to go back to piano playing.

CUTAWAY: Do you find that students pick up on the passion you have for films?

Peter Evans: It's clear that some students really do enjoy the films that one is bringing to their attention. In the classic musical course, the film that we discussed last week was *That Night in Rio* starring Carmen Miranda, the most kitschy, over the top, camp, outrageous, orgiastic, ridiculing, trivialisation of Latin America. And I said to them at the end of the session, 'is there anyone here who thought "why on earth has he put this film on?"', and nobody piped up.

I'm always amazed by their willingness to trust you, and it's an absolutely wonderful career, to have been in a profession for 40 years that has allowed me to be with young people, people who on the whole want to learn, want to move on, want to be exposed to new experiences, to be opened up to new places. So that's really what's inspired me.

Toffell's Cinema Scenes

Hidden behind an anonymous featherboard fence next to a busy stretch of Whitechapel Road is a scrappy patch of waste ground. Few of the thousands that pass it every day can be aware of the one-time significance of this spot. Flashback eighty years, and here is the Pavilion Theatre, a prime communal institution of the Jewish East End. Yiddish theatre, boxing matches of note, and political meetings all – raucously - took place here. Also on offer were films presumed to cater to Jewish tastes. Indeed in 1931 the Pavilion was the first UK location where Yiddish-language talking films were screened. As the ads in the Jewish Times read 'Come see and hear the mother tongue!'

Accounts of national cinema cultures necessarily focus on the broadest trends. Missed in these grand sweeps, however, are the less obvious worlds of those who failed to make it onto the official ledger book of history: the 'under the counter' people. Reconstructing these lives is not a straightforward task. In the process of separating punter from cash, though, some fragments of evidence do remain. In the interwar years around eighty thousand Jews lived in the East End, and film exhibitors quite clearly understood their tastes as differing from those of their fellow countrymen. Alongside much loved Hollywood fare (and the rather less adored British product), Zionist propaganda films, biblical epics, pogrom films, newsreels documenting the rise of Fascism, and anything featuring Jewish stars were all screened.

In the neighbourhoods to the west of what is now the London Borough of Tower Hamlets there were some fifteen cinemas in the 1930s. As with the Pavilion, many of these tailored their programmes to Jewish customers as and when the product was available. Prior to the feature

presentation Jewish stage acts could also be seen: singers such as Leo Fuld would take to the stage to perform in Yiddish; or local celebrities like boxer Harry Mizler might be called on to judge a competition. Feeling very much at home, audiences were not exactly retiring in their response. As the author Willy Goldman reports in his memoir of Jewish East End life, 'they turned the place into a circus'. There was, in short, a thoroughly living and vibrant Jewish East End cinema culture.

A series of events exploring the social significance of cinema spaces, both in the Jewish East End and across a range of historical and cultural contexts, has been launched by Queen Mary Film Studies. As part of the 2011 East End Film Festival mounted annually by the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, QM co-produced an outreach programme and an event entitled 'The Sights and Sounds of the Jewish East End'. The event, held this Spring, featured talks, along with a performance of songs and music from Yiddish films and a rare screening of the Free Cinema film *The Vanishing Street* (dir. Robert Vas, 1962). A new QM research colloquium 'Social cinema scenes' seeks to explore the intersection of geography, history, identity, and aesthetics in spaces of film exhibition and practices of cinemagoing. At its first meeting in January, participants examined diasporic cinema scenes in Britain, with a focus on Jewish interwar and South Asian post-World War II communities, and short papers delivered by myself and Nirmal Puwar (Goldsmiths, University of London) Future meetings will cover such topics as generational differences in film reception and the memory of cinema spaces. Suggestions for further themes are warmly invited.

Gil Toffell (g.toffell@qmul.ac.uk) is Leverhulme Early Career Fellow in Film Studies, researching Jewish cinema culture in interwar Britain.

Doctor Darke's Cinetopia

Friends tell me that 'Dr Darke' has a certain ring to it. They say it conjures up images of a mad scientist concocting evil schemes in an underground laboratory, or a Victorian gent sporting sinister whiskers and wrapped in a villainous cloak. Some of this may be true....

Now that I'm finally 'Doctored', the time is right to share with the world some details of the theoretical master plan laid out in my thesis, which has occupied me since 2005, when I was awarded a Queen Mary Research Studentship in Film Studies. Entitled 'Cinetopia: Utopic Dimensions of Cinematic Space', the thesis aims to explore cinema in terms of 'utopia'. I approach cinema as an imaginary 'no-place' (*u-topos*) constructed from images of pre-existing places in the world, assembled to create cinematic spaces. Cinema can therefore be seen as a form of imaginary world-making, which is not without a relationship to the real world and which the idea of utopia is helpful in unpacking.

In examining cinematic space in utopian and utopic terms, my intention has been to engage with spatial questions in relation to film. The 'spatial turn' of recent years has produced a wealth of theoretical possibilities with which to interpret the relationships between textual forms and the worlds they represent. I explore three themes – globalization, surveillance, and cinephilia – and examine each from the perspective of how it challenges cinematic space and representation, thereby exploring how to do 'utopic' spatial analysis of film.

The first phase of my plan for world domination now complete, I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of my supervisors in the School of Languages, Linguistics and Film, Dr Alasdair King and Dr Sue Harris. But here I must break off, for I must attend a fitting for a scarlet-lined cloak and seek advice on a suitable 'tache. ...

Chris Darke passed his PhD viva in January 2011. His article on cinephilia appears in the Winter 2010 issue of Cinema Journal.

Filmmaking in the East End

London's East End has always had strong links with films and filmmakers. Alfred Hitchcock was born in Leytonstone, and films as diverse as D.W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms*, Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, and Mike Leigh's *Vera Drake* have been set here.

Significantly, beyond being used as a location for commercial productions, the last ten years have seen an exponential growth in the number of local filmmakers. This upsurge is attributable to the general rise in the affordability of filmmaking equipment; the huge number of artists pouring into Hoxton, Dalston, Bethnal Green, and Hackney; and the many advertising houses and production companies in Shoreditch and Old Street that give filmmakers opportunities to support themselves by working part-time on a freelance basis.

Because these filmmakers come from diverse social, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds, it is not only impossible but also undesirable to look for consistencies throughout their work. Films being produced range from formally experimental documentaries such as Golriz Kolahi's *Gilad and All That Jazz*, to Ulrika Axen and Tobias Eiving's mixtures of live action and animation, through to fictional shorts such as Naor Aloni's *The*



Teddy Powell directing *The Fantastic Megan Fox*, 2011

Cutty Wren, illustrating the beauty and the boredom of middle-class existence.

However, common practices and concerns are emerging amongst sections of the filmmaking community that indicate that the influx of filmmakers to East London adds up to more than a group of disparate, unconnected voices; in fact, we have a thriving community of individuals who are consistently riffing off each other's themes and ideas.

One shared concern is how film as a medium works rhetorically, and how this rhetoric might have political implications. David Alamouti, a founding member of Dalston-based production company Contralmage, sees a connection between the narratives we watch in the cinema and the political narratives we subscribe to in our lives: 'Film is the storytelling medium of our generation, it's the closest thing we've got to a universal language. As someone with a mixed identity [David is British-Iranian], I find it difficult to

subscribe to one narrative, and I don't want to hide behind that kind of simplicity'.

David's latest venture, *The Citizens' Project*, bears out the investigation of this link between power and narrative. A compilation of formally experimental films from around the world, the idea behind the film is to give the audience 'the respect to believe they can find their own relationship with the stories and images'. *The Citizens' Project* is one of very few professional film projects to be distributed exclusively on the internet (www.citizens-project.com – co-produced with Nathan Coombs), and audiences are encouraged to explore the films both individually and as a collection, making connections within and between narratives in order to create their own stories about the world and their position within it.

For Teddy Powell, living in Bow has informed his investigation of filmic rhetoric and politics:



The Value of Love dir. by Joseph Churchill, 2009. Actor: Erica Goehdes

I wrote a film called *Architecture* in response to the density and compression that you get between communities here, which is much more acute than in other cities or suburbs, the incredible contrast between Canary Wharf and the working-class communities that literally stand in its shadow. What interested me was that although there are lots of films that look at 'working-class life', the looking always seems to be done from the same perspective, which is broadly white and middle-class. For example, such films are almost always played for a downbeat realism as if to do something else would be disrespectful; but this limitation seems to me to be deeply patronising. I try to investigate some of the power relations in that mode of looking, the implicit political assumptions that are being made.

Something that comes out of this concern with filmic rhetoric is the desire to construct a space for audiences to consider their relationship to the images they're looking at, and to take responsibility for their experiences. In his short, *The Value of Love* (filmed in Bethnal Green's Victoria Park), Joseph Churchill investigates the tension between the measurability of capitalism and concepts that seem to defy measurement, such as love. He states: 'I aimed to get an audience to contrast the emotional experience of viewing a romance with the rational experience of the need to define, to get them to consider the contradictions that might arise from these experiences'.

Powell considers his Film Studies degree to have contributed towards his consideration of such a space. 'The way I write is informed by the links I discovered through my degree. The way you're taught at university, the history of interpretation isn't separated from technical and industrial history, so you're always building not only on what filmmakers have done before, but how audiences have responded.' In Powell's latest film, *The Fantastic Megan Fox*, he foregrounds images of female star types from



Kathryn Worth in *The Cutty Wren*, dir. by Naor Aloni, 2010

Hollywood history in order to elicit a response from his audience, and also to give them the thinking space to investigate the ethics and politics of that response in the context of its relationship to the history of looking at female stars.

Perhaps because of the links between film technology and film interpretation, several of the filmmakers have an ambivalent attitude towards new technologies. As Powell explains:

Filmmaking is affordable now, and with the introduction of new camera systems such as the Canon 7D, I can genuinely get close to Hollywood production standards. Even two or three years ago, this would have been impossible.

But there is a preconception that because of the mass availability of equipment, if you're using consumer equipment then you can't possibly make good films. To be taken seriously by distributors and even audiences you still need to be working with the quality guarantee of a big budget, a prejudice that is no longer rationally viable.

Alamouti concurs: 'the problem is not the means of production, it's distribution and exhibition. Everyone has access to the Internet now, and this could be a great platform; it's not yet, and I don't know if it will be, but it could'.

Before, to get a breakthrough a film that was made on consumer equipment would have to foreground the low-fi nature of the technology, as in *The Blair Witch Project* or *Tarnation*. What is now emerging is a situation in which projects with genuinely high production values are for the first time possible on consumer-sized budgets, or just slightly higher. If great films can genuinely be made on such budgets – and the technology is so new that the

evidence isn't really in yet – the next stage will be for them to find distribution and exhibition.

With cheaper technologies comes a loosening of commercial imperatives, which opens up the possibility of such films sustainably gaining audiences that will be willing to use the interpretive strategies the films ask for, to link anew industry, technology, and interpretation. Academic learning has affected the methods and the product of many East London filmmakers, and in University-based projects like Mile End Films (www.mileendfilms.qmul.ac.uk/), Queen Mary recognises the ways film theory, film criticism and film practice interact.

The development of local films offers the opportunity for academics to reconnect with film practice in a new way, for the kinds of critical engagement that sections of academe promote may unexpectedly find themselves in accordance with a current form of film industry and technology. As part of a potential audience that no longer needs to be large to be sustainable, academe's critical and coherent voice may also be genuinely able to facilitate avenues of distribution and exhibition.

Alex Lichtenfels is a PhD candidate at Queen Mary, researching film and ethics.



Julie McDonnell in *The Fantastic Megan Fox*



Teaching Film Studies

In relation to teaching, I'm finding two things really exciting and rewarding at the moment.

First, the tools of the trade seem to be changing very quickly, in particular the way in which technology is making it increasingly easy to mix moving images, sound, and text. An inspiration here is the work of graphic designer and data artist David McCandless, whose website Information is Beautiful (www.informationisbeautiful.net/) shows how we might use technology to find dynamic and interesting ways to present ideas. The Flash-based presentation software Prezi, which looks likely to challenge the hegemony of PowerPoint in the near future, also seems to have great potential. It has a wonderful built-in zoom effect that I'm determined to turn to the task of close film analysis. I feel my teaching of film could be enhanced through these increasingly powerful tools, if I can only find the time to learn to be confident and comfortable with their use.

Second, I am greatly enjoying teaching a final-year module on Contemporary Hollywood Cinema. This relates directly to my own research but also asks the students to become researchers in their own right, producing an account of a

single contemporary Hollywood film. As the students research their films they trawl through material that I might not otherwise discover. The contemporary focus ensures that they prospect in the terrain where reviewing, blogging, and gossip mix with more scholarly work; and they often unearth real gems. Research and teaching dovetail here in a mutually sustaining way for both student and teacher, offering something of a solution to the feeling that the one is inevitably sacrificed to the other.

The best work produced on the Contemporary Hollywood Cinema module (as well as on the similar Contemporary German Cinema module) feeds into another final-year offering, Mapping Contemporary Cinema. Here students develop, edit, and rewrite the work of their peers in order to prepare it for publication on a dedicated website (www.mcc.sllf.qmul.ac.uk/). Modelled on the real-world workings of a small editorial board, this module fosters an environment of near-professional standards, teamwork, and good communication and is intended to be of

particular interest to students who might be considering careers in such areas as academe, publishing, and film journalism. Mapping Contemporary Cinema is a new initiative for 2010-11, but the hope is that as the website develops it will form a useful resource for scholars, students, and other interested parties – and a small contribution to the growing list of online resources so wonderfully mapped by Catherine Grant's *Film Studies For Free* project (<http://filmstudiesforfree.blogspot.com/>).

Guy Westwell (g.r.westwell@qmul.ac.uk) is Senior Lecturer in Film Studies and Director of Taught Programmes and Chair of the SLLF Teaching and Learning Committee. In 2009, he won the Queen Mary Drapers' Award for Excellence in Teaching.

Events

Time/Image

Lucy Bolton and Charles Drazin

The inaugural Living British Cinema (LBC) event took place on 15 February, when the Time/Image team came to Queen Mary to talk about their work with the films of the British Council. LBC is a new project, supported by QM Innovation Ltd. Our aim is to create a collaborative forum that promotes the appreciation of British film culture and history. We seek to encourage exchange between the many groups that care about British cinema's wellbeing, including students, scholars, writers, filmmakers and industry professionals; and to provide a continuous, active, forum through online publication and events such as festivals, conferences, and study days.

QM Film Studies graduate Adam Field is a curator at Time/Image, and he brought along colleagues who are also working with films commissioned by the British Council in the 1930s and 1940s. These were made by some of the finest filmmakers of the time (including Mary Field and Julian Wintle), and offer a fascinating perspective on how the British Council wanted Britain to be perceived around the world. Time/Image aims to engage the public in the exploration of these films by digitising as many as they can: they have already made some available online at www.timeimage.org.uk.

Time/Image coordinator Sam Milsom introduced the project and screened three films: *Island People* (1941), *Life of the Rabbit* (1945) and *General Election* (1945). Sam invited students to consider remaking some of the films or doing 'mashups' of the ones that have been digitised. A Q&A session was followed by a wine reception and a discussion of areas of British film which students, colleagues and guests would like to explore, and ideas for ways in which LBC might carry these forward into partnerships or events.

Lucy Bolton, Associate Lecturer in Film Studies (l.c.bolton@qmul.ac.uk), and Charles Drazin, Lecturer in Film Studies (c.b.drazin@qmul.ac.uk), founded Living British Cinema and would be delighted to receive suggestions and ideas for LBC.

Sights/Sites

Lavinia Brydon

Last summer, I attended a conference at which I met Jimmy Hay, a graduate of Queen Mary and now a PhD student at the University of Wales, Swansea. During the course of the conference and over several coffees, we discussed our mutual interest in British film, especially as it pertained to space and place--as well as the frequently isolating experience of being a doctoral student. Agreeing that conferences are necessary in both advancing our research and ensuring some level of social contact during the PhD years, we touted the idea of organising one ourselves. I'm happy to say that this discussion continued into the Autumn and provided the basis for the postgraduate study day Sights and Sites: Topographical Approaches to British Cinema that took place at Queen Mary in April.

Early on in our discussions, it became clear that a small informal event would be preferable to the large and sometimes anonymous conference format. As such, we devised the event as a study day in which all attendees would contribute to intellectually vigorous and vibrant discussions: in the event, topics ranged from the use of location in British crime dramas through the ideological spatial codifications of British horror films to the aesthetics of animated space in British silent cartoons. To help with our endeavour, we decided to circulate the papers in advance, a decision well-received by the PhD students who presented their work. In addition, we invited a small number of critical observers whose research interests extend beyond British cinema, thus ensuring that connections could be made not only between the papers presented but also across national cinemas and even academic disciplines. This was especially important given that participants' wider research projects engage with graphic arts, communication studies, and cultural geography. We were delighted, too, that the day benefited from an opening address given by QM's newly-appointed Professor of Film Studies, Janet Harbord.

Lavinia Brydon is a PhD candidate at Queen Mary, researching the space of the garden in British film culture

Film/Gallery

Janet Harbord

If the topography of cinema is open to particular and fruitful scrutiny in the present moment, this is an analysis not only of the landscape within film but the landscapes and locations that cinema has come to inhabit. A key surface feature of this map is the art gallery, with which film has enjoyed an enduring relationship. That there is more heat in this relationship in the wake of the digital wave is without doubt, and two recent events signal this. *Unspooling 4.0* at Manchester's Cornerhouse Cinema (October-December 2010) celebrated the relationship between art and cinema in an exhibition of artworks drawing on both institutional histories. Most evident from the exhibition was a sense of cinema as an accumulating archive for artists to raid, repurpose, and ventriloquize. Indeed, canonic cinematic texts were made to speak again: *Death in Venice* was re-performed with the artist (Ming Wong) playing the roles of both the boy and the ageing protagonist, whilst the descending lift scene from Godard's *Weekend* was infinitely playing as a loop projected on a stairwell, destabilizing both text and visitor (Sheena Macrae).

New cinema echoes old cinema, as many commentators have noted; and film in the gallery gives rise to the kinds of anarchic, restless audience behaviour that characterized film viewing in the late nineteenth century. The relative passivity of contemporary audiences in relation to film is a theme played differently by artist Philippe Parreno, whose solo show at the Serpentine Gallery in London (January 2011) consisted of four films. Parreno leads his audience through the gallery with a series of cues, such as electronic blinds lifting as the sound rises in another room. Each film entertains ghosts of one sort of another, and there is a haunted feel to the exhibition with muted sounds emanating from the darkness next door. Cinema as haunted house, perhaps?

Professor of Film Studies Janet Harbord delivered a keynote lecture, 'Excentric cinema', at Manchester's Cornerhouse in November 2010; and a talk, 'By the time you are real', at the Philippe Parreno conference at the Institut Français in February this year.



spectator's vision, in that people's looking appeared to dart around the frame in all kinds of unexpected directions.

Haeffner concluded that a project like *Re-possessed* has the potential to reinvigorate Film Studies in at least three ways: firstly, by treating media audiences not just as makers, but also as consumers, of media; secondly, by sidelining 'expert' readings of films in favour of an approach that highlights the pragmatics of communication; and finally, by drawing on the hitherto undreamed-of level of detail and accuracy in analysis that is made possible by computer technology.

In contrast, Neil Sinyard's lecture traced the complementarity between Herrmann's music and Hitchcock's images. With extracts from several Hitchcock films, Professor Sinyard demonstrated how Herrmann's music was spare and muted in *The Wrong Man*, romantically obsessed in *Vertigo*, and 'driving, agitated' in *Psycho*: Hitchcock and Hermann, he concluded, brought out the best in each other. The lecture was followed by an exciting recital by the Tippett String Quartet of music by Herrmann and other composers (among them Miklós Rózsa and Erich Korngold) working in Hollywood in the classic era, including the Quartet's own arrangement of the *Psycho* theme.

The Hitchcock Cinema and Annual Lecture are about honouring a great filmmaker, an honour that is not just about legacy. They allow audiences to see Hitchcock's work, and cinema in general, in a fresh light. The Lecture aims to inspire new approaches to viewing Hitchcock's films, and what space could be more practical for students and teachers of film than a cinema that reproduces the comfort and luxury of the golden age of filmgoing? Queen Mary's Hitchcock connection recalls the local roots of a master of the cinema, and gives his work living and breathing space for all students of film and lovers of cinema.

Editorial team:

Annette Kuhn
Alex Lichtenfels
Maren Thom

School of Languages, Linguistics and Film CUTAWAY

Queen Mary, University of London
Mile End Road
London E1 4NS
e: cutaway@qmul.ac.uk
www.slif.qmul.ac.uk/filmstudies/

The Hitchcock Connection

The Film Studies department at Queen Mary can boast many connections with the legacy of the filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock, who was born just up the road in Leytonstone in 1899. When the department was being formed, it was considered appropriate to honour a filmmaker. The choice fell between Hitchcock and Charlie Chaplin, and Hitchcock was selected--with the blessing of his daughter, Patricia. The department now houses the delightful 'red velvet seat' Hitchcock Cinema and hosts an Annual Hitchcock Lecture.

The Hitchcock Lecture offers a privileged locus for debate surrounding Hitchcock and his films. In 2010 Dr Nicholas Haeffner (London Metropolitan University) gave an illustrated talk entitled 'What you saw and what you think it means: Hitchcock, the look and empiricism'; and in March of this year Professor Neil Sinyard (University of Hull) delivered a lecture on the music composed by Bernard Herrmann for the nine films on which Herrmann and Hitchcock collaborated.

Dr Haeffner addressed the question of looking in Hitchcock's films. He argued that whereas psychoanalytic film theory shows a mistrust of looking motivated by fear, desire and 'misrecognition', advances in technology allow empirical testing to accurately discover where people actually look when watching a Hitchcock film.

Consequently, in 2007, with a team led by digital media specialist Chris Lane, Dr Haeffner began work on *Re-possessed*, a travelling interactive new media exhibition inspired by Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. *Re-possessed* invited audiences to 're-make' and 're-play' sequences from the film using games (like Scalectrix and Grand Theft Auto), cameras, and computer platforms (www.londonmet.ac.uk/news/latest-news/repossessed-an-exhibition-on-vertigo.cfm). Additionally, whilst watching *Vertigo* different groups--male and female viewers, for example--could have the trajectories of their gaze mapped against each other. The results offered little evidence to support the thesis that Hitchcock controls the