Hitchcock's *Vertigo* as Orpheus myth: what the *auteur* gains by citing the myth

The classical Orpheus figures prominently in artistic development across disciplines. Cinematic referents to Orpheus' fundamental achievement, i.e. creation, are as pervasive as are musical or operatic or the purely literary. Jean Cocteau's Orphic Trilogy is concerned primarily with poetic creation, even if it is cast by the *cinemaste* in film. Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge!*, Camus' *Orfeo Negro*, Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* among other great artistic works exhibiting profound application of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice*.* Hitchcock's *Vertigo* also promotes a particular reading of the myth.

While such films are familiar to classicists and will long find a place appropriately in the classical classroom, classicists ought carefully to examine the fundamentals by which a film can be evaluated as a manifestation of a classical myth. By some evaluations it has been sufficient to observe certain overtones or intersecting threads within a narrative such that a theme may be discerned only by scholarly cleverness. Until the analysis of a work shows *how* the work is benefited by the mythological application, the identification of the usage remains tepid.

My paper proposes an interpretation of Hitchcock's purpose for adapting the Orpheus myth within his 1958 cinematic masterpiece, *Vertigo*. Royal Brown some three decades ago observed the presence of an Orphic storyline in the film; and he went further to analyze how the film's narrative is deepened by closer recognition of the mythological narrative within it. I will argue for a deeper understanding of the film's use to its creator, the director/*auteur* himself, which use comes clear in his selection of an Orpheus story *per se*. It is not coincidental, I argue, that Hitchcock worked with the Orpheus and Eurydice myth at this particular point in his career. Nor may criticism of the film stand back from considering the role that Orpheus *qua* creator plays in the narrative.

The larger issue I wish to address after analyzing Hitchcock's *Vertigo* as vehicle for the Orpheus myth is an approach to a theorical statement concerning what constitutes fair discourse in mythological adaptations. Far beyond merely identifying the presence of classical mythological themes in a cinematic narrative — the point at which classicists have sometimes ceased their inquiry — scholarly discourse must strive a) to identify overt references to the myth applied and b) to explicate what the artist gains by the application *per se*.

I will argue that Hitchcock chose the Orpheus myth because his artistic forebear, Cocteau, had established the Orpheus material as a thematic ground where artists can interact. I will show how Hitchcock's working material for the film once exhibited overt, perhaps too readily recognizable references to the Orpheus myth; and I will identify the referents Hitchcock infused into the film's final form so as to identify the narrative as an Orpheus story. I will argue that Hitchcock's purpose in the project was to emulate Cocteau and achieve comparative stature within the cinematic world. Finally, I will assert that, until a scholar presents a plausible reason *why* an artist applies a myth, the act of observation is incomplete. What Solomon and Cyrino and Winkler have shown so effectively for the methodology of classical historical narratives in cinema may and must be applied productively to usages of mythological material as well.

Works to be cited:

Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York 2006).

Thomas Leitch, *Film Adaptation and its Discontents* (Baltimore 2007).

Marianne McDonald, "A New Hope: film as a teaching tool for the Classics," in L. Hardwich and C. Stray, edd., *A Companion to Classical Receptions* (Oxford 2011): 327 - 41.

Joanna Paul, "Working with Film: theories and methodologies," in Hardwick and Stray, 303 - 13.

Martin M. Winkler, *Cinema and Classical Texts: Apollo's new light* (Cambridge 2009).