# ReTurning

### *ReTurning* by Anne Robinson

> *"The film we saw is never the one that I remember." (Burgin, 2004, p.110)*

> *"…Wandering is the liberation from every given point in space, and thus the conceptional opposite to fixation at such a point." (Simmel in Wolff, 1950)*

> *"…the impossibility of the flaneuse..." (Friedberg 1994, p.36)*

The video installation *ReTurning* is inspired by the line from Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*: "Only one's a wanderer, two together are always going somewhere…" and takes on the idea of flâneur, the artist dreaming and looking in the city, and the conceptual spaces of digital video.

I have always been fascinated by this line, which is spoken by Madeleine (Kim Novak) to Scottie (James Stewart) on the morning after the San Francisco Bay incident, in response to the query: "don't you think it's kind of a waste…to wander alone?" The notion of 'wandering' recurs throughout the film, as when Scottie replies "oh, just wander about" in response to a query about his usual occupation, and resonates with the idea of the 'flâneur', able to wander at will, and to become absorbed by the life of the city whilst being apart and able to remain in a kind of dreaming space. The idea that two together may break that spell prefigures the ending of this particular text; but also makes us reflect on time, wandering, desire and solitude.

My work is engaged with the freeze frame and with the relationship between the language of moving images and painting, in particular looking at time and consciousness, and exploring

'daydream space'. In relation to this particular film, which is a rich text in terms of my work, I am concerned with the interplay of looks, and the implications of the apparent visibility of Madeleine, the woman, wandering, but watched, combined with the invisibility of the unconscious, the world of the imagination. Deleuze's ideas about cinema and the "crystal-image" (Deleuze, 1989, p.66) and Bergson's on time and the notion of 'duree' (Bergson, 2001) have both had an impact on my work, and I am interested in exploring the possible imaginative spaces between scenes, shots and frames in our perception of moving image work.  A key question that has developed in my work is:

What are the possibilities for visual artist of the space between frames in digital video as an imaginative space for artist and spectator?

The illusory perception of movement is created by viewing still pictures in rapid succession at anything between about 10 and 35 frames per second, so that the eye's retina, connecting with the perceptual processes of the brain, briefly retains an image, known as 'persistence of vision'. Each still in this process is a frame.  The brain and the eye, however, do not work according to a camera-type, "frame rate" or (as with video) scan rate.  Rather, visual experiences are created from the outputs from motion detectors, detail detectors and pattern detectors in the brain/eye system. The frames here are virtual rather than actual, being the product of digital systems rather than physical celluloid, or even analogue video interlacing. In digital systems, the frame itself is illusory.

*Returning* is a video installation that both engages with the film *Vertigo* and explores our perception of the liminal spaces in film language, using processes of re-filming screens to capture the spaces between frames, and using digital editing to work with freeze frames derived from this process. These abstracted images remain intentionally ambiguous, whilst mirroring ideas and associations from the original work.  In building a work that relates to an

existing story I am interested in the way emotions can be experienced through chance encounters with images, possibly dissociated from their original context. Through the selection and digital processes, the work explores oppositions between abstraction/representation and conscious/unconscious - trying to imagine the spaces between frames as a kind of pre conscious space.  Layer/spaces are merged through re-filming and the original frame boundaries are blurred in the newly constructed digital spaces. The line from the film seems to raise questions about the two characters sharing daydream space or seeking time for emotions, time to wander; and the screens in this piece function as a kind of expansion of time, where the density of the image affects eye and emotion. The installation consists of five screens, where very slow moving images are set beside still moments in sequence. On the soundtrack, I have used a remixing of a single singing voice: an imperfect, slightly distorted and dreamlike rendition of the song "Pack Up Your Troubles, C'mon get Happy" as sung by Judy Garland in the 1950 film Summer Stock. The singing disrupts our vision. It is at once determinedly cheerful, and slightly 'mad', becoming more and more melancholic with each repeated verse. This song is, for me, a remembered soundtrack, a tune in the head, parallel to Victor Burgin's idea of 'remembered film' which has also been an influence on my work and which I will go on to explore in this context. In compelling spectators to view the images through this layer of sound, I hope to displace the spaces of reverie extracted from *Vertigo*, and provoke more subjective, emotional affect.

I find that part of my fascination both with Madeleine, and with the notion of wandering, is the frequent denial to women in particular of such a wandering place of dreams and visions. A question arises as to whether the "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey, 1975, p.6-18) of women in cinema may parallel a kind of worldly intrusion on the particular and elusive solitudes required by intense looking and creative thought, the precious time outside time of the artist/dreamer. Anne Friedberg describes the flaneur in modernity as: "...a male urban subject, endowed with a gaze at an elusive and almost unseen flaneuse" and explores the possibility of a postmodern flaneuse (1994, p.33).  In *Vertigo*, the spectator's vision of Madeleine wandering is constructed

with such intensity that I feel I want to inhabit her reverie, desire, and her vision of the city, her madness... I continue to believe in her character - fiction within fiction - beyond the plotted narrative point where I should have stopped, after duplicity has been exposed.  A wandering dreaming solitary woman like Madeleine is always perceived as mad; but, in considering her walking and looking, I am reminded of Deleuze and Guattari's proposal that: "A schizophrenic out for a walk is a better model than the neurotic lying on the analyst's couch" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1984, p.2) and of course of my own practice of looking and dreaming in the city.

Perhaps the desire to go on believing parallels the paradoxical search for a soul mate whose eyes we can see through with perfect understanding, only to find that succumbing to this dual destiny has subsumed our own dreams; always going somewhere, but where? And are we still free to wander? I believe in, but cannot penetrate or inhabit Madeleine's reverie in the film by merely following the narrative. I am always drawn back through the eyeliner tunnel into Scottie's obsessive desire and destruction. A multiplicity of filmic rules: continuity, match cuts and closure place these visionary paths off-limits.

Certain heightened moments from *Vertigo*, and in fact certain fragments of the screen area stay with me. I have come to think of fragments such as these as 'sequence-images'. Having begun to work with fragments of refilmed moving images from existing films that seemed to have some iconic significance for me, I encountered Victor Burgin's work on 'Remembered Films'. Burgin's idea is based on the fragments of cinematic image that emerge into in our waking consciousness spontaneously, unbidden:  "A concatenation of images raises itself in bas relief" (Burgin, 2004, p.21).

He picks up on the idea from Jean La Planche of the time of the human subject - the individual secreting this time independently of historical time, and how this can be combined with cinematic or fantasy memories. In the case of his work, with what he calls the 'sequence-image' He has developed the idea of the sequence-image to describe this kind of fragment of

cinematic memory which is often little more than a still, and goes on to examine its possible significance.

"The elements that constitute the sequence-image, mainly perceptions and recollections, emerge successively but not teleologically. The order in which they appear is insignificant (as in a rebus) and they present a configuration - 'lexical, sporadic' - that is more 'object' than narrative. What distinguishes the elements of such a configuration from their evanescent neighbours is that they seem somehow more 'brilliant'. In a psychoanalytic perspective, this suggests that they have been attracted into the orbit of unconscious signifiers, and that it is from the displaced affect associated with the latter that the former derive their intensity." (Burgin, 2004, p.21)

I would propose that a significant factor in the visual language of *ReTurning* is 're-filming', refraction through distancing lenses, possibly relating to Benjamin's idea of "unconscious optics" (Benjamin in Arendt, 1999, p.230).  This not only creates a new frame space, but transforms the perception of images through a distancing effect which reverberates with our own memories and subjective associations, perhaps also reminiscent of Freud's notion of telescopic lenses being analogous with the refraction of images between layers of consciousness. (Freud in Hirsch, 1997, p.118) We are looking through more than one lens, so the uncanny effects of looking through other eyes or of watching through surveillance systems may come into play. However, what is most interesting in here is the idea of looking into unconscious memory spaces, and the perception of time momentarily stilled.

Laura Mulvey, considering the digital frame, suggests that bringing stillness into the present through the creation of a freeze frame can create dialectic between old and new, and lead to reflection on the representation of time. She looks at the possibility of the 'technological uncanny', the "sense of uncertainty and disorientation that accompanies a new technology that is not yet fully understood." (Mulvey, 2006, p.194) She also describes thinking about film

within the framework of the digital as: "watching a kaleidoscope pattern reconfigure very slowly". In the context of looking at *Vertigo*, this seems reminiscent of Baudelaire's flâneur/kaleidoscope. (Baudelaire, 1863) Mulvey goes on to point out the ways in which slow motion and freeze frames allow us to see previously parts of the image, which were hitherto invisible, which may then become newly significant.

The refilming process makes a visible distance for the spectator; creates images, sequences and experiential spaces in which to encounter personal memories and reflect on time passing. This may create a space of reverie and even safety in which to look at painful memories or associations. The new liminal spaces captured between digital 'frames' seem distinct from the dead freeze frame, emanating life and motion, opening up a landscape suspended outside time, a space in which to wander.

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