

# ReViewed

***ReViewed* by David Raybould and Richard Stevens**

## **Exhibit description**

Fifty times a second we are observed. Using eye tracking technology, *ReViewed* removes our freedom to voyeuristically observe from the 'darkness of the auditorium' and allows us to expose and re-view our patterns of looking. In an echo of the film's themes of voyeurism and surveillance, *ReViewed* asks us to reflect upon our sources of visual pleasure, compare them across gender boundaries, and to examine the power of Hitchcock as director to control and manipulate our gaze.

Many of Hitchcock's films are concerned with the act of obsessive looking. *Vertigo's* intentions are clear from the very opening titles. The eye and spiral motifs of Saul Bass and James Whitney draw us in, invoking the vertigo of spinning and falling but also serving to control and guide the eye to their centre. Although Hitchcock makes great use of both sound and music in his films, he saw himself primarily as a visual storyteller. This is perhaps not surprising given his origins as a director of the silent era and his early career as a graphic designer.

*'When we tell a story in cinema, we should resort to dialogue only when it's impossible to do otherwise. I always try first to tell a story in the cinematic way, through a succession of shots and bits of film in between'* (Duguid, 2006)

With his obvious talents for self publicity and spectacle, Hitchcock can be seen, in some senses, to be directing the audience before they even enter the auditorium. Once there he has at his disposal the language of the shot, the mise en scène (the camera position, set design,

lighting, colour), the cut and the transition. Through examining our gaze in *ReViewed*, we can begin to examine the control exerted upon us as spectators through these techniques.

As we follow the trajectory of Scottie's gaze across Ernies restaurant we are reminded of the eye's central importance in our social interactions. We are permitted, through Hitchcock's use of deep focus, to look around at the other diners and yet are still guided to rest on the figure of Madeleine, highlighted by her emerald green sash that stands out in contrast to the muted black / white and greys of the other diners. Resonant of the eyes constant movement to bring the image to the central foveal area, where acuity is at its sharpest, the camera moves to bring Madeleine central to the frame. Theorists of the time, such as André Bazin, argued that using such deep focus shots (in which the fore, mid and background are equally sharp), would give the spectator time and freedom to explore the whole frame, and this might represent a more objective reality than the coercion of montage (Bazin, 1967, p.23-40). Although on this occasion Hitchcock allows us this freedom through his use of deep focus, unlike his French counterparts he does not hold for long before utilising the director's ultimate technique of control, the cut.

How does the eye and perceptual mechanism react to the seemingly brutal art of the cut, where a complete view or 'shot' is replaced by another? A scene may consist of a large number of shots, and yet is mostly perceived by the audience as seamless through the use of continuity editing, whose aim is to be as transparent and unnoticed as possible. Through Re-viewing our gaze we can begin to examine these techniques and their effect in greater detail. In the scene described above one can see that Hitchcock has tried to limit the extent to which the main focus of attention is in a different position during successive shots. Strong similarities between compositional element from one shot to the next - in similar positions, shapes, colours etc are sometimes used to create allusions and associations (graphic matches). However even if this is not the intention, the need for the viewer to track the object of interest across the screen in an auditorium, possibly even having to turn their head, must be a consideration.

Of course the amount of eye / head movement necessary to follow the area of interest is greatly dependant on the playback media. It is worth considering what the implications might be for the shot and the edit when the film can be consumed not only at the cinema, but on the television and on the small screens of mobile phones and ipods.

The eyes are always moving. Even when we fixate upon a single spot they are not perfectly still. As described above, in order to perceive the best possible image the eye must move so that the image lands on the centre of the retina, the fovea. Several editors and filmmakers have attempted to use blinks and the moments of blindness when we move between objects of interest (saccades), as a metaphor for the editing process itself.

*'..we entertain an idea, or a linked series of ideas, and we blink to separate and punctuate that idea from what follows. Similarly - in film - a shot presents us with an idea, or a sequence of ideas, and the cut is a "blink" that separates and punctuates those ideas' (Murch, 2001, p.62-63)*

Through *ReViewed*, we can not only discover the attentional landscape of a scene by monitoring the areas where the eye pauses or 'fixates', but examine the impact of the cut, or techniques like graphic matching on this.

As Madeleine approaches Scottie a selective, shallow focus directs our attention to her alone as the background diners disappear into blur. Scottie becomes aware of his gaze and self consciously averts his eyes whilst we, the audience, are voyeuristically indulged. For much of the first half of the film we see the world through Scottie's eyes with the camera directed through his point of view. It has been argued by Laura Mulvey in her text "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema" (1975) that these cinematic structures of mainstream film where we are invited to identify with the main protagonist, inevitably male, serve to recreate the dominant patriarchal structures of society. The camera, she contends, represents the heterosexual male

gaze and women are objectified in order to provide visual pleasure.

*'In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active / male and passive / female.'* (Mulvey, 1975, p.6-18)

When we see the world through Scottie's point of view, do we accept this role, do male and female viewers view the scenes differently, or do we retain the freedom to assess the scene objectively as detached observers? When we engage in self reflection through *ReViewed*, are we now not only seeing the film through Scottie's eyes, but also feeling the same discomfort and guilt about our gaze and voyeurism?

*'The spectator, lulled into a false sense of security by the apparent legality of his surrogate, sees through his look and finds himself exposed as complicit, caught in the moral ambiguity of looking.'* (Mulvey, 1975, p.6-18)

Our visual perception mechanisms are unreliable. In everyday life one person's perceptions and memory of an event may differ greatly from another's. Indeed, through inattentional blindness it is possible to be unaware of greatly significant changes (most famously noted in Simons' and Chabris' 1999 'Gorilla' study where 75% of the observers did not notice a man in a gorilla costume enter the scene and wave at the camera (Simons & Chabris, 1999, p 1059-1074). In order to tell a story in a purely visual way, where is the line between control and freedom? By examining and comparing the eye's fixations, we might start to explore the amount of freedom that the individual retains within the control of the cinematic constructs, and what implications this might have for visual storytelling.

### **Exhibit details:**

As Hitchcock frequently takes his characters from passive observers into the dramatic action, so our aim is to connect with and actively engage the audience by bringing them into the work. Although we retain authorship of the piece, its materials are created and manipulated by the audience as is their meaning. In a development from the usual gallery experience the focus here is no longer on the object, but on the experience that the object offers.

Members of the audience will watch a scene from *Vertigo* via a Tobii eyetracker. The eye tracker emits a harmless low wattage infrared beam of light which is targeted at the participant's eyes and enables the apparatus to detect, track, and record their position every 50th of a second.

The study of visual perception of dynamic scenes is inherently difficult as the objects that are being fixated upon are in constant motion. It is therefore difficult to relate the position of the fixation to any particular object without a painstaking visual analysis of the scene. In *ReViewed*, the audience is able to observe the data produced by multiple participants in novel ways, for instance using coloured overlays (evocative of Hitchcock symbolic use of colour in the film), blurred / sharp images (reminiscent of the use of depth of field effects used to exert control over the viewer) and pictorial summaries. In keeping with our aim of allowing the audience to remake the artefact, it is also our intention that the data produced in the gallery will also be made available online for the technologically minded to re-image in their own way.

# RePossessed

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