

ReFramed

***ReFramed 1 ... inVertEgo* by Souli Spiropoulou**

ReFramed1 ... inVertEgo, is a short film by Souli Spiropoulou, which explores the complexities of gender representation in Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958). The film is part of "ReFraming Gender", a practice based PhD at London Metropolitan University, and it brings the established theoretical controversy, triggered by Laura Mulvey's description of Scottie as the active male hero, onto the screen.

The film visually deconstructs and re-constructs scenes from Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, using digital manipulation of voice, gesture and composition. It seeks, in its form and content, to make the familiar unfamiliar and to destabilise the terms through which it has been received and understood. The role of classical narrative structure in limiting gender representation is explored as the film is re-cut; creating new unpredictable narratives that leave behind the restrictions of the traditional Oedipal trajectory, and confusing the cinematic binaries of voyeur and victim, sex and violence, strength and weakness. The juxtaposition and mirroring of performances in the final scene of the film becomes a mutual embrace of passive and active, underlining the instability of gender, and creating radical potential for gender fluidity.

Film as found footage:

*The practice of using earlier films from a variety of sources -found footage- as the raw material for new works of film art has a history that dates back almost to the origins of cinema and is currently considered "a, if not **the**, dominant critical procedure in independent film and videomaking." (Yeo, 2004, p.13)*

The found footage method mainly uses images or shots that are detached of their original pre-existed film source, and are manipulated, re-arranged, re-edited, re-constructed and placed in new narratives and contexts. Although these images will still carry the ideological meanings that were attached to them in their original appearance, the way that are manipulated by the artist can offer radical opportunities to challenge the foundations of film language and uncover hidden meanings. Found footage is manipulated and re-presented in order to question the conventions of traditional cinema, subvert narrative structure and create new meanings.

Analysis of *ReFramed 1 ... inVertEgo*

ReFramed 1 aims to re-frame gender, using the techniques of found footage and the underpinning of theoretical research. Laura Mulvey's statement that "Vertigo focuses on the implications of the active/looking, passive/looked-at split in terms of sexual difference" (Mulvey, 1989, p.24) fuelled an expansive theoretical debate about Hitchcock's representation of gender that has been useful to this research. However, it is not the purpose of the project to simply translate or illustrate gender and film theory, but to use found footage as a tool to generate ideas that subvert and prevent re-circulation of the "compulsory order of sex/gender/desire." (Butler, 1990, p.6)

The re-cutting, use of colour and filters, and the lack of continuity in the environment of each shot, force an active attempt by the viewer to create meaning, and in doing so encourage a re-examination of conventional film language. The use of such a well-known film like Vertigo assists this re-examination as viewers try to compare and figure this narrative in relation to the one that they already know.

The use of sound in *ReFramed 1* also adds to the sinister atmosphere of the film. Throughout the film the actual existing sound from the Vertigo clips are used, slowed and repeated along with the accompanying image. Use of the original sound is an important feature of the film:

without adding any extra sound or sound effects, a new narrative is created, but it is still 'true' to the original film. The slowing down and repetition of the footage produces haunting abstract sounds that actually guide the editing of the film, both in terms of atmosphere and rhythm. This creates a rhythmic abstract soundtrack that does not compromise the integrity of the original footage.

The film consists of three scenes:

Scene 1

The film opens with inter-cut shots of two men (who are actually the same man: Scottie) looking at each other. The lack of a woman in this scene, negates the expected male voyeur and female object relationship, and raises questions about who is looking at whom. The two men look at each other, Man 1 voyeuristically from behind the door, Man 2 from inside the car. As a viewer you begin to identify with Man 1, partly because he is presented first, but also because he is the most hidden and can almost watch unobserved - like the viewer in the cinema space. Conventional film language helps us to establish Man 1 as the subject, and Man 2 as the object of his look.

Through the use of re-editing, split screen, and colour, the two men change positions, Man 2 becomes the voyeur and Man 1 becomes the object. This interchange acts to undermine the polarity of the positions of subject and object as represented in conventional film. This has the effect of causing us to mistrust both men, we are not clear about who is who, and what his intentions are, unlike the original film where we clearly identify with Scottie and support him on his investigative mission.

In *ReFramed 1* the male figure(s) becomes sinister; we are not sure who or what he is looking at, or what he is going to do when he finds it. The collection and repetition of shots of the man's looks underlines his predatory nature and our lack of understanding of what is going on makes us wary and suspicious of his intentions.

Scene 2

When the woman appears in the next scene she instantly fills the gap of the missing object of the previous scene: we instinctively worry about what the man is going to do to her when he catches her. By excluding a female figure from the previous scene, as soon as we see the woman in this scene the viewer instantly assumes that she is the object/victim of the gaze. There is almost a sense of relief, because the presence of a woman helps us to make sense of the film, and we are consciously aware that this relates to a well-established film language where the male is in active pursuit of the passive female.

The film sticks on this shot, returning to it over and over, building tension, forcing the viewer to consider this act of pursuit carefully, and increasing our anxiety for the woman as a potential victim. This physical domination and insistence by Scottie towards Madeleine is emphasised, and the reading of this act as the active male pursuing his lover, is transformed into bullying and aggressive insistence.

Scene 3

This reading of the male character in *ReFramed 1* is in contrast to the original film where Scottie is actually an example of a flawed male. In the original film he is the victim of deception and tragedy, who suffers from vertigo. This weakness is best represented in the scene early in the film where Scottie falls from the stool and is caught in Midge's arms.

Re-framed 1 combines this moment of weakness with a scene of ultimate aggression, by inter-cutting between the fall and the attack. This is the beginning of the challenge to our perception of the man as the strong, active, and pursuing. We see clearly the possibilities for the man to be active and passive within his role, as the circling of the fall and fight undermines the division between active and passive. This juxtaposition destabilizes the polarity of the victim/passive and predator/active relationship recently established by the introduction of the woman.

The potential of James Stewart to play the role of a man with a weakness was well recognised by Hitchcock. (Keane, 1986, p.233-234) His damaged masculinity is in fact the main motivation of the narrative, as we follow his struggle to overcome his physical and psychological weakness, and restore his masculinity as the active hero. The climax of *Vertigo* is Scottie triumphing over his vertigo and solving the mystery. Strength/activity and weakness/passivity are not allowed a fluid coexistence within this male character.

The narrative of *ReFramed 1* climaxes with the parallel images of the man falling into a woman's embrace, and a woman falling into a man's arms. The striking similarity of these two shots, underlined by constant alternating repetition, draws our attention to the possibility of fluidity between active and passive for the male character, and negates our fear of the man as the predator/aggressor. As the shot of the attack is repeated it slows down, and becomes a loving embrace, and the aggression is also dissolved by the parallel of the falling shot. The resolution of the narrative comes with our relief, as the attack transforms and becomes a mutual embrace of passive and active.

Unlike *Vertigo*, the narrative of *ReFramed 1* introduces the possibility of gender fluidity. The foregrounding of masculine and feminine "performances" through the process of repetition reveals how the illusion of gender is created through consistent and persistent behaviour. The juxtaposition and mirroring of these performances in the final scene of the film serve to underline the instability of gender and allow the radical potential for gender fluidity.

Bibliography:

Butler, J., 1990. *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York and London: Routledge.

Keane, E. Marian, in Deutelbaum M. and Pogue L. (ed.), 1986. *A Closer Look at Scopophilia: Mulvey, Hitchcock, and Vertigo* in *A Hitchcock Reader*. Ames: Iowa State University Press. (p. 231)

Mulvey, L., 1989. *Visual and other Pleasures*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd.

Yeo, R., 2004. *Cutting through History, Found footage in Avant-garde Filmmaking* in *Cut: Film as Found Object in Contemporary Video*. Milwaukee: Milwaukee Art Museum.