

Mrs De Winter's Dualism Dilemma

A two screen video by Joanna Callaghan

Critique by John Bunyan

Hitchcock's 'Rebecca' in the scene reworked in this installation, has a particular narrative function. It is to define the relationship in its emotional, historic and relative status of the personalities between the new Mrs De Winter and the old – Rebecca. It does this through the heavy use of mis-en-scene / atmosphere, the action of knocking over a statuette of Rebecca's and its subsequent hasty hiding by the guilty new Mrs De Winter, and the unconscious denial by her of her new status by not immediately responding to her new name on the telephone.

These are overt but naturalistic scripted devices that advance the narrative clearly within the 'rules' common to the melodrama / mystery genre that locates the film. As such they communicate the plot and narrative unconsciously and unambiguously to the viewer. Deconstructive devices used in the installation include repeating the scene continually, duplicating the display, alternating action between the 2 displays, opposing the scenic action by counterpointing static scene shots across the 2 displays without the actor present. Others also include switching the source of sound between the displays and using it in opposition to the actor / scenic action, opposing the ambience and associations of the original film by locating the scene in a modern office / neutral context with minimal atmospheric or mis-en-scene intervention whilst overlaying the original film soundtrack and synchronising and then de-synchronising this soundtrack with the action and lip synch.

This is a very large number of deconstructive devices to use simultaneously in a piece and, of necessity, must invite a wide range of active readings by the audience. These will be directed in part by any viewer's knowledge of the film from which the scene and soundtrack come from and the introductory paragraphs on the door. Possible themes that may arise in readings:

Rebecca as a ghost: Music comes from the scene when the new Mrs De Winter is not present and there are just static scenes of furniture. Is Rebecca present and working malevolently through the furniture which (whose???) presence becomes personalised through the association with music?

Furniture conspires: As Mrs De Winter progresses through action in one view, static furniture is present in the second view. Does the newly personalised furniture make her knock over the statuette?

Furniture regards: Does the furniture from one screen 'see' Mrs De Winter on the other screen? Mrs De Winter cannot see out because she never makes eyeline connection with the camera.

Significance of the close-ups of static furniture / carpet: We look for meaning in these static contradictory but closely edited shots of the furniture. What is their narrative function? Do they allow us to consider the 'temporal other'. (I mean for e.g. the shot of the carpet before the ornament falls on it – suggesting it has a reasoned existence both before it is spread with the pieces of the ornament, and after they have been cleared up. Similarly with the closed drawer that will later contain the broken pieces). This relationship between static and motile development in the furniture is further

concentrated by the continual repetition of the scene but with modified editing each time.

Furniture views the viewer: Our familiarity with filmic conventions makes us feel comfortable with the actress and her character. She never looks out of the screen to see us (except almost when she is sitting at the telephone but she looks just beyond the camera). In other words we- the viewer – can see her but she cannot see us. However – if we feel or accept that the furniture becomes loaded with personality and function – it follows that if we suspect that – while we look at the actress – there are shots of static furniture on the other image behind us, then do we feel un-easy at being regarded and possibly laughed at?

Mrs De Winter trapped: If the actress / character is in such a weak position in the viewing order of things (potentially she is being regarded both by the audience and by the static furniture – or Rebecca’s ghost whilst she has no right of regard herself) is she not further trapped by constant repetition (deja-vu, the ever waking dream, groundhog day). Scenically she is trapped in a stark impersonal cell. She is disengaged from the one personal item in the room – the statuette which she inadvertently breaks. She is further disengaged from the one link to the outside world – the telephone – through which she fails to identify herself – only realising what she should have said when the call is over. Technically she is further undermined in post production. The disengaging of the soundtrack and its relocation to the opposite screen and the desynchronising of lip synch work to do this.

Is there a gender agenda: The scene is free of gender associated items except for the statuette which is too small to be easily defined or loaded with association. Mrs De Winter is dressed neutrally as if for the office. But we know the story of Rebecca – that there are at least two women competing for Mr De Winter’s love and attention – one alive and one dead. Does this knowledge colour our consideration of Mrs De Winter in the scene? Does the translation of the scene into a modern office environment and the use of deconstruction allow us to review the rationality of her actions in the scene both within and from outside of the context of the story of Rebecca? Does she become more or less of a victim as a result?

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