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A LEAP OF FAITH- *GONE GIRL,* (2014, DIR. DAVID FINCHER)

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Abstract: The focus of the study is the 2014 movie Gone Girl, directed by David Fincher, and it frames in close-up the technical tricks which build a suspenseful puzzle-film, keeping the viewer on the edge. How does the movie play with our sympathies and expectations? How are we, viewers, kept in the uncomfortable position of having to constantly reassess how we feel about the main characters, whom we ultimately believe?

Key-words: alignment, allegiance, recognition, narration, puzzle-film

In 2014 David Fincher's *Gone Girl* came out, an excellent adaptation of Gillian Flynn's 2012 novel "Gone Girl". It captures the mood and themes of its literary source, with a healthy dose of Fincher flair and style. Some of his earlier movies, such as *Se7en* (1995), *The Game* (1997) and *Fight Club* (1999) fall into a special category of contemporary cinema, which delineates movies that rely on non-linear narration and labyrinthine structure, blurring levels of reality and fantasy- the *puzzle films.* The complexity of such movies is mostly given by the intricate, polyphonic telling of a more or less complex story, "a delight in disorienting or misleading spectators" (Elsaesser 2009:25). Th. Elsaesser discusses this category of movies, calling them "mind-game" (2009:25) films, and further divides them in two categories: movies in which a cruel or deadly game is played on one of the characters, without their knowledge (Fincher's *Se7en, The Game*), and movies that play games on both audience and characters, because crucial information is withheld or ambiguously presented (Fincher's *Fight Club*). *Gone Girl* (2014) fits the description, as it forces viewers to choose between seemingly valid realities and perspectives.

The movie is about a married couple, and starts on their fifth anniversary, the day Amy Dunne, disappears. The husband Nick Dunne calls the police, and as the investigation moves forward, it becomes clear that Nick's life is based on lies and deceit. Once Amy's diary is found, Nick's image changes from caring man to brutal murderer. At first glance, it

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looks like the viewer will only have to follow the leads and clues to solve the mystery. But further plot twists unsettle the viewer, as Amy's disappearance is disclosed as a carefully planned fabrication. We are snowed under informational load from multiple directions, before the ultimate game is played on us.

Emotions play an important role in creating an experience that is constructed through the looks of the film, and form the core of levels of engagement with characters on screen. Murray Smith focuses on this type of emotional involvement, in line with the trend in cognitive film theory, and argues for a system based on three levels of engagement: *recognition* (the way in which the viewer constructs the characters as individualized and continuous human actors whom the viewer can identify), *alignment* (the way a film text us gives access to the actions, thoughts and feelings of characters) and *allegiance* (the way in which a film text guides sympathy for or against the various characters in the established fictional world).

The first level Smith mentions, recognition, refers to the use of schemata in identifying characters and their roles in the narrative development, as described by Bordwell (1985) in his theory of perception and cognition. This first stage plays an important part in the formation of sympathy for a character.

[...] Spectators can get passionately involved in the worlds that the films create - they study the characters' inner lives and back-stories and become adept at explaining the improbability of an event. (Elsaesser 2009:13)

At the recognition stage the viewer places the characters in a certain context and unconsciously establishes character attributes, already forming hypotheses about these with regard to the development of the characters and their conduct.

Alignment, the second level of spectator engagement Smith mentions, is established through which characters are bound to functions related to range and depth of story information. Smith calls these *spatio-temporal attachment* and *subjective access*. The first focuses on how the narrative structure can follow the spatio-temporal path of a character throughout the story, or rather divides the attention on the paths of multiple characters. The latter, subjective access focuses on the way the viewer gains access to the subjectivity of the characters, so that the viewing experience is filtered through the perspective of that character. In addition, the placement of a new character can be influenced by the perspective that has

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already been obtained from the alignment with a previous character. Alignment can in that sense affect consecutive recognitions.

Thirdly, Murray Smith talks about *allegiance*, which should be clearly differentiated from alignment. The viewer is connected to the character through access to the latter's thoughts, which prompts the former's moral evaluation, leading to sympathy, the second classic form of identification with a character in Aristotle's view. As Michael Davis argues in his study of the *Poetics*, Aristotle saw that our response to tragedy is double: we respond from outside the drama, from our perspective as spectators, and we respond from inside, from the perspective of the characters. We feel pity *for* Oedipus; we feel fear *with* Oedipus: "As spectators we pity; as participants we fear." (Davis 1992:39)

Carl Plantinga, in his comprehensive study on audience emotions, notably comments that

"Audiences at the movies… are often thrilled, excited, or exhilarated; moved to tears, laughter, scorn, disgust; made fearful, expectant, curious, or suspenseful; absorbed and focused; outraged, angered, placated, or satisfied; given elevated heartbeats, sweaty brows, and galvanic skin responses; made to scream, yell, and excoriate bad guys and usually, relieved and calmed at the film's end." (Plantinga 2009:3)

The riddled gaps and flaunted inferences in *Gone Girl* keep us on the edge and generate suspense and surprise, what Meir calls "drivers of narrativity" (1978). The technical warp and weft of film-making, namely framing, sound, editing, makes our sympathies shift, while our expectations are alternately met and subverted.

Fincher's first imprint on the adaptation is to exploding the target genre. The book is a convincing crime story, while the movie is a post-modern mystery built from the heritage of traditional crime stories- the *spider woman* genre, the *killing husband*/*missing wife* genre combined with the *helper male* scenario. As much as we enjoy solving the mystery and filling in the conventional gaps, we enjoy watching the traditional pieces fall over, as the movie becomes metafiction.

In *Fight Club* the real and the symbolic occupy the same space of reality to show the pressure put on Tyler by the myth of masculinity: " advertising has us chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we don't need." Tyler, the main character, responds with authentic violence. In *Gone Girl* the myth of attainable perfection in marriage

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is shattered by real destruction. Early in the movie Amy says "We are so cute I wanna punch us in the face", summing up the viewer's emotional response to the movie. The heroes and villains in the movie are not people, but stories. David Fincher turns a crime story into a farce, taking a narrative device and twisting it to its extreme possibilities.

The unreliable narrator trope is a very powerful formal tool when it is employed in movies because it is conveyed visually, playing upon our expectations that seeing is believing. If in a book language may or may not equal truth, the image on screen is taken for granted as truth. We expect the images to have taken place in the story world. We are prepared for twists in the story not at formal level. Amy's flashbacks, linguistically rendered as diary entries, are visually supported by coherent sequences, and narrated in first-person diegetic voice-over. The auditory input we receive places us in the privileged position of listeners to a confession, strengthening the illusion of truth. Visually, the lie is even more complex, as many flashbacks are entirely fabricated, especially those pointing to Nick's violent behavior. These twists Fincher uses have an extremely jarring effect on us.

In the book, Amy and Nick's perspectives are clearly separated and rendered in first-person voice, while the movie is an intricate labyrinth of perspectives. For the first half, we are in alignment with Nick visually, as we learn of his present behavior, right before and after Amy's disappearance. The diegetic voice-over, however, places us in alignment with Amy, whose confessional tone makes her diary notes of over 300 entries ring true, even if we shall soon learn some are not.

Allegiance then shifts to Amy because Nick's behavior seems suspect, he has a bad opinion on their five years of marriage ("fast and furious"), he has no alibi for the morning of her disappearance, not to mention that his mobile keeps ringing and he ignores it.

Mid-point into the movie we are in alignment with Nick and the balance of sympathy leans in his favour because he discloses the truth to his sister, and we are thus able to fill gaps in the story, so that the *missing wife/guilty husband* plot is replaced with the *faked death/spider woman* plot to convey the idea that coupledom entails victimization. The *male helper* plot is equally twisted with Desi's appearance, who keeps Amy prisoner in his house, a modern version of the Gothic trap.

Fincher introduces a third unreliable narrator, the media, with its separate realm of perception, its own myths, symbols and demons. The purpose is to show how fast media

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representations get out of hand and how distorted the story is, once thrown on the public screen. People are staring at the screen, craving for the latest clues, but real action happens off-screen, on three levels, each more unreliable than the other: the past, memory and fantasy. With people too easily neglecting what or who is in their presence, the movie veers towards parody. Nick is not guilty, but in order to be come off as innocent he becomes a "trained monkey", as his lawyer teaches him the language, the look and the tone he needs to adopt for public view. This strand of digital story manipulation mirrors the art of movie-making and the craft it takes to use the nuts and bolts available to encourage spectators' allegiance.

Cinematically, Amy is framed in close-up shots more than Nick and always lit more intensely, technical choices that bring her in close proximity to the viewers and encourage allegiance. On the other hand, Nick's duplicitous nature is hinted at by the frequent use of side-lighting, and it takes a while before we realize that he is a liar, but not a murderer.

The film begins with a voiceover from Nick Dunne, supported by a medium close up of Amy's head.

"When I think of my wife, I picture cracking her lovely skull, unspooling her brains. Trying to get answers: What are you thinking? What are you feeling? What have we done to each other?"

Mid-point into Nick's confession, Amy abruptly turns and faces us, eyes wide open, resting her head back on Nick's chest. These are the two main characters, introduced to us while the film credits are still rolling, in the opening phase. Nick's opening statement alerts the viewer with its message, as is seems infused with a psychopathic, threatening undertone, which may leave a negative first impression on Nick, unless taken metaphorically. The moment Nick is suspected of murdering his wife, the viewer will subconsciously remember his wish to crack her skull, and automatically think that Nick may not be as innocent as he seems. Amy seems to be the unsuspecting victim.

The ending scene is visually and acoustically similar. The voice-over repeats the message from the opening scene, with the extra question "What will we do?", which overlaps with Amy's closing her eyes. The tone of Nick's voice signals his despair of having to stay with Amy, whom we clearly perceive as aggressor.

In terms of narrative strategy, Amy's diary serves an important role in the first phase of the movie. The diary sequences, which are narrated by Amy in voice-over, are supported

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by images that contribute to the content, keeping the viewer under a false sense of subjectivity, for a long time. The diary sequences, disguised as flashbacks, allow the viewer to doubt the credibility of Nick's story, resulting in a shift of sympathy. If no answers from Nick work to his advantage for a while, once concrete proof of his cheating on Amy comes out, the viewers no longer trust his version. Spatial alignment with Nick prompts us to believe he is innocent, but as Andie says, "You were going to get a divorce", viewers may take this as a motive for the disappearance of his wife, whose diary entries -"I feel like I could disappear", "This husband of mine may kill me") further reinforce the assumption.

The ensuing plot twist, which brings into question the reliability of all previous information, forces viewers to constantly adjust their perspective and be open-minded to the movie watching experience.

The non-diegetic tune which subtly underscores the scenes at times, a combination of massage therapy music, inducing a relaxing mood, with unsettling electronic beats is equally intriguing for its shift in function. It alternates between foreshadowing and symbolic functions in many scenes. Moreover, it is disturbingly omnipresent because it connects scenes in the present with fabrications of the past, and fluidly underscores the main character's divergent perspectives.

Parallel editing is another example in point, in the four minute sequence intercutting two forked plots- the police find Amy's diary and Nick finds the expensive goods. The narrative outcome is our realization that Amy is a liar and has carefully plotted every step. The non-diegetic tune becomes more intense as we are in alignment with Amy but our allegiance has shifted to Nick.

Arthur Raney's theory comes in handy in combination with Smith's structure of sympathy. It further details how the spectator goes through the three stages, and builds on Dolf Zillmann's affective disposition theory, which signals that spectators are "untiring moral monitors" who judge every action of a character by its rightness or wrongness (Zillmann 2000:54). Raney adds that "the initial formation of an affective disposition towards a character may at times actually precede specific moral evaluations of the character" (2004:361). The theory that the initial valence of a character is usually maintained has also been backed up by empirical research. Meir Sternberg (1978:93) study on the exposition in fiction calls this *the primacy effect*, in line with a psychological research about the enduring

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influence of first impressions. What this means, is that the recognition stage, in Smith's sense, influences our allegiances to a great extent. Furthermore, we actively look for reasons to maintain the first assumptions made during the recognition stage, and, instead of evaluating each and every action, we are ready to explain morally 'wrong' actions of characters we sympathize with, and dismiss neutral or morally 'good' actions of characters we dislike.

The police play an important role in gathering information on both parties, and in bridging loose gaps in the story with information which is unavailable to the main characters, but made known to us. N. Carroll suggests that the behaviour of a major character towards minor characters can improve our impression of them (qtd. in Smith 1995:190), especially when those characters have our sympathies. Tanner Bolt (the lawyer), Go (Nick's sister), the family cat are such characters, who function to focalize the story, give additional information or cast a favourable light on Nick, so that our allegiance leans towards him.

Another way of eliciting the spectator's sympathy in a narrative is by putting the character in a vulnerable position. Although pity is not synonymous to sympathy, Plantinga is right in concluding that pity is usually accompanied by sympathy. When someone is in need, in danger, hurt or treated unfairly, the spectator's pity is invoked. In *Gone Girl*, Nick is often cornered, hurt or lied to, leading us to maintain our allegiance to him.

The ending of the movie works to Amy's disadvantage, with our negative evaluation of her abnormal actions. There is no feeling of sympathy left for her. However, Nick's decision to stay with Amy comes off as deeply confusing. He wants to live away from her, but he stays with her. This decision induces the viewers' feeling of dissatisfaction, so that our see-saw shift of sympathy ultimately results in a feeling of sympathy for none of the characters.

Fincher's mind-game movies, such as *Gone Girl*, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, *Zodiac*, *Panic Room*, *Fight Club*, *Se7en*, *The Game*, rely heavily on cinematic techniques, a clever orchestration of points of view, and kindred strategies to keep us glued to our seats. We unwittingly identify with a character at one moment, and wish we had not, a second later. It all comes down to the degree of character-spectator engagement, which is worth exploring, as this mind-blowing category of movies leave us bruised, scarred and, best of all, wondering.

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