

Obsession of fantasy:
scottie, judy, and the
importance of closely
analyzing vert...



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Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* is a shocking tale of love and obsession, and it is just as poignant now as it was nearly 60 years ago. *Vertigo* tells the story of how Scottie's taken in by appearances—how he's fooled by Madeleine's beauty and her "beautiful phony trances". But Scottie isn't the only one obsessed with fantasy and fake appearances. Throughout the film, Hitchcock masterfully crafts his meta-critique of the filmmaking process and the degree of obsession and fetishization inherent in American cinema. Although artfully made, *Vertigo* is not an easy film to watch—characters are morally dubious, the audience often feels deceived and unsure of who to sympathize with, and the film makes us question our own views of reality and how we perceive others by blurring the lines between objective and subjective reality. By no accounts is *Vertigo* your typical "feel good" blockbuster, instead, it is so much more. A film rich with meaning and social critique, the impressive use of cinematic elements such as staging and costume design work excellently to drive Hitchcock's messages home, creating a thought-provoking film that certainly warrants a re-watch.

Throughout *Vertigo*, the protagonist John "Scottie" Ferguson falls deeply in love with Madeleine, the woman he is tasked to watch. However, this love soon far surpasses the typical bounds of love, quickly becoming obsessive and fetishistic. It is clear that Scottie falls in love with the image of Madeleine, seeing her as a desirable object rather than a person. What brings another level of depth and intrigue to the plot is that Madeleine represents the image of a quintessential Hitchcock woman. Female protagonists in Hitchcock films are most often blonde, sexually alluring, manipulative, and then ultimately humiliated and/or killed; all traits that

Madeleine (or Judy) possess. Knowing this, it is easy to begin to compare Scottie's obsession with Madeleine to Hitchcock's obsession with filmmaking and casting. Later in the film, Scottie finds another woman and tries to mold her, dress her, train her, change her makeup and her hair, until she looks like the woman he desires. Again, Scottie's relationship with Madeleine/Judy imitates that of a director/actor relationship; especially in the case of Hitchcock, who was notorious for molding and oftentimes harassing his female stars in order to conform them to his visionary needs. *Vertigo* is daring and raw in its meta-critique of the themes that controlled Hitchcock's art. The film is not only a thriller about a possibly possessed woman and a murder, but also about how Hitchcock used, feared, and tried to control women. Hitchcock's most apparent reflection on the obsession of controlling fantasy comes during the sequence showing Judy's makeover. Judy is much less polished than her counterpart Madeleine, and Scottie repeatedly tries to shape her into the image of his dead love. When Judy displays qualities that disagree with Scottie's fantasy of his ideal woman he is disgusted, and often outright rejects Judy. Until Judy agrees to enter Scottie's fantasy (and at the same time, depart from reality in an illusion), she will be rejected by Scottie. Scottie gives explicit instructions as to what Judy should look like, controlling her hair, makeup, attitude, and wardrobe, among other things. What he wants is to symbolically bring Madeleine back from the dead by transforming Judy in her image. He thinks that if he creates the look, he can create his own reality; an ideology that perhaps mirrors that of a film director.

Hitchcock's masterful usage of *mise en scène* within the transformation scene helps develop his themes of obsessive control. The costuming of Judy is incredibly poignant—as Judy “ transforms” into Madeleine for Scottie, she <https://assignbuster.com/obsession-of-fantasy-scottie-judy-and-the-importance-of-closely-analyzing-vertigo/>

wears the same suit, has the same hairstyle, and fixes her makeup in the same fashion. As Judy is being redone to look like Madeleine, the camera focuses on parts of her body—her eyes, lips, hair, hands. This tactic also appeared in the opening credits of the film, as the camera moves across the face of an unidentified woman before falling into a vertigo-inducing spiral. As Scottie sees this final transformation, his eyes burn with zealous fixation. Scottie is indifferent to Judy as a person and sees her rather as a sexual object he can mold and control to fit his desires. When he finally shapes Judy to his liking, a perfect mirror image of his dead love, he is noticeably overcome with a sense of lust and control over Judy. Conversely, Judy seems far from pleased with the transformation. As Judy emerges from the bathroom after completing her transformation, her movements and facial expressions look as if she is overcome with pain and sorrow, and a pitiful will to please the man she loves. If the striking body language weren't enough, when Judy exits the bathroom the lighting and staging look as if she is emerging out of an eerie green fog; her eyes are distant, unseeing. Once again Judy has given up a part of herself in order to conform to the fantasy that a man has demanded of her. As Judy moves to embrace Scottie, the green glow, the swelling and tortuous music, the camera's spin around the kissers all add to the sense of vertigo and overwhelming dizziness. For me, one of the greatest accomplishments of *Vertigo* is how it challenged the audience to reevaluate how they watch movies. For someone who hasn't seen the film before, for a good majority of the movie (up to the murder plot reveal), the audience most likely is blindly following and sympathizing with Scottie. Once Scottie's deranged antics become more apparent, the questions are raised: Should the audience sympathize with Scottie? In what

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ways does Scottie represent the audience, and how most film viewers are “obsessed” with a voyeuristic view of other people’s lives? These questions are complex and would perhaps require a completely separate argument to effectively analyze them. However, their complexity should not detract from the film experience but rather add to the ingenuity and intellectual intrigue that *Vertigo* presents to its audience.

Vertigo is widely praised among film critiques and common viewers alike, and for good reason. Even though the characters may be hard (or surprisingly easy) to relate to or be difficult to like, *Vertigo* functions on a much higher level than merely plot progression. Any cinephile would do well to view *Vertigo* at least once, in order to both appreciate and critique the points made on the obsessive nature of fantasy and film-making. *Vertigo* developed my appreciation of cinematic elements and made me question what it means to be in the audience of a movie. The stylistic techniques were superb, the film itself was thought-provoking, and it left me feeling changed after I had completed the movie. So yes, *Vertigo* is a “good movie,” and is much more than intriguing entertainment. For lack of more eloquent phrasing, I will give out a remark that I rarely make in terms of cinema—*Vertigo* is definitely worth a re-watch.