

Movie review on the mastery of vertigo

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



The 1958 thriller *Vertigo*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock, is commonly considered to be one of the finest films ever made, and one of the best works of Hitchcock's career. The tale of a former police officer (James Stewart) who must deal with his issues with heights while also tracking a woman through two different lifetimes, *Vertigo* is a masterclass in filmmaking's most subtle and effective techniques, resulting in a work that stands the test of time. Through its innovative use of *mise-en-scene*, music, performance and more, the film allows for a stunning look into paranoia and duality, raising questions about identity and how we shape it.

Some of the most effective recurring elements found in *Vertigo* are Hitchcock's use of film as a mirror; *Vertigo* is about duality and the obsession with that duality, using cinematic techniques to convey those ideas in a haunting and chilling manner. According to Metz, film is a mirror in that "the cinema involves us in the imaginary: it drums up all perception, but to switch it immediately over into its own absence, which is nonetheless the only signifier present" (250). With this mirroring effect, the audience is identified with the Other through its mirror image, allowing for a level of self-reflexiveness that is only found through effective filmmaking. With *Vertigo*, Scottie, James Stewart's character, becomes the Other, and we see the way he looks on screen as a mirror into our own neuroses and anxieties. This allows us to project what we feel and fear onto him, which makes us relate to him all the better.

Right from the first scene, *Vertigo* establishes this mirroring effect in a fascinating way; the film begins with Scottie's incident that got him kicked off the force and establishes his vertigo and guilt. In the film's very first shot,

a criminal's hands reach for and grip a ladder rung in close-up, linking the audience right away with the visceral feeling of heights and being chased. As the camera pulls back, we see the city skyline, as we follow the criminal climbing to the roof of a building, followed by Scottie and his partner – this allows the audience to see who is chasing whom, and shows the stakes of the scene itself. After this first show, a wide shot showing the entirety of the chase is shown, with the cityscape being blurred to show it being far in the background, an effective technique for showing distance. This contributes to the unease that Hitchcock wishes to convey in the chase; the characters are far away from help and safety, being away from the city and at a great height.

During this scene, when Scottie jumps to another rooftop and slips, grabbing onto a storm drain to stop himself from falling, we get our first instance of Hitchcock's mirroring effect. As Scottie looks down at the ground below, Hitchcock switches to a point of view shot staring at the long drop down to the ground; Bernard Hermann's chilling score offers a frenzied sting of instruments, as Hitchcock emphasizes the terror of this sight by accentuating the static shot by zooming in and tracking out at the exact same time. This makes the shot look as if reality is distorting, and also creates a simulated feeling of falling; the viewer is then disoriented and uneasy, as Hitchcock firmly establishes the fear of death by falling in the audience (just as it is present in Scottie). By having the partner fall, this fear is realized, and Scottie's fear becomes our own, the specter of death and heights looming over Scottie and the audience alike.

One of the most defining elements of Hitchcock's mastery of suspense in

films like *Vertigo* is his mastery of the visual – he, unlike most others, understood the power of visual technique in telling the story just as much as actors, performance and script did (Blakesley 111). More than anything, Hitchcock successfully centers *Vertigo* in an ideological position through his filmmaking techniques: “*Vertigo* positions its viewers, its characters, Hitchcock, and its cinematic style in a matrix of ideological practices and rhetorical appeals analyzable as identification and division” (Blakesley 119). Scottie, as the main character, becomes the central figure of study for the audience as well – the film’s primary goal is to explore his own identification, and therefore the ideology of the film critiques the main character’s. The film is preoccupied with issues of identity, as is shown from the film’s title sequence, created by the masterful Saul Bass. By focusing on the off-centered face of an unknown woman, with James Stewart’s name appearing over her lips, then focusing on her eye; the camera then merges into the eye as the credits continue to roll and the stylized Saul Bass imagery continues. This indicates that we will be looking at issues of gaze, identity and who people are on the inside (Blakesley 119). The audience scrutinizes the woman’s face, then tries to get inside her head, just as Scottie does with Carlotta and Madeleine. Through this economical and effective use of imagery, the film allows us to understand the themes and subjects that the film will discuss through its plot.

Scottie, as played by James Stewart, becomes obsessed with a woman he is paid to follow, in yet another scene that evokes the sense of mirror imagery. He follows Madeleine into Ernie’s Restaurant for the first time, Hitchcock choosing to establish the restaurant in a single shot. The camera begins by

moving toward a stunning red glass door, acting as a barrier to something that has been hidden from the audience. The audience, like Scottie, wants to know what is beyond that door, and so the film fades to a shot of Scottie, looking around the interior of the restaurant for Madeleine; the camera switches to a long pan around the restaurant, allowing the audience to drink in every detail of the people, objects and décor found in the restaurant. The slow, elegant movement of the camera allows us to absorb the full action of Ernie's until finally fixating on a single woman who is adorned in a bright green dress. Hitchcock then cuts back to Scottie, cementing the fact that he is focusing on her just as much as we are. In this single scene, Hitchcock works to connect our voyeurism to Scottie's; just as Scottie leers over everything he sees, so do we, making us more invested in the search for Madeleine. Because the camera's gaze is so closely connected to Scottie's, it becomes an extension of his eye, making his search our own. The steadiness of these camera movements presents an almost pathological stability to Scottie's methodical search for Madeleine; it is, after all, a detective story, and so Scottie must perform his job as needed, especially in the first part of the film.

Hitchcock's willingness to inject more fantastical, dreamlike elements into *Vertigo* is one of the reasons the film offers such a strong picture of fear, identity and obsession. After Madeleine apparently commits suicide, Scottie has a terrible dream sequence that uses imagery and tone to convey his rapidly deteriorating state of mind. Starting with an establishing shot of the city that evokes the film's first scene, the film cuts to Scottie's face in close-up as he tosses and turns in bed. The shot lingers on Scottie's discomfort,

making the audience identify with this discomfort, while a series of flashing bright colors wash over the screen in his face. By inserting this visual chaos over Scottie's discomfort, a hallucinogenic effect occurs in which we understand the almost-supernatural level of fear and anxiety he is experiencing. Images of leaves and papers falling down are added to the flashing colors, reminding us of Scottie's fear of heights which he is now confronting in his nightmare. Scottie walks toward a grave that has been freshly dug, the camera (and Scottie) falling into the grave. We then see Scottie's head, disconnected from his body, falling down a brightly colored, abstract tunnel of color, with the wind blowing his hair while the other colors surround him. Scottie's head approaches the audience slowly but surely, as he falls toward us, until the character and the screen are merged, effectively linking the audience with Scottie. This dream sequence places a large emphasis on Scottie's face and his confused, terrified countenance; the audience then feels that same reaction to the surreal scene that surrounds him. By making the main character just as disoriented as the audience during this dream sequence, an effective measure of fear is achieved.

Scottie, as the main character, is a fascinating look into a man who needs to relive the past and control his life, as evidenced through his treatment of women in the film. Film often has what is known as the 'male gaze,' in which women are looked at through a sexual lens and prized for their looks and appearance more than anything else (Gabbard 161). Madeleine and Judy alike are objectified by Scottie, seen as the ideal lover whom he must follow and obsess over. This kind of male desire drives Scottie to do unspeakable things, including his controlling behavior over Judy in the second half of the

film. Scottie is a man plagued by loss – of his partner, of his job, of his manhood – and the job he is given to follow Madeleine becomes conflated with the restoration of his personhood. After the events of the opening scene and the death of his partner, Scottie is shown to be a feckless homebody, a man who does nothing. It is also implied he has no one in his life, save for his

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