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## About the Author

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## Music and Mirrors in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*

by Christine Jackson

In fall 2008, I taught Literary Criticism and Theory (LITR 4050) to a class of mostly English and humanities majors. Our class text was a thirteen-hundred page anthology chock-full of weighty ideas for students to use in analyzing literature (Rivkin and Ryan, eds). Covering every movement in criticism would have been impossible, so we separated into groups. Each group focused on a different critical approach. A variety of short stories, poems, and plays served as "patients" on whom we could operate.

Lively class discussions signaled a fast start, but when we reached psychoanalytic criticism, some students faltered. The Rivkin and Ryan anthology included two provocative essays, one by Lacan ("The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience") and another by Van der Kolk and McFarlane ("The Black Hole of Trauma"). Student questions outnumbered their answers:

"What's *imago*?"

"I don't get neo-Freudianism."

"How is it possible to apply psychological principles about people to artistic works?"

I searched for an example I could use in class to help students "flex their muscles," so to speak, using psychoanalytic criticism. My answer was for us to view pivotal scenes from Alfred Hitchcock's haunting film, *Vertigo* (1958). This film's controlled use of mirror images, on the screen and in the soundtrack, serves as a launching point into Lacan's concepts of ego formation.

Also, the protagonist exemplifies many of the conflicts resulting from trauma as analyzed by Van der Kolk and McFarlane.

The film opens with the severe trauma suffered by police detective John "Scottie" Ferguson (James Stewart). While chasing a thief across San Francisco rooftops, Scottie stumbles, slides, and ends up hanging from a gutter twenty stories in the air. Another policeman tries to rescue him and plunges to his death. Scottie's mistake causes another man to die. Somehow Scottie survives, but his life after the accident is shattered.

Because the audience never sees Scottie being rescued, in some sense, he continues to hang from that gutter of guilt, psychologically, through the entire film. The rest of the movie follows his frustrated attempts to lose the fear of heights that has come to represent his overwhelming guilt. Once he re-gains his balance, he can resume living. Or can he? Scottie's attempts to overcome this trauma through an obsessive love that nearly destroys him are central to the film. This [online film trailer](#) presents a montage of the film's scenes:

Due to time constraints, we could view only a few *Vertigo* scenes in class, so I developed a chart as a handout. This graphic provided a narrative overview for students unfamiliar with the film. (As it turned out, only two of the twenty students had previously seen the movie, which I found surprising.) Along with a narrative schematic, I included several other patterns of opposites appearing in the film, not mirrored images but spots of tension in the outside world that illustrate Scottie's internal distress. Flowers and art are presented in opposition to Madeleine's visits to Carlotta's grave--life and death. Madeleine's jump into San Francisco Bay contrasts with her sitting in the upstairs window of the McKittrick Hotel--low and high spaces. Below is the chart I developed, "A Psychoanalytical Approach to Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958)":

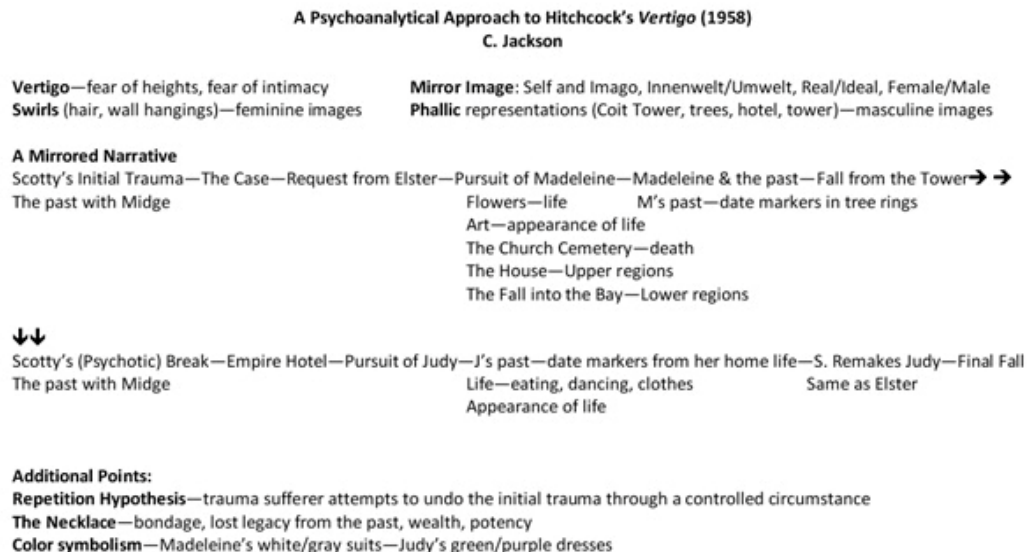


Figure 1 - Class handout: "A Psychoanalytical Approach to Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958)"

A crucial point I wanted the students to see was how the first half of the film's narrative is mirrored in the second half. Scottie's trauma-inducing fall starts the movie. He experiences

another shock when Madeleine, his beloved, falls to her death mid-way through. Then a third falling accident happens to Judy at the end. Instead of the linear narrative usual in most films, this work follows a circular pattern consistent with the dizzying effects of Scottie's acrophobia.

While typing the chart, I knew that the film's stunning soundtrack by Bernard Hermann warranted discussion as well. Much more than background mood music, this soundtrack intensifies and expands this film's psychological power, creating its own coherent soundscape. The [opening music accompanying the film credits](#) carries the idea of falling and recovery in its melody line. It also uses a musical mirroring, not only to suggest the main character's swirling vertigo but to jump-start the mirror image patterns recurring through the story.

The melody is a six-note line that descends four pitches and re-ascends two. It re-creates the motion of falling and getting back up again, but not as high as before. The following diagram is not intended to represent actual music but a stylized, general way to depict the music's "U" shaped line:



*Figure 2 - Falling and Rising Motion of the Opening Music*

For most films, this motif reflecting the movie's storyline would stop there, but Hitchcock and the composer Bernard Hermann, two master artists, give us much more. The line above is mirrored in another that moves in the opposite direction that starts low, ascends, and ends after descending.



*Figure 3 - Rising and Falling Counter-melody*

Ultimately, putting the two together creates a double helix-type figure that captures the twisting, cyclical nature of Scottie's central conflict. As if this were not enough, brass instruments enter with dramatic bursts, creating more discordant drama, sending jolts to the nervous system.

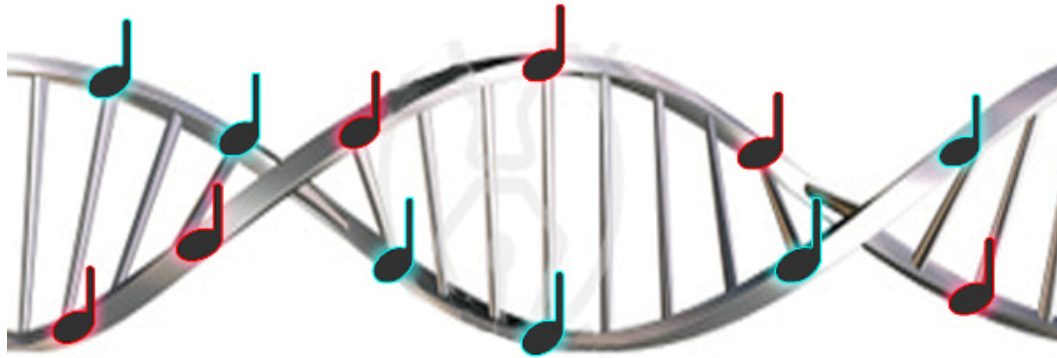


Figure 4 - Double-Helix Arrangement of Opposing Melodies

This double-helix figure is a musical equivalent of the camera shots that Hitchcock set up to simulate Scottie's vertigo. Roger Ebert explains the innovative technique: "Using a model of the inside of the tower, and zooming the lens in while at the same time physically pulling the camera back, Hitchcock shows the walls approaching and receding at the same time; the space has the logic of a nightmare" (par. 11). The musical duality may be hard to hear for a casual listener stunned by the swirling colors behind the opening credits (created by Sol Bass). However, from the film's opening moments, the mirror-imaged music and images create a dangerous, unsettling space.

Ironically, after Scottie suffers trauma, danger is exactly what he wants, whether he knows it or not. Van der Kolk and McFarlane discuss "the compulsive reexposure of some traumatized individuals to situations reminiscent of the trauma" (493). A damaged person needs to re-experience the trauma-inducing event to blunt its effects and normalize the horrific feelings associated with the event. At times, the person may become addicted to the unpleasant sensations. Danielle Quinodoz draws on her clinical experiences to elaborate on this theory in *Emotional Vertigo: Between Anxiety and Pleasure*.

After his accident, Scottie retires from the police force and withdraws to the company of his comfortable woman-friend Midge. In her apartment, Scottie rejects Bach as a remedy for his acrophobia and begs his friend Midge to shut off her record player. Bach's self-enclosed passages are too reminiscent of his condition. His strenuous objection also suggests the paradox of his vertigo. He rejects music that will keep him together and "in balance," and seems to want a wilder spiral of experience, as shown by his interest in Midge's work on a lingerie design.

SCOTTIE

What's this do-hickey here?

[He turns the brassiere over with his stick]

MIDGE

It's a brassiere. You know about those things.  
You're a big boy, now.

SCOTTIE

I've never run across one like that.

MIDGE

It's brand new. Revolutionary uplift.  
No shoulder straps, no back straps,  
but does everything a brassiere should  
do. It works on the principle of the cantilever bridge.

SCOTTIE

(Impressed) Uh-huh! (Copell and Taylor)

Scottie shows whimsical admiration for a design based on a structure that, by all accounts, should give him more vertigo. But he warms to the whole idea.

To re-build his sense of self, Scottie is drawn to danger. He risks a second perilous emotional fall with the beautiful Madeleine. He first sees his client's wife from afar at a restaurant. She is sophisticated and elegantly dressed. The ostensible purpose of this encounter is for him to see what she looks like so he can follow her, as his client has requested. But her ethereal essence seeps into his consciousness just as the "[Madeleine](#)" theme filters into ours.

The slow strings create yearning. The melody rises and hangs suspended before descending. Near the end of the theme (00:48), it gathers energy toward that suspension by repeating three times, reaching an ever higher pitch to give urgency to the entire sequence before trailing away into the clouds.

At the scene's completion, Scottie is convinced of Madeleine's perfection. Even before he is fully aware of it, he has stepped into a planned illusion. The set-up is revealed by a mirror. As Madeleine leaves the restaurant, she passes a mirror which for a brief moment holds her reflection. This sequence foreshadows the eventual revelation that Madeleine is herself an illusion. The mirror at this point also suggests Jacques Lacan's "mirror stage." Lacan's discussion generally addresses how an individual arrives at the "I," shaping the space he occupies between the outside world, or *Umwelt*, and subjective inner space, *Innenwelt*.

The consistent pattern of doubled images in the film connects to Lacan's concept of the mirror stage as a part of ego formation, which he first published in *Écrits* in 1966. Lacan uses the metaphor of the mirror to show how an infant begins to develop the concept of "I": "We have only to understand the mirror stage as an identification . . . the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image" (Rivkin and Ryan 442). The developing self attaches to an image of the mother or caregiver as a model for the I; but this view, the *imago*, is ultimately inadequate and incomplete. Lacan calls the image of this stage an *imago*. "This form situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction" (442).

Hermann's colorful music and instrumentation accompany Scottie's psychotic break. [Dissonant music](#) with many leaps invades his restless sleep and blooms into nightmarish fragments. He plummets to increasingly darker depths as Hermann's soundtrack uses a "habanera" to accompany Scottie's nightmares of Carlotta. Linked to "Havana," the habanera is a repetitive rhythmic figure prevalent in Cuban dance. The Spanish-tinged habanera calls up the ghost of Carlotta. As the spirit of Carlotta allegedly lured Madeleine to her death, Carlotta also pulls Scottie into a miasma of mental instability. This theme is only a prelude to increasingly nightmarish leaps. Scottie is drawn toward an open grave, then down into it, until he finally re-enacts Madeleine's fall from the tower in his own nightmares.

After this Dionysian descent, Scottie is deaf to Midge's feeble attempts at music therapy.

Earlier in the film, Midge had played Bach to soothe Scottie's vertigo. She again plays sedate music, this time by Mozart, to help Scottie recover when he is in the mental ward. He does not object, since at this point he is nearly catatonic. "One of the gravest symptoms of having been overwhelmed by a traumatic experience can be total amnesia" (van der Kolk and McFarlane 493). Mozart is more calming for Midge than for him. The fact that Scottie cannot respond to Mozart or non-threatening Midge suggests that his shattered psyche is in a near infantile state. He needs to re-build the self that additional trauma has taken away. After losing the false image of Madeleine, he sets his goal in another "fictional direction."

Judy is the woman Scottie finds to replace his ideal love. Judy knows she cannot compete with a dead woman. Another problem is that Judy is a cheap copy. Scottie knows this, but on one level, he still wants to see her. When she complains that he doesn't much like her, just her resemblance to his lost love, he says, "No, it's you, too, Judy. Something in you." Likewise, something in [the music associated with Judy](#) captures a similar feminine quality of Scottie's earlier obsession.

Whereas Madeleine's theme with stringed instruments is tender and mysterious, Judy's song uses wind instruments. Flutes and clarinets convey an openness different from the secret strings. The tune itself stays away from shadows or emotional depth. The melody line moves slightly downward with consistent phrases. It takes place in the light.

Of course, this music fails to hook Scottie. Judy's tune seems like a nursery rhyme, sing-song and skipping happily downward. An obverse to the ascending "Madeleine" theme, Judy's song in "The Park" perfectly captures the emotional distance that Judy and Scottie maintain as they pass lovers on the lawn. On one of their evenings out, they go dancing, and Scottie seems to have two left feet. Almost a funhouse mirror of his previous love, this section of the film mocks romance.

Scottie's attempts to bring himself back to life finally are successful with the resurrection of Madeleine. Again, [the music](#) serves as a mirror of Scottie's emotional turmoil. This first section is searching, with step-wise movements and shifts in key. The trembling strings mimic Scottie's own expectations. Occasionally [traces of the "Madeleine" theme](#) come through.

The music rushes to announce Judy's emergence from the mist as the re-made Madeleine, harp glissandos playing under the triumphant melody. Scottie achieves the full realization of his

completed self. Re-making Judy into Madeleine, he has rolled back time and made a dead woman come alive. He possesses her again and has saved himself.

This scene captures the culmination of their love both in image and music. In a stunning, spiraling montage, the camera circles the couple, putting them at once in a circle of images from their past and isolating them from the outside world. The image seems a perfect illustration of *Umwelt und Innenwelt*. In the center, Scottie reaches *jouissance*, a Lacanian integrity of self. The music finally resolves the initial yearning begun in the initial strains of Madeleine's theme.

Judy's efforts to become the mirror image of Madeleine ironically reveal the deception with Gavin Elster. Judy hopes to start a relationship with Scottie that would make his feelings for Madeleine and the past irrelevant:

JUDY

Couldn't you like me, just me, the  
way I am?! When we first started out  
it was so good! We had fun! And you  
started on the clothes! I'll wear  
the darned clothes if you want me  
to! If you just like me! (Coppel and Taylor)

Now he actually does like her, but his love is short-lived. When Judy wears the necklace, she reveals the deception. Technically, this is one item Judy should not wear to be like Madeleine; she has no reason to have it. The halves of the film mirror each other, and they are separated by the necklace. A necklace represents the allure of women, a decorative accessory to beauty, but it also signifies the bondage of the wearer. Its stronger connotation is to evoke the power of men, wealth given to women, whether they are grateful or desperate. For Scottie, the necklace is a tie to the past that prevents him from moving forward and loving Judy for herself. As they happily prepare to go out for dinner, Judy asks Scottie to help her fasten it at the nape of her neck. He is the one to make the circle complete.

SCOTTIE

How does it work?

JUDY

Can't you see?

SCOTTIE

Oh, yeah. There.

[As he is fastening it he glances into the mirror and sees the necklace clearly for the first time. His eyes are immediately startled with the shock of recognition, and he stares, wondering why. The CAMERA ZOOMS IN to a closeup of the necklace in the mirror; then, with a click, the closeup changes to a closeup of the necklace painted on canvas. The



CAMERA DRAWS BACK to show the necklace around the neck of Carlotta in the portrait, the same necklace. Now the CAMERA DRAWS BACK to show the Art Gallery, with the Portrait of Carlotta on the far wall. The scene click-changes to a BIG HEAD of SCOTTIE, staring . . . ] (Coppel and Taylor)

When Scottie fastens that final link, the two halves of the narrative come together, and lines between reality and illusion fall away. Scottie finally understands the deception and his role in it.

With its careful structure and deep symbolism, *Vertigo* holds many lessons for students. It stands up to detailed study and lends itself to challenging analysis. The tragically intense story about longing and grief is ultimately redemptive. The soundtrack carries the viewer to a wider emotional space than image alone, and its mirroring sheds light on the traumatized psyche and the nature of self-development. For these reasons and more, *Vertigo* is one of America's best films, rich with psychological and aesthetic resonance.

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