

Clinton Adas

The Representation of Gender in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*

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Undoubtedly one of Hitchcock's most renowned psychological masterpieces, *Vertigo* represents its characters and their gender in a manner that deviates from what could stereotypically be expected from a male director. Although one can see the typical patriarchal power represented by Scottie as male, one can also see women in the film as having power and independence. Hitchcock however returns to the norm when he goes on to rob Madeleine/Judy of her power and independence, and even her life, in order to help Scottie reach peace and finality in his life. It is the objective of this discussion not only to examine the representation of gender in *Vertigo*, but also to examine the general content and techniques that assist such representation.

Released in 1958, the movie is based on the novel *D'entre Les Morts* ("From Among the Dead") by French writers Thomas Narcejac and Pierre Boileau (Adair 113). In the hands of Hitchcock, however, it was destined to be renamed *Vertigo*. Filmed in San Francisco where the exterior scenes were shot, and Paramount studios in Hollywood where the interior scenes were shot, *Vertigo* is placed in a romantic setting that is dominated by religious buildings (Aulier 7). It is these religious buildings that house flights of stairs that trigger Scottie's vertigo, a central theme in the movie. In the opening scenes of the film we see the devastating events that led to Scottie's vertigo, we also become spectators of his relationships with women: the pragmatic and non-idealised Midge; and the beautiful and idealised Madeleine, who seems to have some strange relationship with an ancestor named Carlotta. With the assistance of techniques such as long tracking shots through doorways, and spinning camera movements, Hitchcock manages to bring the ideas behind the title *Vertigo* to the fore and create grave danger that is linked to women, in the most beautiful of surroundings. Examples of this would be Madeleine's suicide attempts at the Golden Gate Bridge, and at the chapel where she climbs a winding staircase with Scottie after her, and apparently jumps to her death.

Although this is not in the original novel, Hitchcock adapted *Vertigo* to be a means of representation of historical knowledge. This is seen in the scene where Scottie and Madeleine visit a redwood forest and one can see markings on the trees corresponding to some of the most important dates in both U.S and British history. It is here that Madeleine says "Somewhere here I was born, and there I died. It was only a moment for you, you took no notice". Madeleine seems to be acknowledging that in comparison to the tree, Carlotta's life was short and insignificant, yet she also seems to be calling

attention to the fact that Carlotta was excluded from the history that the dates on this tree represent (Corber 154). By highlighting this, *Vertigo* exposes the discrepancy between the actual experiences of real Hispanic men and particularly women, and the under-representation of those experiences by official histories of the United States (Corber 16). By reconstructing the story of Carlotta Valdez, an Hispanic woman who was seduced and abandoned by her Anglo lover in the nineteenth century, *Vertigo* challenges the official representation of the nation's past as a continuous, linear narrative and indicates the possibility of constructing a counter history that more accurately represents the nation's past because it now includes stories like hers (Corber 16). The point that people like Carlotta are excluded from history is emphasised when Scottie wants to find out about a part of San Francisco's past that official historians of the city have excluded because of the fact that it does not constitute so-called 'real' history. This leads him to a bookstore owner Pop Liebl, who is representative of the idea that the people most qualified to tell the story Scottie needs to know are not the official historians, but instead the local families. The seduction and abandonment of Carlotta essentially turns out to have been typical of Hispanic woman in what is referred to throughout the film as the "gay old days of San Francisco". Although Scottie knows or should know that there are many stories such as Carlotta's, he fails to see the connection between her experiences and those of other women in the film, and thus he not only remains blind to the city's racist and sexist practices but also participates in their reproduction (Corber 159). Just as Carlotta was thrown away by her husband, so is the wife of Elster in a more literal sense 'thrown away' by him.

When looking at the characters in the movie, one will see that in essence *Vertigo* revolves around Scottie, an ex-policeman who resigns from the force when his fear of heights leads to the death of a fellow policeman during a rooftop chase. It is then that Scottie is asked by his friend Gavin Elster to do him the favour of following his wife Madeleine, who may be in danger as she is seemingly "possessed" by the spirit of her great-grandmother, Carlotta, who killed herself, and this might lead to Madeleine also attempting suicide. Scottie trails Madeleine and witnesses her strange behaviour, which in one scene ultimately leads to her attempting to drown herself. It is here that Scottie falls in love with her, saves her and vows to keep her safe, signifying the origin of Scottie's so-called 'hero' complex. One sees, however, that keeping her safe is easier said than done as Scottie's vertigo apparently prevents him from saving her from her

death. Overcome by loss and guilt, Scottie spends time in a mental institute. When he is released, he perpetuates the cycle of violence against women that had appeared in the Carlotta story by forcing Judy Barton (a woman who seems to bear a resemblance to his lost love Madeleine) to remake herself into Madeleine. Unbeknown to Scottie however, Madeleine and Judy are the same person. As if one death was not enough for Scottie, Hitchcock allows Scottie to lose his love once more, making for a bittersweet ending in that although Scottie has lost the love of his life on the one hand, he has regained control over his vertigo and his masculinity on the other.

Starting with the character of Scottie, one can see from the opening of the film that gender representation in *Vertigo* is not typical of a male director. Scottie is clinging to a gutter, putting him in a vulnerable position, and is in an injured state throughout the movie, both physically, when he has to wear a corset which is a feminine item of clothing, and psychologically, when he suffers from vertigo and the guilt from his past wrongdoings. This vertigo is the reason that Scottie can no longer carry out his duties as a policeman which results in him feeling emasculated. His injured state emphasises his human weaknesses, and it is by adding these weaknesses that Hitchcock essentially makes him easier to relate to, as we as viewers can identify with his vulnerability.

From this point onwards Scottie tries to overcome the humiliation and guilt caused by the rooftop incident. This humiliation and guilt on a deeper level represent the fact that because he could not carry out his policeman duties he feels feminized to some extent. Therefore, although Scottie is an ex-policeman who would be a hero by nature, he is still a complex male – “the hero, yet reluctant; the lover, yet confused; the innocent, yet menaced and menacing” (Aulier 19). The fact that Scottie failed to rescue Madeleine is important to the representation of the masculinity as it deviates from the typical role of the male being the hero and subsequently signifies the collapse of the ‘hero’ complex.

As the story unravels we see Scottie portrayed as being rather obsessive in nature, as he becomes the pursuer who chases Madeleine into somewhat extreme circumstances which are eventually out of both his and her control. It is this pursuit of Madeleine that Mulvey sees as Scottie’s erotic obsession based on a castration anxiety (Mulvey 23). Argued in greater detail, Mulvey states that because women in classical Hollywood cinema invariably signify sexual difference, looking at them threatens the male spectator

with the image of castration (Corber 3). It is for this reason that the camera resorts to framing them as icons or objects to be looked at, interrupting the film's narrative flow. Rather than being subjects who solicit the male spectator's identification, women in classical Hollywood film function instead as objects of visual pleasure, allowing the male spectator to elude the threat of castration that is so often signified by their image (Corber 3). The pursuit of Madeleine is also a matter that Mulvey sees as a blatant act of voyeurism as Scottie derives great pleasure from following and viewing Madeleine throughout the movie. Not only does he derive great pleasure from following and viewing Madeleine, he also allows himself to think that he is once again enforcing the law which would help him regain his masculinity, while in actual fact he is coming close to breaking the law by becoming a 'stalker'.

When looking at this obsession in more detail one will see that Scottie is unable to accept Madeleine's death which results in him recreating her via Judy Barton later on in order to satisfy his desire for her. Not only do we see Scottie's obsession with Madeleine as an idealised personality (the vulnerable women in distress), we also see his obsession with specific attributes such as her blonde hair and clothing style, and it is these specific attributes that Scottie forces Judy Barton to acquire should she want to acquire his affection. It can be argued that not only was Scottie pursuing his obsession to recreate Madeleine, he was also pursuing his obsession with regaining his masculinity, in this case by exercising 'power' over women and their freedom (Corber 160). It is through his obsession with recreating Madeleine that Scottie becomes very inhumane, but at the same time, we can understand why Scottie behaves like this, making his actions to some extent justified. The ending reaffirms gender roles in that Madeleine is made to pay for her dangerous deceptive lifestyle by being destroyed, while Scottie on the other hand seems to overcome his vertigo and recover his masculinity.

Upon examining the representation of women in *Vertigo* one notices that Hitchcock attempts to portray women in two variations in this movie: the kind represented by Scottie's friend Midge and the kind represented by Madeleine.

On the one hand we see Midge who represents the more realistic, practical and competent kind of woman. She is often portrayed as maternal and this is evident in

many scenes, particularly where Scottie tries to cure his acrophobia by climbing a ladder and ends up falling from the ladder into her comforting arms, a form of swoon that is usually associated with women falling into men's arms. Furthermore, throughout the story Midge tries to keep Scottie level-headed by trying to convince him to rethink giving up his policeman job, helping him to overcome his acrophobia as well as attempting to unmask much of the confusion caused by Madeleine. Although she portrays what is essentially the 'good' woman and we as viewers feel sorry for her when Scottie chooses to pursue Madeleine over her, we may also be annoyed by the fact that she is so sceptical and sarcastic towards Scottie and his obsession with Madeleine, as it seems that she does not understand the extent of it's importance to Scottie. At the end of the day, despite hard work, Midge fails to bring Scottie back into the real world that she represents and he is lost forever to the ideal which is represented by Madeleine. Midge also fails to get Scottie to settle down with her largely because he feels that she is too motherly.

As already mentioned, Madeleine represents the unattainable ideal woman while Judy represents the attainable real woman, even though they are in essence the same person. Madeleine could be seen as being the typical representation of women, one essentially in keeping with the Marilyn Monroe craze of the 50's which left many film studios keen to take women and reshape them in accordance with this national and international interest.

Even though Judy is the same person as Madeleine except for a few differences in appearance, Scottie wants nothing to do with her in that form and insists on her changing. Judy essentially allows herself to undergo tremendous abuse which results in her having to live a lie by being someone she is not, purely for the sake of pleasing Scottie. This is an action that Mulvey sees as being masochistic in nature because of the fact that Judy realizes that Scottie could never love her for her own attributes and therefore forces herself to change into Madeleine. This masochism of Judy is however a quality that Mulvey sees as complimenting the voyeuristic and sadistic side of Scottie (Mulvey 24). We see in the changes from Madeleine to Judy and vice-versa a form of doubling, suggesting that there are always two versions of woman as love object, the reality and the illusion or imaginary fantasy. Further doubling is seen throughout the movie where Scottie mistakes other blondes for being the 'dead' Madeleine.

Furthermore, throughout the movie symbolic similarities such as that between the acrophobia that Scottie suffers and the vertical hairdo of Madeleine indicate that obsessive relationships with idealised women will be filled with danger, and a sense of vertigo.

From this discussion of the dark and twisted representation of gender in *Vertigo* one can see just some of the reasons why it is one of the most discussed movies of all time. In essence the movie shows a man who loses himself to a woman, a woman who loses herself to a man, as well as the abuse that they both have to suffer for a relationship that was doomed to torment all people involved from the start. In many ways one can see that the deviation from the stereotypical representation of gender is quickly restored in that although women are for a short period portrayed sympathetically, with power and independence, they are soon seen as being the villains and are the ones that need to be punished in order to restore peace and sanity for men.

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