Defining Film Rhetoric: The Case of Hitchcock’s Vertigo

David Blakesley

The death of Hitchcock marks the passage from one era to another .... I believe we are entering an era defined by the suspension of the visual.

—Jean Luc Godard, 1980

Godard is a great filmmaker, but he may not be a particularly good prophet. He clearly recognized, however, that Alfred Hitchcock—perhaps more than any other director of his time—drew our attention to the power of the visual as an appeal to the audience’s desire and as a means of fostering and interrogating identification. Although other directors and cinematographers—Orson Welles and Gregg Toland, for instance—made great advances in cinema in terms of visual technique and representation, it was Hitchcock more than any other who both recognized this power of the visual as an appeal and also turned our attention to the psychological subject of the visual itself. In so many Hitchcock films—especially Rear Window (1954), Vertigo (1958), and Psycho (1960)—the central theme is arguably the psychological consequences of seeing and being seen, or more properly, voyeurism and the objectification that accompanies the desire. So Godard is not wholly wrong; Hitchcock did indeed help define an era in filmmaking when the visual became more than just the primary medium or technique of cinema’s appeal, but additionally, and in modernist-fashion, cinema’s contested subject.

Since 1980, however, we have not witnessed the end of an era of the visual. On the contrary, we have witnessed a visual turn—especially in the mid- to late-1990s—with tremendous interest in understanding the function of the image in its own right as well as the interanimation of the visual and the verbal in our means of (re)presentation. That focus of critical theory has accompanied similar
developments in art and art history, perceptual psychology and neuroscience, cultural studies, and a host of other disciplinary areas. With the gradual emergence of digital filmmaking and on the heels of this visual turn, the contested nature of representational realism has also been examined in many popular films, such as *The Usual Suspects* (1995), *The English Patient* (1996), *The Matrix* (1999), *Memento* (2000), *Minority Report* (2002), and many others. These are films that also make identification an explicit theme. Although we can safely say that all films—as projections and sequences of images—function representationally to some degree, films like these that self-consciously contest the relationships among realism and identity make excellent subjects for the study of film rhetoric and thus for understanding the verbal and visual ingredients of identification.

In critical theory, the rhetorical or linguistic turn of the 1980s became the visual turn of the 1990s. The rhetorical turn had heightened awareness of the ways that our verbal means of representation cannot be easily (or rightly) separated from our ways of knowing. The visual is implicated in epistemology so fundamentally that any attempt to bring the mirror to nature, to use Richard Rorty’s phrasing, must be seen as disingenuous or naïve because we understand the world through mediating symbol systems. In its most general sense, the visual turn simply asserts that symbolic action entails visual representation in the inseparable and complex verbal, visual, and perceptual acts of making meaning. Who we are and what we know suddenly become intertwined with questions about visual representation or about the relationship between what we can see or imagine and what we can know. This visual, or pictorial, turn is closely allied with the rhetorical turn because, in Kenneth Burke’s apt phrasing, “A way of seeing is also a way of not seeing—a focus on object A involves a neglect of object B” (*Permanence and Change* 49). Seeing is believing, but believing is seeing as well. In the most detailed working through of the implications of the visual turn for critical theory—*Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*—W.J.T. Mitchell explains:

> Whatever the pictorial turn is, then, it should be clear that it is not a return to naïve mimesis, copy or correspondence theories of representation, or a renewed metaphysics of pictorial “presence”: it is rather a postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figuration. It is the realization that spectatorship (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance, and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of reading (decipherment, decoding, interpretation, etc.) and that visual experience or “visual literacy” might not be fully explicable on the model of textuality. (16)

The interanimation, or interplay, of the verbal and the visual in the context of film interpretation is certainly as complex as Mitchell suggests. In my view, a rhetoric of film would articulate the dimensions of this deep problem, with the aim of suggesting ways through or around some of the central problems that have vexed film critics for a long time—especially the nature of identification and spectatorship as rhetorical processes. In my conclusion, I discuss the visual component of identification specifically to show how film rhetoric elaborates and exploits visual ambiguity to foster identification and thus provides insight into the rhetoric of film as an appeal to desire.

**DEFINING FILM RHETORIC**

What constitutes film rhetoric? With reference to Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*, this essay addresses that question by defining four approaches to film rhetoric, each of which reflects and animates our broader understanding of visual rhetoric. These four approaches share interests in identification and persuasion as rhetoric’s aims, yet their differences in application reveal substantial disagreement about the nature of film rhetoric or about whether rhetoric itself is any more than a means of textual analysis. In the last 10 years or so, however—and as Thomas Benson notes—rhetorical criticism of film now entails more than attention to its explicitly persuasive dimensions:

> A much broader approach encompasses rhetoric as the study of symbolic inducement, reaching beyond films that are didactic or propagandistic, and employing the whole range of tools common to humanistic inquiry into cultural forms and investigating issues of text, genre, myth, gender, ideology, production, authorship, the human subject, meaning, the construction of cinematic ways of knowing, response, and reception. (620)

In my introduction to the collection, *The Terministic Screen: Rhetorical Perspectives on Film*, I outline four approaches to film rhetoric that I want to summarize and extend here. In the second section of this chapter, I aim to illustrate the approach that I see as encompassing the others to varying degrees—film identification—by showing the ways that *Vertigo* reveals and interrogates the processes of identification that are central to our understanding of rhetoric as the faculty for elaborating or exploiting ambiguity to foster identification itself. That *Vertigo* and other Hitchcock films make identification a central theme has been much discussed in the Hitchcock criticism, especially among feminist theorists, such as Laura Mulvey and Tania Modleski. Nevertheless, I think a conception of identification grounded in rhetoric and in visual rhetoric in particular can help us through the impasse of determining not only the nature of the spectator and spectatorship, but the basis of filmic appeal as implicitly visual and rhetorical, with film’s visual elements reinforcing its nature as an appeal addressed to an audience and seeking identification and transformation. A core concept of the approach is that of the terministic screen,
which is a phrase used by Burke to describe how our terms—or more generally the means of representation—direct the attention to one field rather than another such that our observations of experience (all that can be known) are implications of the particular terms themselves (Language as Symbolic Action 46). I conclude by considering what difference it makes for our interpretation of Vertigo and film generally when we see rhetoric’s key term as identification and ground that concept in the visual.

Each of the following categories—Film Language, Film Ideology, Film Interpretation, and Film Identification—can be thought of as orientations or leanings (in the sense of attitudes)—rather than precisely defined and practiced philosophical foundations.

Film Language

Advanced in the work of Christian Metz, Stephen Heath and Patricia Mellencamp, Vivian Sobchack, and others, this approach treats film both semiotically and phenomenologically as a grammatical system of signs, with attention to spectatorship and perceptual processes. Metz’s groundbreaking work in particular has been enormously influential, mostly for his attempt to develop a sign system for film spectatorship, drawing heavily from Lacanian psychoanalysis. Metz develops for film analysis the concepts of the mirror stage—the moment of self-recognition and distinction that marks the immersion into language—and the insistence of the letter in the unconscious—the idea that the unconscious is structured like a language. In tying this semiotic system to the imaginary (the realm of secondary identification), Metz shifts our focus to the construction and reception of film and, thus, ways that film functions both like a language (in its sign system, with cinematic technique the analogical equivalent of a grammar), but also rhetorically as an appeal to or assertion of identity in the audience (Blakesley “Introduction”).

Approaching film as a language suggests the possibility that there is a grammar of visual signs that operates predictably and that can be used to generate an infinite variety of meanings. The elements of film language include but are not limited to its visual elements, which include camera movement, mise-en-scène (placement in the frame), color, proxemic patterning (spatial relationships among characters and between the viewer and the visual material), the subjective camera and point-of-view shot, special visual effects, visual editing, iconic symbolism, visual repetition, and so on. One problem with attempts to locate the rhetorical in the visual language of film, which obviously shares with traditional rhetoric an interest in language as a system, has been that—as Mitchell observes—it has been developed on the model of textuality, without sufficient appreciation of textuality or visuality as a means of representation embedded in the social process of human relations, the traditional realm of rhetoric. In the realm of the textual or the visual, the ideological apparatus has a determinative influence on what is read or seen at the moment of perception. What we read, as well as what we see, is a product of what we know or want to believe, as much as it is a product of the formal properties of the system observed. The reader/viewer is implicated in the effects and meaning propagated by the visual (and semiotic) system. Traditionally, film ideology has been specified by its explicit content: Films convey messages or shape attitudes that rehearse or challenge ideological pieties and in this sense are representational. What these terms suggest, however, is that the medium of the visual functions ideologically as well. The visual composition of the frame, for example, conveys meaningful relationships among components in the frame, and these relationships also transmit or create ideology. Visual composition functions rhetorically to the extent that the visual material represented is the expression of value, a choice among alternative means of representation or among the myriad objects that might be represented in the first place. The rhetorical operates at the moment of choice or neglect, when we (viewers, directors) focus on object A and neglect object B. How a subject is filmed is an expression of ideology, and to the extent that this agency positions the viewer, the director, or even characters on screen relative to the filmic content, the film functions rhetorically as an exploitation of that subject’s ambiguity.

Metz’s insufficient appreciation of the rhetorical/ideological component of perception in his semiotic system nevertheless did not prevent him from making forays into identification and spectatorship—in The Imaginary Signifier (1982), for instance—representing a fairly radical departure from his more formalistic articulation of film language. In making such a move, Metz helps us understand more fully the visual nature of identification, about which I will have more to say later in the chapter. Identification is, from a rhetorical perspective, the act of asserting or imagining identity between two (or more) dissimilars, on the basis of similitude. As Metz argues, film identification functions in the imaginary, on the secondary (or even third) order of reality that is the film viewing experience. A film appeals to this desire for identification—of the self with others, for example—in an imaginary, symbolic realm, with interesting and complex psychological consequences for the film spectator and for spectatorship generally.

Film Ideology

This approach to film rhetoric views film as serving ideological purposes in both its content, technical apparatus, and distribution mechanisms. It examines film in its partisan aspects, as a kind of “pamphleteering.” The task of film criticism is to expose film’s complicity with or deconstruction of dominant ideology. Rhetorical analyses (of film, texts, speeches or any other symbolic activity) are typically concerned with both how works achieve their effects and how they make their appeals to shared interests (the margin of overlap)
among people. This attention to agency in concert with ideological analysis and critique make this perhaps the most common way to approach a film rhetorically and as an instantiation of rhetoric (Blakesley “Introduction”). In film studies, its practitioners include Bill Nichols, Robert Stam, Barry Brummett, Thomas Benson, and a host of others. As cultural expression, films reveal not only the predispositions of its makers, but they also serve ideological functions in the broader culture (as critique, as hegemonic force, as symptomatic) that can be analyzed as having a rhetorical function, especially to the extent that rhetoric serves as the means of initiating cultural critique and stabilizing cultural pieties (Blakesley “Introduction”). As we will see, this concepcion of film rhetoric also focuses our attention on identification to the extent that identification is an assertion of a margin of overlap—an identity of values, beliefs, and even bodies and bodily processes—in cases where we are also clearly divided, where common values or beliefs are arguments or propositions as much as they are a pre-existing basis for acting together. In Vertigo, ideology functions as a rationalization of male desire and of woman’s otherness, voiced, for example, through the “historian” Pop Lieb’s naturalized mythology of Carlotta Valdes and Scottie’s failed attempt to read Madeleine through that termimistic screen.

Film Interpretation

This approach treats film as a rhetorical situation involving the director, the film, and the viewer in the total act of making meaning. Its subject is often the reflexivity of interpretation, both as it is manifest on screen and in the reception by the audience/critic. Like Nichols in his treatment of documentary film rhetoric, J. Henrix and J. A. Wood, David Bordwell, Seymour Chatman, and Bordwell and Noel Carroll each examine the film experience as a rhetorical situation. Bordwell is perhaps most concerned with the role of the critic in that situation. Chatman attempts to show how the interpretation should account for audience reactions, the formal elaboration and function of genre, and the symbolic representation of meaning on screen. Chatman, however, shies away from rhetoric’s role in articulating the situational nature of film (or any text), preferring instead to imagine rhetoric as useful for translating linguistic tropes and forms into their visual equivalents (Blakesley “Introduction”).

Film Identification

This approach considers film rhetoric as involving identification and division. Film style directs the attention for ideologically, psychologically, or social purposes. Identification has been paired with discourses on the postmodern subject in work by critics such as Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Tania Modleski and many others whose approaches have been influenced by Metz in feminist and psychoanalytic studies. Although the notion of the subject in film studies has received its due share of attention, the meaning of identification, particularly as it functions rhetorically, has yet to be closely scrutinized outside of the psychoanalytic (Oedipal) termimistic screen. For Metz, identification occurs in the imaginary realm of the signifier, where film narratives create the conditions for identification to occur in a secondary order of reality. It would be useful, I think, to examine identification in the imaginary as a rhetorical process as well as a semiotic process of decoding and encoding signs. Kenneth Burke saw identification—and with it, the corresponding situation of division—as both the condition and aim of rhetoric. The desire for identification, which Burke calls consubstantiality, is premised on its absence, on the condition of our division from one another. There would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim our unity, Burke says, if we were already identical (A Rhetoric of Motives 18–29). Consubstantiality, with its root in the ambiguous substance, may be purely an expression of desire, an identity of attitude and act in a symbolic realm, much like Metz’s secondary order.

The aim of rhetoric, according to Burke, is identification. From the perspective of the audience, or the spectator, identification functions as desire, as an assertion of identities, such that while there may be division or differences among people and characters, we pursue that identification as one way of expressing (or, again, asserting) our consubstantiality. Pushed to its extreme, we desire to become the other, to inhabit that psychological and physical space, to take ownership of some kind, to walk in someone else’s shoes for awhile (to put it in more familiar terms).

Film is an especially powerful medium for cultivating this desire for identification, and, of course, not just between film and spectator, but among characters on screen. Hitchcock was especially interested in these processes of identification, foregrounding not only the relationship between viewer and film (so that our own desire for identification is never far from conscious awareness), but also among his characters, many of whom seek identification with a vengeance. In Vertigo, as we will see, Scottie’s pursuit of Madeleine is an expression of this desire and a response to a challenge to the integrity of his legally sanctioned identity as a police detective. His is a desire to transform the self through the transformation of the other into the self. I will argue that Scottie wants not only to possess Madeleine (thus competing with Gavin Elster and especially the ghost of Carlotta Valdes), but also to be Madeleine, as much as that can be possible. The tangled relations of identity in the film implicate the viewer as well in this search for what we might call an analogical self—an identity that is similar but somehow different. In film generally, the projection of the visual field on or from a screen compels our attention this way and that, with the rhetoric of identification manifest as a desire for orientation—for sorting through, arranging, and forming visual cues that are expressions of attitude and identity. For that matter, seeing itself can be
conceived as an active, rhetorical process—an assertion of the self on the world and the reverse manipulation of the viewing subject, as James Elkins has suggested in *The Object Stares Back*. In approaching film as identification, we ask, How does film exploit and elaborate our compulsion to see and, consequently, to identify?

**THE CASE OF VERTIGO**

Hitchcock's *Vertigo* is an exemplary case to elaborate the nature and value of each of these approaches to film rhetoric. The story follows John "Scottie" Ferguson (James Stewart), a recently retired police detective, as he tracks the "possessed" wife, Madeleine (Kim Novak), of an old college friend, Gavin Elster (Tom Helmore). Scottie has *acrophobia* (fear of heights) that gives him vertigo, a condition he often discusses with his friend Midge (Barbara Bel Geddes). He learns from Elster that Madeleine is possessed by the spirit of Carlotta Valdes, her great grandmother, who had committed suicide. According to a local San Francisco historian, Pop Liebl (Konstantin Shayne), Carlotta was the mistress of a wealthy and powerful man who kept their child and then "threw [Carlotta] away." Carlotta went mad and ultimately committed suicide. Scottie follows Madeleine throughout San Francisco to see what he can learn. When she leaps into San Francisco Bay, Scottie rescues her. He brings her back to his apartment where she is still unconscious, undresses her, and puts her in his bed. Although startled when she awakens from her "trance," the two have a sexually charged tête-à-tête, then part ways. The next day they meet again when Madeleine returns to thank him for rescuing her. As Scottie and Madeleine try to unravel the mystery of her possession, they fall quickly in love. But at the midpoint of the film, Madeleine apparently commits suicide while in one of her spells by leaping from the tower at the San Juan Bautista Mission. Scottie tries to stop her from reaching the top of the tower but is slowed by his vertigo.

The second half of the film tracks Scottie as he copes with Madeleine's death. He revisits all the locations where he had previously followed her, until one day when he sees Judy Barton (also Kim Novak) pass by on the street. She reminds him of Madeleine, so he persuades her to have dinner with him. The mystery of Madeleine is quickly revealed in a flashback seen from Judy's perspective. She had pretended to be Madeleine for Gavin Elster, with whom she was having an affair. When Judy reached the top of the tower at the San Juan Bautista Mission, she discovered that Elster had killed the real Madeleine, throwing her body from the tower to make it appear that, like Carlotta, she had gone mad and committed suicide. Judy contemplates running away now that Scottie has found her, but then tears up her confessional note, realizing that she loves him. Scottie remarks Judy into his image of Madeleine, making sure that she has the right clothes, make-up, hairstyle, and so on. Eventually, she comes to look exactly like Madeleine. One night when they are getting ready to go out to dinner, Scottie secretly notices that Judy is wearing the same necklace he had seen on Madeleine and in the portrait of Carlotta. Instead of taking Judy to dinner, he takes her back to the "scene of the crime" to force her to admit what has occurred. At the top of the tower, which this time Scottie has been able to reach, Judy confesses. They embrace, but then Judy is startled by a nun emerging from the darkness and falls backward out of the tower and to her death. The film ends with Scottie standing precariously on the ledge.

In my analysis of *Vertigo*, I want to focus primarily on Film Identification, which entails the other three approaches under the terministic screen of rhetorical theory. *Vertigo* positions its viewers, its characters, Hitchcock, and its cinematic style in a matrix of ideological practices and rhetorical appeals analizable as identification and division. Scottie is a representative figure for the neurosis of pure yet imaginary identification. His madness midway through the film as he falls into the wild zone of the feminine and his relentless re-imaging of Madeleine/Judy in the latter half of the film are expressions of rhetorical desire, ones that Hitchcock locates in the common desire of seeing and being seen. Throughout the film, Hitchcock employs a variety of visual techniques (Film Language) to focus our attention on the psychological consequences of this desire for identification or identity. I will allude to some of these techniques as I elaborate these mechanisms of identification, in addition to noting instances when our consideration of the film might also slide into considerations of Film Ideology (what does *Vertigo* reveal or repress?) and Film Interpretation. What is the basis of disagreement, for instance, between Mulvey and Modleski on the nature of the spectator of *Vertigo*, and how can this disagreement be mediated by a more textured understanding of identification as a rhetorical process?

Identification becomes a central theme at the very start of the film, as the Saul Bass/John Whitney credit sequence unfolds. The camera shows an extreme close-up of a woman's face (but not Kim Novak's), slightly off-center to the left. Already, we have transgressed the proxemic space of the familiar into the intimate. The camera pans left, until we see "James Stewart" appear above the woman's lips, with the implication, perhaps, that she speaks the name, or rather that he (or his character) will speak for her (see Fig. 5.1). Either way, there is the implicit equation between Stewart's character and woman in this juxtaposition of the verbal and the image that presents or speaks it.

The credit sequence continues with the camera moving slowly up to show the woman's eyes. She looks to her left, then right, as if she feels she is being watched, and then we zoom in to an extreme close-up of her right eye. To this point, there has been just a hint of color visible, but suddenly everything is tinted red as the eye widens in surprise (or fear). The title of the film emerges from her eye, then Alfred Hitchcock's name as director, and then we descend inward as spiral-shaped images begin to slowly rotate and merge with the rest of the credits. There is much that is suggestive about this opening sequence and that sets a mood and a visual theme for the remainder of the film. There is
the woman being scrutinized and written upon, in fear of being watched. The close-up is so extreme it is unsettling. The camera pans across the woman’s face and then descends into her eye where we see the verbal and the visual intermingled, with the credits juxtaposed to spiraling patterns suggestive of objects seen later in the film, such as the twirl in Carlotta/Madeleine’s hair. If we translate this sequence into its literal equivalents, the spectator has not only been watching this woman from an intimate distance but has entered her mind, occupying the most private and inaccessible space of all. Even at this early stage, we have been forced to identify absolutely—we are consubstantial. But that identification has to be earned, as Hitchcock knows, so we retreat from inside, the camera zooming out, and with the pace of the music quickening, there is a cut to the film’s opening scene, the rooftop chase. For the rest of the film, Scottie wants to return to that dark space—to find out who Madeleine is, what secrets haunt her, what moves her, and what or who possesses her. Implicated as we are in this identification, Hitchcock appeals to the viewer to want the same.

We next witness the rooftop chase and fall, with a “criminal” dressed in white being chased by a police officer (in black) and Scottie (in grey). The critical moment comes when Scottie can’t quite make one jump and nearly falls to the street below. He clings desperately to a drain gutter. We then see two point-of-view shots: one of the police officer reaching out his hand to help Scottie, and the other, when Scottie looks down in a famous example of the dizzying reverse tracking/zoom shot. Even this early in the film, his vertigo is our vertigo. The police officer tries to help, but falls to his death. The criminal escapes. The scene ends with Scottie still clinging to the drain gutter. As Robin Wood shrewdly observes, this opening scene suggests the pattern of the quest for identification to follow in the remainder of the film: the criminal is the Id (which is set free); the police officer is the Superego (which is eliminated); and Scottie is the Ego left hanging (in search of a stable self; 32).

The early insistence on the viewer’s identification with the image of the woman—and by extension Woman as a categorical ambiguity—and our identification with Scottie’s precarious situation raises a critical issue regarding the role of the viewer and whether Hitchcock has scripted the viewer’s experience as exclusively male. Scottie, as we see in this opening scene and in the one immediately following in Midge’s parlor, is already searching for identity, feeling emasculated by his vertigo and by the (woman’s) corset that he wears. He speaks frequently of “wandering,” as if he is searching for something to fill the emptiness of the self now that he has had to retire because of his vertigo. After Elster tells him the “ghost story,” Madeleine quickly becomes the object of his desire, a purpose for his wandering. He appears that desire in his surveillance of her in the first half of the film, gradually reaching the point when he proclaims to Madeleine, just prior to her apparent suicide, “No one possesses you. You’re safe with me,” while embracing her tightly. At the time of her apparent death, Scottie identifies with Madeleine totally, so the shock of that break drives him mad. What has he seen? And how does this shocking elimination of the object of identification affect him? (Recall also the shock felt when Marian Crane is murdered halfway through Psycho.) What happens when the (male?) desire for identification with the woman has been thwarted? In Wood’s view, by the end of the film, the “total and unquestioning identification invited by the first part of the film is no longer possible. We are too aware at that point that the fantasy is fantasy, and too aware of it as an imposition on the woman” (35).

These are questions that vexed Laura Mulvey in the mid-1970s and then her commentators in the 1980s and later. To build her case, Mulvey explains: “In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to occasion to-be-looked-at-ness” (11). The woman is the image, and the man is the bearer of the look. Mulvey sees Hitchcock as rehearsing this visual relationship in predictable ways and only grudgingly admits the self-reflexiveness of this look:

[Hitchcock] takes fascination with an image through the scopophilic [voyeuristic] eroticism as the subject of the film. [...] As a twist, a further manipulation of the normal viewing process which in some sense reveals it, Hitchcock uses the process of identification normally associated with ideological correctness and the recognition of established morality and shows up its perverted side. (15)
In Mulvey’s view, Hitchcock forces the male perspective on the spectator, leaving little possibility for any other. “Hitchcock’s skillful use of identification processes and liberal use of subjective camera from the point of view of the male protagonist draw the spectators deeply into his position, making them share his uneasy gaze” (15). There’s no question that even in the opening credits, the woman is the object-image, the mystery to be solved (presumably) by the male. But there’s more than one-way looking involved, and it is the viewer’s capacity for multiple identifications, born of conflicting desires, that Hitchcock addresses. As Elkins notes in The Object Stares Back, even “just looking” is hardly passive or one-way:

Looking is hoping, desiring, never just taking in light, never merely collecting patterns and data. Looking is possessing or the desire to possess—we eat food, we own objects, and we “possess” bodies—and there is not looking without thoughts of using, possessing, repossessing, owning, fixing, appropriating, keeping, remembering and commemorating, cherishing, borrowing, and stealing. I cannot look at anything—any object, any person—without the shadow of the thought of possessing that thing. Those appetites don’t just accompany looking; they are looking itself. (22)

For Elkins, looking is the appetite functioning simultaneously with (or even guiding) the perceptual process. Simultaneously, objects stare back, scripted as they are (and as Mulvey suggests) to appeal to these ideological and physiological appetites. What seems clear but often remains underappreciated in Hitchcock criticism is that we—the spectators—are watching and being watched, spying on ourselves with the same degree of desire and intimacy that we often see acted out in his films. How better to express that stare back than to open the film with a woman being watched, staring back at us? Although Mulvey admits that Hitchcock makes the gaze wielded in Vertigo “uneasy,” she underemphasizes this reflexivity in the film in the interest of reifying the ideology of identification that she believes is formulated in psychoanalytic theory and acted out through the phallocentric order of the Oedipal triangle. There is, in other words, an inevitability to the relationship of the bearer of the gaze and the image—an unequal distribution of power resulting from the patriarchal order. And yet we also have the object staring back, both in the opening credits and elsewhere in the film. The ease, uncomfortable or not, with which the spectator (male or female) can assume the gaze and receive it, suggests the underlying rhetorical motive at work in the act of seeing and being seen and that Hitchcock foregrounds more than Mulvey will admit.

In The Women Who Knew Too Much, Tania Modleski argues that Mulvey does not allow for this possibility of multiple identifications and that contrary to Mulvey’s insistence on locating the spectatorial gaze in the male protagonist of films like Vertigo and Rear Window, Hitchcock allows that perspective to shift in unexpected but prominent ways and thus suggests the plasticity of identification. In Vertigo, for instance, although Madeleine is the object-image for much of the first half of the film, equal screen time is afforded Scottie. We are watching him as much as we are watching Madeleine through him, and we do not necessarily view him from the perspective of the male’s gaze that has been established and rehearsed in Scottie’s voyeuristic tracking of Madeleine. The best example of this comes fairly early in the film when Scottie follows Madeleine into the flower shop. He watches from behind a door as she picks out a floral bouquet that we later discover is similar to the one Carlotta Valdes holds in her portrait in the Palace of the Legion of Honor. For much of the scene, we see from Scottie’s perspective with the use of the subjective camera. Hitchcock even uses an iris filter to suggest further that we/Scottie are scrutinizing Madeleine. But then suddenly Madeleine walks toward the camera, and Scottie, and there’s the urgent feeling that Scottie might be noticed. The shot shows Madeleine reflected in the mirror on the door that Scottie hides behind (see Fig. 5.2).

As Madeleine approaches the camera, we might expect once again to observe Scottie watching her—as Modleski suggests—in visual possession of the woman (92). However, in this split frame, we see both Scottie and the reflection of Madeleine in the mirror, which is a distorted image of the “real” Madeleine. Modleski cites Donald Spoto’s observation that Scottie and the viewers may be seen as Madeleine’s reflection, and then notes that Spoto, however, “does not pause to note the extraordinary significance of this observation, which suggests that identification is ‘disturbed, made problematic’ [Robin Wood’s terms] at the very outset of Scottie’s investigation” (92). We see (reflected) what Scottie sees, and we see Scottie watching her. At the same time

and if we break the filmic plane, Scottie is watching us also. And what of the reflection in the mirror? It is reflecting back a scene that we can only imagine, somewhere in the numinal space we also occupy in front of the screen. What of our reflection?

Indeed, it is this foregrounded process of identification that I think is the central theme of Vertigo and that I believe best illustrates the nature of filmic rhetoric. As Burke points out, there would be no need to identify with each other, no occasion for rhetoric, if we were absolutely divided (A Rhetoric of Motives 22). But identification and division are ambiguously contemporaneous such that there’s the urge to either assert identity or to elaborate its potentiality. Whether the means are verbal or visual, the rhetorical act involves imagining that such identity is possible and that its effects are real. Furthermore, there is something strangely unsettling about this desire for identification that Hitchcock also makes us feel. The act of total identification requires abandoning thoughts of the self as a unique identity, and thus there is loss. When we’re reminded of how eagerly we give ourselves over or how absently-mindedly we take possession of the other through the look, we realize the danger of total abandonment. There is, as Woods argues, the “fear of spying” (passim). Finally and from a rhetorical perspective, we are compelled to identify verbally and visually as a matter of course in social life. As Burke notes, a doctrine of consubstantiality “may be necessary to any way of life” and “a way of life is an acting-together” (21). In acting-together, we “have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes” that make us consubstantial (21).

Identification is inherently an acting-together of subject–object, with identity a constructed middle ground in the symbolic (visual and verbal) realm where individual identity can be played out, reformed, channeled, encoded, visualized, and even asserted as if it were a verbal and visual proposition. In Visual Analogy: Consciousness as the Art of Connecting, Barbara Maria Stafford suggests that this process is analogical. Analogy is “born of the human desire to achieve union with that which one does not possess” (2). She proposes also that “the proportional and participatory varieties of analogy are inherently visual. It requires perspicacity to see what kinds of adjustments need to be made between uneven cases to achieve a tentative harmony. It also presupposes discernment to discover the relevant likeness in unlike things” (3). Throughout Vertigo, Hitchcock stresses this desire to connect and control the other with the look, which travels in both directions between object–image and subject by, as I have already suggested, making the object of fascination into a portrait, which can serve as an empty repository for projections of identity. As we will see, when Scottie descends into madness, he has recapitulated Madeleine’s dream, falling into the darkness of the grave, where there is no other and no self.

This process begins prior to his initial surveillance of Madeleine around San Francisco. Scottie goes to Ernie’s Restaurant, where Elster and Madeleine will be dining, so that he can see the person he has been hired to follow. Already, there is some fascination with Madeleine’s story of possession, which Elster related to Scottie earlier. Scottie sees Madeleine from behind as she dines but gets a closer look when she and Elster leave. As Madeleine nears Scottie, he turns away slightly so as not to be caught staring. She pauses right next to him, and the right side of her face is framed like a portrait. At the time, of course, we are not aware that Judy is deliberately staging this close encounter. What’s striking about this shot is that it echoes the extreme close-up of the opening credits, but here the angle is oblique and the image of the woman only partial, suggesting that there is still a mystery here to untangle.

The next day, and after the close encounter in the flower shop, Scottie follows Madeleine to the Mission Dolores, where Carlotta Valdes is buried. As Madeleine leaves, there are two shots reminiscent of both the scene in the flower shop and the one at Ernie’s (see Figs. 5.3 and Fig. 5.4). In the first shot, Madeleine once again pauses near Scottie, who then backs away slightly. The tension in the scene comes from both the fascination with the mysterious story of possession that we are unfolding, but also from, once again, the danger of the object staring back, that the one wielding the look will be seen. In the second shot, we see Scottie once again turn away slightly into the shadows where he won’t be noticed.

Scottie next follows Madeleine to the Palace of the Legion of Honor, where he watches her as she sits before a painting that, he discovers, is called, “Portrait of Carlotta.” Hitchcock stages the scene so that we observe Madeleine observing the painting in a point-of-view shot from Scottie’s perspective (see Fig. 5.5).

Intercut with this scene are shots of Scottie standing before two paintings, both of which he takes some interest in. In this shot (Fig. 5.6), he is framed by Carle Vanloos’s “Architecture” (1753), which depicts three small boys holding

blueprints, and Largilliere's "Portrait of a Gentleman" (1710). The dialectic between these alternating shots further suggests that both Madeleine (and Carlotta) as well as Scottie are on display, portraiture themselves. (There may also be some suggestion that Scottie is, in terms of his sexual maturity, still in a grey area between a child and a gentleman.)

This theme of watching and posing comes full circle a short time later in Midge's apartment when she shows Scottie her version of "Portrait of Carlotta" (see Fig. 5.7). Midge herself is posed next to the painting, setting Scottie in the position of painter. Midge has painted her own head onto Carlotta's body (with a prescient sense of the crisis to come in the challenge to photographic and representational realism). Scottie can hardly bear to look. At this point, he is unwilling and perhaps unable to corrupt the perfection of the image he has begun to paint of Madeleine.

The repetition of this pattern of surveillance and portraiture rehearses the desire of the voyeur for observing and constructing the object-image without...
being seen but still in danger of being seen. What happens when the object stares back? Why is it so unsettling? (Midge’s bespectacled Carlotta stares back at him and appears to make him ill.)

In Vertigo, we don’t experience that break when the observer becomes the observed in as abrupt a fashion as we do in Rear Window, when Lars Thorwald catches L. B. Jefferies spying on him through his camera, or when Norman Bates stares back at us from his cell at the end of Psycho. The possibility for this to happen in Vertigo is there nevertheless, and it gives the narrative its edge for the first half of the film. When Scottie finally transgresses the observer—observed boundary in his rescue of Madeleine from San Francisco Bay, he literally takes possession of her, bringing her back to his own apartment, undressing her and putting her to bed, and then watching with a desiring eye as they sit by the fire.

After Madeleine’s death and the coroner’s inquest that legally absolves Scottie but nevertheless makes him culpable for her “suicide,” he visits Madeleine’s grave. In the next scene, we witness the famous nightmare sequence, with its crude animation (by today’s standards), showing, among other things, a point-of-view shot as we plunge into Carlotta’s grave (again, repeating the imagery of Madeleine’s dream), Carlotta’s flower bouquet splitting apart, washed of color from shot to shot, and the image of Scottie’s disembodied head (see Fig. 5.8).

The dream sequence closes with a matte shot of Scottie’s falling body against a bright white background. He awakens with a terrified look on his face. The next scene takes place at the sanitarium, where Scottie is diagnosed as having acute melancholia. There is a Freudian basis for understanding melancholy in terms of subject—object identification that has some bearing on our understanding of Scottie’s “problem” at this stage in the film. As Modleski points out, Freud described melancholy as an extraordinary diminution of the self, “an identification of the ego with the abandoned object” (qtd. in Modleski 95–96). Scottie has identified with Madeleine so thoroughly that in her absence, there is no ego-identification or, as Freud would suggest, even self-reproach, because Scottie is made to feel responsible for her death and, symbolically, his own.

There is another explanation as well, one that brings us closer to understanding the motives for Scottie’s total identification with Madeleine, and thus, to an explanation of his madness in terms other than those provided by the Freudian terministic screen. As Elaine Showalter points out in “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness,” Edwin Ardener suggests that “women constitute a related group, the boundaries of whose culture and reality are not wholly contained by the dominant (male) group” (471). The region of experience beyond or inaccessible to the dominant group Ardener calls “the wild zone” (471). This wild zone is outside of male consciousness and unstructured by language. It is muted and entirely imaginary. It is the experience alluded to by Pop Liebi when he tells the story of the “mad Carlotta, sad Carlotta.” In Helene Cixous’s formulation, the wild zone is the Dark Continent where the laughing Medusa resides (Showalter 472). Scottie’s descent into Carlotta’s grave, down the dark tunnel that Madeleine sees as her destiny and her past, brings him ever closer to this imaginary wild zone. In his nightmare, the Medusa’s head is his own, staring back and rendering him speechless, for nothing can be or need be spoken once identification with the other is total (and especially when the other is purely symbolic). This desire for consubstantiality, or oneness—being with, being as—is acted out in an imaginary realm of the symbolic that has been determined by the stories of Carlotta Valdes told by both Gavin Elster and Liebi, then acted out by Judy in her role as Madeleine. Elster and Judy have been acting out a drama written explicitly for Scottie and designed to appeal to his vanity and to take advantage of his weakness. Identification, here, becomes the expression of desire, an appeal grounded in the narrative of woman as other, as unexplainable. Scottie’s madness results from his crossing over into the realm of the wild zone, the symbolic space inaccessible to the dominant (male) cultural narrative and also beyond language. This transgression is echoed later in the film in another form, when Judy’s role is discovered because Scottie recognizes that she has taken the symbol of Carlotta—the necklace—as her own. “You shouldn’t have been so sentimental,” he tells her. It is this act that breaks the plane of the imaginary and the real and helps Scottie realize that he has been played the fool and that his descent into madness has been scripted from the start.

**VISUAL RHETORIC AND IDENTIFICATION**

As a predominantly visual medium, film makes identification even more inviting than it might otherwise be. We ease into novels and it normally takes a
while before we begin to live the lives of the characters with them, to see ourselves in them, or to laugh at them as if we were laughing at ourselves. In film, however, identification is an insistent force, sometimes leaving the viewer no choice but to identify or at least to play out the drama of identification. When it works well, it induces submission, a relinquishing of power to the idea and image of the other. What makes identification so powerful is its pliability—the ease with which the viewer can shift identifications almost effortlessly, provided the film provides sufficient imetus to construct multiple identifications. The visual elements of film not only foster identification, but they appear to the capacity of the mind to assert its vision of the world even as the active agency of this assertiveness remains hidden. The visual field seems ready-made—arriving in consciousness as fully formed visual experience. As James Elkins, Richard L. Gregory, and many others note, however, the visual field is never innocent or untainted by ideology or desire. What we see, even at the moment of perception, is a consequence of what we’re looking for. As Hitchcock knows—and Burke theorizes—the desire to assert identifications on the visual world—the objects of sight—is not only necessary, it is insistent, powerful, and, because of the unconscious ease with which that visual field is shaped, always beguiling. Because the processes and compulsion of identification assert themselves so readily, any film—in its capacity as visual representation—will wield this power, will direct the attention to A rather than B, or make us believe that framed experience is all experience. A central proposition of film rhetoric is that film’s visuality is not merely a language or a representation of the real (a simulation), or even simply a sign of value or belief. The visual functions as an appeal, an assertion that has been constructed and placed by pointing the camera in particular directions at objects that have been manipulated (staged), by developing, editing, and screening films in particular ways, and even by marketing them to particular audiences. There is, in other words, a rhetoric that elaborates and exploits visual ambiguity to foster identification, and that rhetoric will be operative whether a film’s director self-consciously directs our attention to that process or not.

The concluding scene of Vertigo can help us see how complex these problems of identification can become. As Mulvey observes, we are compelled to identify with Scottie and to view everything from his perspective. And yet it is also clear that in foregrounding this process—in making us so compelled and aware—Hitchcock wants us to see that other identifications are possible, even if they are often repressed by ideological narratives or predispositions. Scottie is also the object of our scrutiny—and even derision—especially in the latter half of the film as he attempts to remake Judy into Madeleine. His authoring of the object of identification is so obvious and forceful that it is unsettling. By the end of the film, when Scottie stands on the precipice of the tower, Judy having fallen to her death, we are compelled to identify with him even as we may be ever conscious of Judy having fallen victim to his desire to reassert himself in his role as detective, as bringer of the law. We’re not shown Judy’s body sprawled on the rooftop, as we are Madeleine’s, which would seem to suggest that we no longer identify with her. However, the last subjective, point-of-view shot of the film is through Judy’s eyes as she is startled by the dark figure of the nun, so there is the sense also that we have fallen with her, that we share her guilt, or that Hitchcock wants us to feel guilty. Scottie’s “possession” of Judy, reminiscent of Carlotta’s presumed possession of Madeleine, is also so assertive that although we may have forgiven his first failure to protect her in her role as Madeleine (still believing perhaps other-worldly possession had something to do with it), this time, Scottie is indeed to blame, having just forcibly dragged her back to the scene of the crime. We have witnessed the processes of identification even as we have experienced them, and we have seen where the madness of consubstantiality—of total identification with the other—can lead. Rather than simply reasserting the ideology of dominant male (and visual) culture for its own sake, Hitchcock reasserts it to place it in full view, as risky as it is, and was, to do so. It is in the duplicity, or multiplicity, of identification that we can appreciate his accomplishment, and it is through the terministic screen of film rhetoric that we can see this scrutiny of identification as an expression of the human desire to connect, albeit symbolically and visually, with each other.

NOTES

3. For a detailed critique of Metz’s attempt to forge a rhetoric for film studies, see Ann Chisholm’s “Rhetoric and the Early Work of Christian Metz: Augmenting Ideological Inquiry in Rhetorical Film Theory and Criticism.”
Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film, 1990; and David Bordwell and Noel Carroll, Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies 1996.


7. See Richard L. Gregory's Eye and Brain: The Psychology of Seeing, 1997, for a detailed account of how the visual field is actively constructed.

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