

Vertigo

(Alfred Hitchcock, USA, 1958)

Component 1: Varieties of Film and Film-Making (AL)
Component 1: American Film (AS)

Core Study Areas:
Key Elements of Film Form
Meaning & Response
The Contexts of Film

Specialist Study Area:
Auteur (AL)

Rationale for study

- *Vertigo*, although not a critical or box-office success on its first release is now considered by many to be Alfred Hitchcock's most compelling and beautiful film, rated as the best film ever made in the 2016 *Sight and Sound* poll, calling it "*Hitchcock's masterpiece to date and one of the four or five most profound and beautiful films the cinema has yet given us.*" An overwhelmingly romantic psychological study of sexual obsession, masculine insecurity, voyeurism and manipulation it is a film that rewards multiple viewings, growing more disturbing with each one.

STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences and timings/links

- Opening titles and sequence 0:00:20 – 0:04:11
- Scottie discovers Judy Barton, spectator identification is split 1:33:21 – 1:46:43

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography

- Disorientation from the beginning. The title comes out of a woman's eye, then

into a series of graphic spirals inducing dizziness before the first sequence. It sets up Scottie's desire to let go, to fall.

- The "vertigo" shot, a camera technique developed by Irmin Roberts. This is achieved by moving the camera in the opposite direction of the camera's zoom.
- Subjective tracking shots follow Madeleine in San Francisco from Scottie's point of view. Dreamlike sequences in soft focus in the cemetery and the hotel bedroom, ghostly images of Madeleine.
- Prevalence of shots from Scottie's point of view to establish his obsession, the male gaze and the power of the look.
- Use of close ups to highlight significant aspects of Mise-en-Scène e.g. necklace on the painting of Carlotta.

Mise-en-Scène

- Use of symbolic colour throughout. Art direction by Hal Pereira, Henry Bumstead. Ernie's restaurant: red walls, Madeleine in green, mirrors, doubles.
- Madeleine's clothes, designed by Edith Head: the grey suit is all important.
- The location of the film was moved to San Francisco, the city of vertiginous streets, the phallic Coit Tower and the Golden Gate Bridge, the scene of Madeleine's attempted "suicide".
- Vertiginous setting of San Francisco contributes to the sense of falling from the opening shots that include the famous bridge to Scottie driving downhill in the sequence where he follows 'Madeleine' thereby falling into Elster's trap.
- Use of green as a colour motif. The key examples include 'Madeleine's dress at Ernie's, her car and Scottie's sweater at the point when he really starts to believe that Carlotta is possessing 'Madeleine'.

Editing

- At Ernie's restaurant cut from Scottie watching to Madeleine in the background,

then, as she passes him, cut to her profile.

- Opening sequence cuts between a police man reaching out, to Scottie dangling, to the 'vertigo shot'.
- Long slow passages containing medium close ups of Scottie watching, cut to what he sees.
- Use of long takes in the scenes of Scottie following 'Madeleine' around San Francisco to allow the spectator time to engage with how he may be feeling.
- Position of flashback in the narrative encouraging the spectator to sympathise with Judy and perceive events from her perspective for the first time.
- Prevalence of eye line match cuts aligning the spectator with Scottie throughout the film until the flashback sequence in Judy's room. After that, there are some shots from her point of view.

Sound

- Bernard Herrmann's music inspired by Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, perhaps the most important micro feature of the film. It appears endless, chords that are never resolved, repeatedly broken. Herrmann's love theme used when 'Madeleine' is on screen to indicate Scottie's growing obsession/love for her.
- Numerous, lengthy passages without dialogue, only music.
- Judy's voiceover as she reveals her story splits the narrative and changes the film.
- Cyclical nature of the score - Martin Scorsese said, 'the music is also built around spirals and circles, fulfilment and despair'. The repetition could allude to obsessive recurring thoughts and poor mental health.
- Classical Music (Bach and Mozart) in scenes with Midge, lighter and more frivolous than Herrmann's score reflecting the lighter tone of her interactions with Scottie. Their relationship, although complex, appears more conventional when compared to Scottie and 'Madeleine's.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS – Meaning & Response

Representations

- The representation of male sexuality with a man confronting his impotence and his repressed desires can be read as a comment on pre-feminist gender politics in the late 1950s.
- Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative*

Cinema (1975) examined the representation of sexual difference as active male/passive female, with women displayed as erotic objects for the characters within the film and the spectator. Mulvey suggested that the use of subjective camera from the male protagonist's point of view results in the spectator identifying with the male.

- Scottie is undermined by his weakness and fascination with the mystery of Madeleine. Madeleine's confession places the spectator in a position of knowledge, spectator changes identification because of this.
- Women as passive – consider Midge as a challenge to this and explore how she fares in the narrative as a result of her active nature. How does the alternate ending of the film change this? <https://goo.gl/YF05fZ>

Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including visual style, influences, auteur, motifs)

- Title sequence's innovative use of *avant-garde* film ideas in a mainstream narrative. Designed by Saul Bass accompanied by Bernard Herrmann's score a combination of emotional dream imagery and abstraction by abstract film-maker John Whitney. He used a special pendulum that forms "modern art in motion" geometric oval shaped spirals called Lissajous waves.
- This is a film about watching. In the opening credits the woman's face is only partially seen, she is looking, she and the location are unidentified. This woman does not feature in the film, she never appears again.
- The motif of the spiral structures the film: in the titles, Madeleine's hair, the steps in the tower, the repetition.
- Hitchcock's recurring use of mirrors, as in *Psycho*, to imply dual identities. The clearest examples are the sequence at Ernie's, Scottie's first visit to Judy's room and the Ransohoff's scene.
- Lengthy fluid camera movements contribute to the film appearing dreamlike at times.
- Ground breaking, inventive camera work. The clearest example is the 'Vertigo effect', the dolly zoom used to convey Scottie's acrophobia. Though invented earlier this technique was first used in this film by camera operator Irmin Roberts.

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS - Contexts

Social

- The USA in the 1950s: racism both social and institutional, entrenched sexism. The USA was a segregated society, and the end of the decade saw the beginnings of the civil rights movement and the women's movement of the 1960s.
- The film can be read as emblematic of men trying to re-assert their control over women in post war America. One of the first things Scottie asks of Judy is that she not go to work but spends time with him instead, "let me take care of you."

Historical

- President Dwight D. Eisenhower, vice President Richard Nixon.

Political

- The USA locked into a cold war with the Soviet Union. Both sides had nuclear weapons.

Technological

- Use of Paramount's wide screen process *VistaVision*, created in 1954. Restored 70 mm version of *Vertigo* in 1996 after many years of anonymity and deterioration.

Institutional

- With the demise of the Studio System in the 1950s more freedom for a director to take control. Kim Novak under contract with Columbia Pictures could only be in *Vertigo* with the permission of Columbia chief Harry Cohn who was paid \$250,000.

- Influenced by German Expressionism and Soviet montage cinema. His elaborate editing techniques came from Soviet films of the 1920s. He particularly acknowledged the significance of the Kuleshov experiment, from which he derived his fondness for the point-of-view shot and for building sequences by cross-cutting between person seeing and things seen.
- Self-publicist Hitchcock was a commercial film-maker, who sought and achieved box-office success. He was always happy to exploit his 'auteur status' as a marketing device, through his TV series no less than his films. His films are assigned to him as in the credits and publicity material making him a 'star' director. He also 'signed' his films through his personal non-speaking appearances in them. In *Vertigo* he appears outside Elster's office.
- The film has recurring themes from Hitchcock's other work including guilt (*Strangers on a Train*), voyeurism (*Rear Window*) and taboo subject matter (*Psycho*).
- *Vertigo's* themes can be seen as revealing a lot about Hitchcock and the film is often considered his most personal. The representation of Scottie as lonely links to Hitchcock's lack of childhood friends, Scottie's treatment of Judy could reflect the way Hitchcock treated actresses working on his films and the guilt Scottie feels could be linked to Hitchcock's Catholic upbringing.
- Mastery of the art of film making – the inspired use of scale models and matte painting to create the bell tower scene are a useful example.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - Auteur

Starting points

- Recognised in the 1950s by the writers of *Cahiers du Cinema* as a master film-maker, Hitchcock is an example of the classic *auteur*, a master of *mise-en-scène* with an unmistakable 'world view'. The 'Hitchcock film' contains elements of style and distinctive marks identifiable with his presence as a creative force who brought together a number of elements – the graphics of Saul Bass, the music of Bernard Herrmann, the performances of Cary Grant and James Stewart. "When we tell a story in cinema, we should resort to dialogue only when it's impossible to do otherwise. I always try first to tell a story in the cinematic way, through a succession of shots and bits of film in between".