A Dreamer and his Dream: Another Way of Looking at Hitchcock's *Vertigo*

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The critics who voted *Vertigo* one of the best films of all time in the *Sight and Sound* poll of 1982 were plainly undeterred by the fact that its plot is relatively preposterous. Although in his essay on the movie in *Hitchcock's Films* Robin Wood ranks *Vertigo* as "one of the four or five most profound and beautiful films the cinema has yet given us," he also admits, "the whole plot is quite fantastic--no one would ever set about murdering his wife in *that* way" (77). And even if a person would go about murdering his wife in *that* way, the film is riddled with secondary improbabilities.

Faced with the plot of *Vertigo* the reflective viewer is confronted with a number of questions, which if not impossible to answer (critical ingenuity can explain almost anything), resist easy resolution. How did Scottie get down from the rooftop gutter, suffering no more serious injuries than those requiring (only temporarily) a walking stick and corset? How did Madeleine get in and out of the second story room at the McKittrick Hotel without being seen by the manageress, who claims she has "been right [there] all the time ..."? How did Elster know that Scottie would recognize "Madeleine's" description of the "old whitewashed Spanish church with cloister" in her dream as the Mission San Juan Bautista and would insist on taking her there to prove that her dream visions had a basis in reality? And how could Elster have been certain that no one would climb to the top of the bell tower after

"Madeleine's suicide" and find him lurking there with Judy, his wife's double? And finally, to change the interrogative pronoun for once, why on earth would Judy put on Carlotta Valdes's necklace (Elster's gift to her) just when she and Scottie had found happiness together? In truth none of these questions has any very plausible answer, and as a result *Vertigo* does not so much resemble the typical Hitchock thriller with its surface probability as it does a "long, demanding, surrealist dream" (Sonbert 35).

It is, of course, not a literal dream--any more than a realistic film, even a documentary, is a literal representation of reality. Reality is not a series of images, from appropriate distances and angles, and sounds edited together to provide either narrative or interpretive coherence. So the dream of *Vertigo* for the most part maintains a semblance of the narrative continuity viewers have come to expect from the thriller genre. Nevertheless, from a psychoanalytic standpoint, *Vertigo* is best understood as a dreamlike representation of the inner conflicts of its protagonist: more specifically of the conflict within John "Scottie" Ferguson between eros and thanatos--between his longing for love and sexual fulfillment and an equally strong, if not stronger, death wish.

In the opening sequence of *Vertigo* a presumed criminal is pursued across the rooftops of San Francisco by a uniformed police officer and (behind him) Scottie Ferguson. Scottie misjudges a leap onto a peaked slate roof and winds up hanging from a gutter a number of stories above the street. Trying to give Scottie a hand to pull him to safety, the uniformed officer plunges to his death in the street below. In the words of Robin Wood, "We do not see, and are never told how [Scottie] got down from the gutter: there seems no posssible way he *could* have got down" *(Hitchcock's Films* 79). But there is of course a way for Scottie to "get down": to let go of or lose his hold on the gutter and plunge to his death as the policeman had. This fate seems far more probable than his surviving such a fall or the fire department getting there in time to save him. I am therefore going to pursue the perhaps radical notion that *Vertigo* may best be regarded as an extended equivalent of Ambrose Bierce's story (and Robert Enrico's film) " An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge": that everything after the opening sequence is the dream or fantasy of a dying man (it makes no difference whether the dream occurs while he hangs from the gutter, as he falls to the street, or when he lies dying on the pavement).

Wood reports that "the sensation of vertigo... has been explained... by psychologists as arising form the tension between the desire to fall and the dread of falling..." *(Hitchcock's Films 79).* If this explanation is correct, it makes *Vertigo* a particularly appropriate title for the film, the majority of which is concerned with Scottie's "desire to fall" and "dread of falling"--or his yearning for death and his fear of death. If the film is regarded as Scottie's dream, its true subject is the tension between Scottie's desire to live meaningfully--to find something or someone of supreme value to live for--and his urge to die--to cease from all onerous struggle and plunge into oblivion: in other words, to find some reason to hang on to the gutter (his precarious existence) or yield to his impulse simply to let go. Madeleine/

Judy is the ambiguous embodiment of this struggle, for she represents both the object of supreme value for which Scottie would wish to live and the appeal of death itself.

Scottie's dream necessarily begins with him safely down from the gutter, having suffered no more serious damage than can be corrected with the temporary aid of a cane and a corset. (I will ignore the phallic implications of the cane but remark that the corset could perhaps suggest the kind of restricted, bound-in emotional life Scottie has apparently lived up to this point.) Scottie is with Midge, a woman he once considered linking his life to in matrimony. Midge is obviously quite a bit younger than Scottie and also than Elster even though she was supposedly in college with both of them--as if she were more the memory of a woman as she used to be, rather than the actual contemporary of Ferguson. Scottie's casual and rather insensitive manner of speaking to her clearly reveals that she is not of overwhelming importance to him--if he needs something to live for, she cannot be it.

Two more things are important in this sequence. Scottie tells Midge of his appointment with Elster, thus setting up the chain of events that will lead him to the woman he will consider worth living for, and he makes an attempt to overcome his vertigo by slowly ascending a stepladder. Unfortunately on the third step, he glances out Midge's window, sees the avenue below, experiences the view as he had that of the street down below the gutter, and winds up collapsing into Midge's arms. The scene demonstrates that the threat of death by falling is still very much with Scottie despite his apparent rescue from the gutter of the building with the tile roof.

Elster then introduces Scottie to the idea of Madeleine being possessed by "someone dead" from "the past." To save Madeleine from the grip of the dead becomes Scottie's way of saving himself from death. Scottie is initially intrigued by Madeleine's beauty as he sees her glide across the floor of Ernie's restaurant (wearing the same style of black evening dress in her first appearance that Judy will die in at the end of the film). He is then additionally fascinated by her mysteriousness as he follows her about San Francisco and perceives her link with Carlotta Valdes, who died approximately a hundred years before.

The style of the film, which is not especially dreamlike in the first two scenes with Midge and Elster, becomes increasingly so after the introduction of Madeleine. Her bodily movements are almost uniformly slow, measured, graceful--as if she were moving through a different atmosphere than that of normal everyday life. The scene in the churchyard, where Scottie first beholds the grave of Carlotta Valdes, Hitchcock says, was shot "through a fog filter" to give it "a dreamlike, mysterious quality" (Truffaut 186). His first day's observation of Madeleine then culminates in her unexplained--and apparently unexplainable-- disappearance from the McKittrick hotel: an event which is later recapitulated in her seeming disappearance from the redwood forest, although in that case Scottie finally finds her behind a tree.

Through his second meeting with Elster, in which Scottie is told about

Madeleine's blood relationship with the dead Carlotta, the detective has no reciprocal involvement with the object of his surveillance. Elster has asked him to watch her and this, aside from the additional research at Pop Leibel's bookstore, is all that Scottie has done. But his relationship with Madeleine enters an entirely new phase after Scottie fishes her out of San Francisco Bay.

Now Scottie has not merely observed Madeleine; he has saved her life. (He has also observed her much more closely: after the rescue the film resumes with Madeleine found in Scottie's bed, apparently completely undressed--her clothes are seen hanging in his kitchen.) His having saved her in this instance convinces him that he can save her altogether. He has entered the realm of fairy tale or legend and become the knight whose role is to rescue the damsel in distress. In keeping with the atmosphere of fable or myth, Scottie and Madeleine the following day enter the equivalent of an enchanted forest: Redwood State Park. But even though Scottie has psychologically entered the realm of romance in his relationship with Madeleine, part of him remains the "hard-headed Scot" (as Elster had referred to him earlier), so the means by which he seeks to save his damsel in distress are rational ones.

He listens to Madeleine recount her dream, which reveals her identification with Carlotta and her sense of the imminence of her own death, and thinks there must be some explanation for what initially appears uncanny. He says, more to himself than to Madeleine, "If I could just find the key... the beginning... and put it together." But then he rejects the reasonable explanation Madeleine proposes--"If I'm mad--that would explain it, wouldn't it?"--because it is not consistent with his romantic fantasies about her. Later he thinks he has found a satisfactory explanation in his theory that the Spanish building in Madeleine's dream is actually the Mission San Juan Bautista, which she has visited in the past even though she doesn't remember having done so. He says he will take her to the Mission, she will remember when she had been there before, and then she will "be free." He is trying to impose his practical, commonsensical view of reality on her, thinking that if she can be brought to view things as he does then *he* and not Carlotta Valdes will possess her.

When they get to the Mission, though, Madeleine does not remember any previous visit of her own to the place; she only recalls the experiences of Carlotta more than a hundred years before. She ignores Scottie's attempt to identify "Carlotta's" memories with objects currently found at he Mission and his increasingly desperate pleas for rational interpretation: "You see--there's an answer for everything." Then after their final embrace in the livery stable, she rushes off to ascend the tower(which he cannot climb more than part way because of his vertigo) and plunge (apparently) to her doom. Both the rational and romatic sides of his nature have suffered crushing defeat: the uncanny has triumphed over his endeavors to explain it away: the uncanny has failed to rescue the lady in distress.

If Scottie has dreamed his involvement with Madeleine, she possesses more than one kind of symbolic significance within his unconscious. In a Jungian sense, she is his anima--the feminine intuitive side of his nature that

he is striving not only to recognize but to achieve union with. It is not surprising, therefore, that his attempts to impose his masculine reason upon her lead only to her destruction. But she is also the possibility of romantic, sexual fulfillment which Scottie has apparently not previously achieved in his life (certainly not with Midge)--a reason for going on with his life. Conversely, she also represents the lure of death itself; she has identified herself with her dead grandmother and ultimately dies by a fall just as Scottie the dreamer may be in the process of doing (the tile roof she lands upon echoes the one he was clinging to at the beginning). Scottie's attempts to save Madeleine represent his struggle to stay alive, which, of course, proves futile.

After hearing the caustic analysis of his behavior by the magistrate at Madeleine's inquest--the judge would seem to embody Scottie's own self-condemning superego--Scottie experiences an obvious nightmare. He sees Elster standing with a woman, but it is Carlotta Valdes (dressed as in her portrait in the museum) instead of Madeleine. Now Madeleine has achieved complete identity with the dead. Scottie moves through the graveyard in which Carlotta is buried and approaches an open grave--which Madeleine had earlier beheld in one of her dreams and identified as *her* grave. Scottie falls into the grave, but then he falls toward the mission roof Madeleine landed upon--and finally into nothingness (represented by a brilliantly white screen devoid of all objects other than Scottie's plummeting black silhouette). This would all seem to be the logical conclusion to the dream of a man who has fallen to his death. Having failed to achieve union with his anima, to gain the romantic fulfillment that would give him a reason for life, to deny the all-powerful hold of death over what is desirable in life--having failed in all these attempts in his dream involvement with Madeleine, what recourse does Scottie have but to accept his own death by falling (of which Madeleine's death is merely a displaced representation)? The film would seem to have reached here its logical conclusion.

But of course it goes on. Human beings are rarely eager to accept the finality of their own deaths. Scottie constructs a new dream in an attempt to deny the ultimate implications of the first one. He converts his fall to death in the last segment of his dream into a less conclusive mental breakdown: he has not lost his life but merely his consciousness for a time. The new dream begins as the first one did with a scene involving Midge. The purpose of the scene for the dreamer is to restore his self-esteem: even though he is totally unresponsive, Midge remains completely devoted to Scottie. Having brought him this boost to his ego, Midge disappears from the film because she can do no more for Scottie: she can't provide the romantic fulfillment he has come to regard as the only thing truly worth living for.

In the final shots of her in the film, Midge is not actually with Scottie: she discusses his case with the doctor at the hospital and then walks off alone down an empty corridor into a fade out. This is not the first time Midge has appeared in the film in a brief sequence from which Scottie is absent. Earlier, from her car she observed Madeleine leaving Scottie's apartment. Then we saw her chuckling to herself as she put the finishing touches on the

painting which we shortly afterwards discover to be her portrait of herself as Carlotta Valdes. This scene is balanced by her defacing of the painting and denouncing herself as "stupid, stupid" after Scottie walks out on her following his viewing of it.

While these scenes involving Midge without Scottie present might seem inconsistent with an interpretation of the film as Scottie's dream or fantasy, they are not so if one keeps in mind the purpose they might have for the dreamer. Each of the scenes stresses Midge's devotion to Scottie. The scene outside his apartment establishes her jealousy of Madeleine; the portrait is her way of suggesting that he should abandon his romantic obsessions with an inaccessible woman and focus his attentions on her; her chuckle before he views the painting is a sort of self-congratulation on her method of conveying this advice to him (and, of course, of announcing her availability); and her behavior after he has walked out on her displays her bitterness at his rejection of her as in any way a semblance of his romantic ideal. Finally, the scene with the doctor indicates her continung devotion to Scottie even after she has acknowledged his love for the dead Madeleine. Even though Scottie does not reciprocate Midge's love, her unswerving commitment to him is of course gratifying to his ego. Her function in his dream is that of a second string object of wish fulfillment--one that can satisfy superficial ego needs but not his deepest desires.

To regain a strong sense of purpose to his existence he has to resurrect Madeleine. Shortly after the recuperated Scottie meets Judy Barton, we have the flashback scene and the letter with voice-over that reveal how Elster had employed Judy as a tool in his plot to murder his wife. Again this material might at first seem inconsistent with the interpretation of the bulk of the film as Scottie's dream--since he neither witnesses the flashback nor reads the letter. But we have to distinguish between Scottie the dreamer and Scottie the character in the dream. Scottie the character cannot know that Judy actually *was* Madeleine because that knowledge would make his "resurrection" of his former lover far too easy. But Scottie the dreamer must know that Judy was Madeleine because only then could she truly *become* Madeleine. In his first dream Scottie kept trying to find rational explanations for the uncanny: the possession of Madeleine by Carlotta and the premonitions of death. Now in the second dream he comes up with a rational explanation that works: the whole thing was a plot by Elster.

As he remakes her, Scottie is so obsessed with his dream of Madeleine that he will not permit Judy to be Judy. She must dress exactly like Madeleine, make up her face the same way, color her hair the same color, and finally pin it into the same bun. Judy protests nearly every step of the way because her true hope, expressed in the letter she never sends him, is "that I could make you love me again, *as I am, for myself...*" (italics added). But Scottie has no interest in Judy's avowed tastes or preferences: he must make her into his ideal of the perfect woman (an ideal that was significantly created by another man). As Robin Wood astutely points out, what Scottie

does in an extreme form is merely what many men do when they experience "'romantic love,' with its demand for perfect union and its tendency to construct the loved person as an idealized fantasy figure, the necessary condition for perfect union being the denial of otherness and autonomy" ("Male Desire" 228). But in real life the woman usually persists in asserting her true identity (or at least her own conception of it), refusing to conform entirely to the man's ideal; the guilt-ridden Judy, on the other hand, feels she can only atone for her sins by sacrificing her true self to satisfy Scottie's desires.

After a heavily filtered shot in which Judy enters from her lavatory perfectly reconstituted as Madeleine, wearing a grey suit identical to the one Madeleine wore the day of her death, Scottie embraces her, and the camera circles the couple as the background changes from Judy's apartment to the livery stable where they kissed shortly before the fall from the tower. This return to the earlier scene has two quite opposed implications. One, Scottie has triumphed, brought back the past, reclaimed the love he lost. Two, just as he lost Madeleine the first time right after their passionate embrace in the stable so he may be about to lose her again. Mixed implications of triumph and defeat are apparent throughout the whole final third of the film.

On the one hand Scottie has demonstrated great power in molding Judy into the perfect semblance of Madeleine. In so far as he has in effect brought her back from the dead, his power could be said to be godlike. There are obvious sexual connotations here as well. Scottie's vertigo, like L.B. Jefferies's broken leg in *Rear Window* (Wood, "Male Desire" 222), can easily be seen as a symbol of sexual impotence. After Scottie kisses Madeleine in the barn, he is unable to consummate their sexual relationship because his vertigo prevents him from following her to the top of the tower to stop her from throwing herself off. Freud's theory of dream symbolism helps to interpret this sequence: "Symbols such as a staircase or going upstairs...represent sexual intercourse" ("On Dreams"171). (In this respect, it is significant that Scottie can only ascend three steps in Midge's apartment and then topples into her arms in the manner of a weak and terrified child--rather than a man.) After kissing Judy/Madeleine in her apartment/the livery stable, Scottie rather obviously is able to consummate their relationship. (Following the fade after the embrace, Judy is wearing a different dress, and both characters are smiling contentedly.) It is not surprising, therefore, that in the final sequence of the film Scottie *can* ascend to the top of the tower with Judy.

Yet in this same sequence Scottie is make aware of his true powerlessness. He has not truly resurrected Madeleine because the Madeleine he knew never really existed. The woman he loved was merely a fiction composed by Elster. There is small triumph for him in persuading Judy to play a part she had already played once before. Scottie's return to the Mission with Judy is his attempt to relive the earlier scene with Madeleine and bring it to a different conclusion. When he persuaded Madeleine to go to the Mission with him, he promised her what the result

would be: "You'll be free." Now he tells Judy that if she will enact the role of Madeleine and ascend the tower with him, "when it's done, we'll both be free." But of course when it's done, only Judy is free, just as Madeleine was at the end of the first visit to the mission--freed by death from the demands of life. Even though Scottie manages to climb to the top of the tower with Judy/Madeleine this time, the end result is the same: the woman plunges to her death. In the last analysis, Scottie has no more control over the circumstances governing life and death in the second visit to the Mission than he had in the first.

Scottie discovers that Judy actually *is* Madeleine when she (quite improbably) asks him to fasten Carlotta's necklace about her throat. The necklace reveals not only that Judy *is* the dead Madeleilne but that she is also the dead Carlotta. She is death itself which he has mistaken for life. She has to fall from the tower a second time because it is his destiny to join her through his own fatal fall. In the somewhat overdetermined final sequence, death also appears as the black shape that rises up from the stairwell. In this respect the fact that the shape resolves itself into the figure of a nun when she steps into the light is less significant than the first black anonymous image--the idea that death can unexpectedly intrude into life at any moment. (For other interpretations of the figure in black, see Rothman 77-78, and this essay below).

The final shot of the film shows Scottie standing at the very edge of the tower top, his arms slightly spread as they were earlier when he stood before Carlotta/Madeleline's grave in his dream (within a dream). That shot preceded his plunge into the grave, then down upon the lower Mission roof, then into oblivion. This shot also seems, therefore, to precede a dive into nothingness. If we interpret the preponderance of the film as a dying man's dream, then although the dream in both its major parts has initially raised the posssibilities of new life--of emotional fulfillment and mastery of fate--the final message it enforces with iron rigor is the necessity of yielding to the inevitabiliy of death. As Lesley Brill has put it, "*Vertigo* is a film of trying not to plunge into the abyss, and failing" (202).

Taken literally, *Vertigo* is the story of a man incidentally destroyed by a beautiful young woman and an older man in their plot to commit the perfect murder of another woman. Although she herself is a victim of Elster, Judy/Madeleine nevertheless causes devasting harm to Scottie, driving him to mental breakdown, then leaving him at the end of the film perched on the brink of the void. But if both Judy/Madeleine and her mentor Elster are seen as products of Scottie's imagination, as characters in *his* dream, then they become not objective forces conspiring to undo him, but rather projections of destructive elements within his own nature. They are in effect embodiments of his death wish, and they teach him not to resist but to accept his fall into the abyss.

But from another point of view, Elster and Judy/Madeleine represent Scottie's mother and father or rather his childhood psychosexual concep-

tions of them that linger in his unconscious. Teresa de Lauretis is surely correct when she argues that Scottie is not in love with Madeleine "but her narrative image,...the desire for the dead Mother which Madeleine represents and mediates for him" (154). Madeleine represents herself to Scottie as a woman who is psychically merging with or being taken over by her own grandmother. In the symbolism of Scottie's dream she represents his own dead mother--the infinitely desirable mother of the oedipal stage of his early childhood. (Whether Scottie's real mother, who is never mentioned in the film, is in fact alive or dead is irrelevant; the desirable young woman of his early childhood no longer exists and is dead in that sense.) In trying to save Madeleine's life, Scottie is really trying to bring the mother of his early childhood back to life so that he can possess her sexually. In this respect his inability to ascend the stairs, in order to save her and to posess her, merely recaptiulates his childhood sexual inadequacy and the loss of the beautiful young mother that he could do nothing to prevent.

A double meaning, therefore, can be found in the sentences de Lauretis quotes from Hitchcock's interview in Truffaut's book:

> I was intrigued by the hero's attempts to re-create the image of a dead woman through another one who's alive. ... To put it plainly, the man wants to go to bed with a woman who's dead; he is indulging in a form of necrophilia. (de Lauretis 154; Truffaut 184,186)

Hitchcock seems merely to be speaking of the second part of the film when Scottie remakes Judy as Madeleine and apparently goes to bed with her once the illusion is complete. But this section of the movie simply reveals the creative process that underlay the presentation of Madeleine in the first part: she is the disquised image of supreme object of his desires--the mother of early childhood. When Scottie drags Judy up to the top of the tower with him, he twice uses the same phrase: "You're my second chance. This is my second chance." He is probably speaking of his second chance to prove his manhood by ascending the tower, but Scottie's whole pursuit of Madeleine was for him another chance to achieve the object of his desire that he had failed to gain as a child. Shortly before the end of the film Scottie announces despairingly to Judy, "It's to late; there's no bringing her back"--acknowledging the futililty of his whole attempt. Then he kisses Judy passionately--apparently deciding that if he cannot have the true object of his desires, a reasonable facsimile is certainly better than nothing. But then the unexpected intrusion of the nun into the love scene on the tower sweeps Judy to her death and leaves Scottie with exactly nothing, other than an overwhelming sense of irreparable loss.

An additional symbolic significance of the nun needs to be considered here. Psychoanalysts have commented on the ways in which American detective novels and films "[split] the maternal image" into two opposed types of female characters: the *femme fatale* representing " sexual night-

time mother" and the faithful secretary or sidekick, "the...desexualized daytime mother" (Bauer, Balter, Hunt 282). In *Vertigo* Midge is clearly the daytime mother, and both she ("Mother is here," she tells Scottie in the hospital scene) and Scottie ("oh Midge, don't be so motherly, " he protests in the opening apartment scene) consciously see her in that role. For this reason, Scottie is unable to develop a strong erotic interest in her. It is not the known, daytime mother who excites his interest but the unknown, nocturnal mother. The nun whose appearance sends Judy/Madeleine to her doom is another version of the daytime mother. She is the mother as moral authority, upholder of religious values. In real life it is perhaps this aspect of the mother that most effectively squelches the child's erotic desire for her and drives it deep into his unconscious. Thus, it is quite appropriate that in Scottie's dream the nun should deprive him of the final semblance of the prime object of his desires.

If the film is an oedipal dream, the role of the father might seem rather underdeveloped. As the husband of Madeleine and the lover of Judy, Elster of course plays the paternal role--an idea underlined by his appearance in Scottie's transitional dream standing beside an animatad Carlotta from the painting. The shot clearly suggests that Elster's true mate is the dead (grand)mother. But Scottie manifests little open aggression towards this father figure beyond ignoring Elster's proffered handshake after the inquest. Nevertheless, the film makes Elster the ultimate source of evil in the story, the direct cause of Madeleine's death, the indirect cause of Judy's. He *deserves* killing for his crimes even though the ending of *Vertigo* leaves him unpunished. By making Elster the arch villian, the dreamer justifies his feelings of hostility and aggression toward the father; by leaving him unpunished, he acknowleges his inability to defeat or over come his great rival.

Freud argues that civilization inevitably frustrates the instinctive desires and drives of humankind. One of the basic taboos in all societies is against incest, and Freud comments that "this is perhaps the most drastic mutilation which man's erotic life has in all times experienced" *(Civilization and its Discontents* 745). The male remains frustrated throughout his life following his early recognition that he cannot erotically possess his mother. If Freud's theory has a measure of validity, one can see Scottie's dream as a disguised quest for the erotic fulfillment he missed out on as a child, leading to his final anguished recognition that true satisfaction of his desire is unattainable. (Even if we assume that Scottie had sexual intercourse with Judy/Madeleine, this scene is not presented--as if the dreamer were unable to imagine it--and in any case it was merely sex with a substitute.) Having achieved such recognition, the dreamer is perhaps ready for the death his dream (as wish fulfillment) had sought to forestall. Scottie has finally realized that the only way to achieve union with the dead mother is through his own death.

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