

Who is Watching Who in Vertigo?

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“I was set-up. I was the made-to-order witness.”

— Scottie Ferguson, Vertigo

Hitchcock's Vertigo has never ceased to amaze the audience since its release in 1958. The movie has deep psychological and philosophical implications crafted to puzzle and sometimes prey the audience into a spiral of chaos where the viewer finds himself/herself trapped in a web of meanings and ambiguities. The eye of the camera is, in fact, the eye of the director that controls and frames a sequence in which characters and objects are carefully composed. There are two concepts regarding the perspective or the point of view, and they are generally regarded as objective and subjective. In the case of Hitchcock, the eye is subjective, and by this subjectivity, he controls his viewers. Alfred Hitchcock is the master of his craft. You can see his appearance in the film, which suggests his intervention between the viewers and his characters. Hence, there is a layer of watching happening in his movies, especially in Vertigo and Rear Window, that proposes a strong sense of voyeurism, a sexual obsession attached to our sense of seeing and watching because this is cinema, a form of the visual domain where watching and being watched is the core art form.

In this paper, I'd explore this uncanny obsession of 'watching' that is closely associated with voyeurism, sexual and destructive in its attire, and deeply psychologically symbolized in extreme colors in the movie. The protagonist of the movie, named Scottie, is a detective who retired from his job due to acrophobia, a mental illness. He is appointed by his old friend to watch his wife, who is possessed and has suicidal tendencies and is a perfect feminine beauty. The protagonist finds himself obsessed with this perfect beauty, and by the end of the movie, he has cured his acrophobia but has lost the love of his life.

The idea of 'watching' is very central in Hitchcock's Vertigo, the characters are watched by the other characters just like in the Rear Window. Both movies share many similarities in this theme of watching and following other characters. In Vertigo, this scheme is cyclical in nature, like a spiral (as the title Vertigo suggests). For an instance, Scottie watches Medline, and while on the other hand he is watched by Elster, Judy and Midge, furthermore, these characters are watched by Hitchcock and interestingly we are watching them all. The movie is a visual allegory of the phenomenon of 'watching' the moving images that enmesh deep psychological insinuations triggered by sexual desire. The characters in this movie are obsessed with this visual pleasure, so is the director, and so are we as the audience (Manlove, p. 83).

Detective is a profession closely linked with voyeurism, it is an intrusion in one's privacy, regarded an

unethical practice in our society where privacy is valued according to the set standards of morality and ethics. It is not only Hitchcock who was obsessed with this concept of voyeurism but there are other notable figures in world cinema, especially Krzysztof Kieslowski, one of the masters of world cinema, who explored this theme in order to test the depths of human consciousness and its obsessive power in *A Short Film about Love* and *The Color Red*. Similarly, David Lynch's *The Blue Velvet* explores the same psychological theme in a relatively surrealistic form, intellectually emotional and uplifting like Hitchcock, with a different treatment of characters, symbols, and colors. However, there is something unique about Hitchcock, and that uniqueness is particularly due to his use of the form of detective fiction in order to make his point. The job of a detective is to watch people without them knowing. The use of this form makes Hitchcock a detective in the domain of direction. He carries a bugle case that symbolizes his authority as a director and his absolute insights into the study of human behavior.

Nonetheless, Hitchcock seems to challenge these notions of moral standards set by our society because even we as audiences indulge in this practice of voyeurism, participating in the pleasure of watching others along with the protagonist in *The Rear Window* as well as in *Vertigo*. Like Scottie, we are all 'set up to witness' this unbridled desire for voyeurism, one of the central themes of modern fiction. The century's most cherished work, 'Ulysses,' has this central theme, which Joyce regards as one of life's little pleasures. But in Hitchcock this desire is devastating, it negatively affects the protagonist's life as it becomes an obsession which is excruciating and it is very evident when Scottie wants to construct Judy into Madeline. In *Vertigo*, Scottie is hired to watch Madeline, and watching her affects his relationship with the woman (Midge) he was involved with at the beginning of the film. Hence, for Hitchcock, this practice of voyeurism is not a healthy one but self-destructive and painful, and pain and pleasure are indistinguishable in Hitchcock due to the obsessive behavior of his protagonist. Though we can argue that he has compassion and love for Madeline, our ordinary definitions of love cannot encapsulate the sheer magnitude of the intensity of desire and sexual energy that he feels for Madeline; it is libidinal in nature and highly destructive. He risked his life in order to save Madeline.

Madeline is a ghost, a being that does not exist, in other words we can say that she is a ghost, not a reality. This observation provides us with an insight into another dimension of the protagonist's mania with the unreal and the non-existent. As I have already mentioned the mastery of Hitchcock, the ways in which he lays his insights into human consciousness and the working of our minds like a true Psychologist who is well aware of the mysterious workings of our mental universe and its fascination with the unreal and the fantastical (Spinks, p. 212). This obsession with the unreal and imaginary is equally applied to the audience as well. In the restaurant sequence, when Scottie saw Madeline for the first time, Hitchcock "established Scottie's beautiful illusion of Madeleine and the beautiful illusion of the film itself" (David, p. 78). Hence, we, the audience, are equally fixated on the unreal as the leading character of the movie. Furthermore, the movie is well-crafted in a manner that visualizes the inner turmoil and the delusory universe of Scottie's mind, as Allen states in her essay in the following statement:

"character identification and point of view ...the orchestration of camera movement, color, graphic

design, mise-en-scène, and performance" (David, p. 78).

He is constantly trying to find meaning in his life, first, when he wanted to become a police chief but failed because of his acrophobia; second, when he thinks he had found the perfect woman in the form of Madeline but unfortunately lost her as a romantic delusion. The audience of the 1950s was able to easily connect with Scottie swirling into his spiral of destruction where everything he touched turned into dust because of his inability to understand his flawed position and the unacceptability of the real and an unbridled urge for the idea. Everything is working, and the whole action of the movie can be compared to the American Dream and the inability of Americans to realize the reality of this world that is absurd and painful due to the general scheme of the disorder of the universe (the spiral shape of our galaxy) we live in and the impossibility of the attainment of happiness in a world devoid of order and our consistent pursuit of the unreal and ideal.

According to the Fredrick Nietzsche the great German philosopher a great work of art is composed of two opposing forces that exist in nature and in every human being; Apollonian (it represent order, music, and harmony) and Dionysian (represents disorder, ecstasy, wine and orgies). A sonnet has strict formal rules that a poet is bound to follow, a rigid structure and order, a very apollonian characteristic while on the other hand, a sonnet's content is usually chaotic and Dionysian in nature, suggesting an inherent disorder of our world and our lives that can be seen in Shakespearian sonnets and Greek tragedies (Charles, p. 111). Similarly, Hitchcock's *Vertigo* is a chiseled, polished, and carefully constructed work of art; it was carefully written in a screenplay in strict order, as we know that Hitchcock was very careful in these matters, unlike Godard, who would improvise on the site. Yet the themes in his movies depict the chaotic nature and the inherent disharmony of our lives in the language of visual art through symbols and colors and the movement of the camera, which is an illusion yet suggests the larger realities of our existence on this planet.

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