

The Philosophical Hitchcock: *Vertigo* and the Anxieties of Unknowingness¹

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The possible intersection of film and philosophy has become a more prominent topic in the last 20 or 30 years. By this intersection I do not mean the philosophy of film, the kind of art it is and its relation to other arts, but film as itself a mode of reflective thought. This is due largely to the influence of the Harvard philosopher Stanley Cavell and the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. We don't have time to explore this theme here fully, but I want to offer one example of what such an intersection might look like.

The film I would like to discuss is Alfred Hitchcock's masterpiece, his 1958 film, *Vertigo*. The "philosophical problem" at issue is how we might come to understand another's behavior, attitudes toward us, intentions, beliefs, and so forth—a form of understanding that is largely interpretive, rather than observational.

One inflection of that problem is familiar. It is sometimes said that in any romantic relationship between two people, there are actually six persons involved. There are *the two persons they actually are*; there are *the two persons as they see themselves*; and there are *the two persons as they are each seen by the other*. Once starting down such a road, though, it is hard to stop. One could say: there is also, *for each, the person they aspire to be seen as by the other*. This might be quite different from the person each actually is, and the person they see themselves as. That would get us to eight. And there could be a difference between *the person they take themselves to be seen as by the other*, and *the person they are really seen to be by the other*. That would get us to 10. And if we import a Freudian thesis, *the opposite sex parent of each participant* also would be involved, and that would get us to 12; quite crowded, no matter the size of the drawing room or bedroom.

The cinematic representation of how we deal with the implications of such uncertainty is the central issue in *Vertigo*. We need at this point

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a plot summary, but a detailed one would exhaust all our time. Here is a breathless summary. The film is a story of a murder plot. A wealthy shipping magnate, Gavin Elster, wants to murder his wife, Madeleine. He sees in the paper that his old college friend, Scottie Ferguson (Jimmy Stewart) has had to resign from the police force because he discovers he has acrophobia and gets vertigo in high places. (He froze after falling from a rooftop, contributing to the death of a colleague who tried to help.) Elster hires Scottie to follow his wife, and makes up a story that his wife believes herself possessed by her ancestor Carlotta Valdes, who wants her to commit suicide. He has his mistress, Judy Barton—the Kim Novak character—impersonate his wife, seduce Scottie, and lure him to a Mission tower, knowing that Scottie cannot climb very high. Elster hurls the body of his real wife off the tower, and Scottie is the perfect witness to a staged suicide. Scottie then suffers a nervous breakdown and enters a sanatorium. When released, he wanders the streets, visiting the places he used to visit with Madeleine. Scottie comes across a shop girl, Judy Barton, who bears an uncanny resemblance to Madeleine. It is only at this point—two-thirds of the way through the film—that we, the viewers, discover the truth about everything we have seen. (We were, until this point, as much in the dark about the murder plot as Scottie.) Scottie persuades Judy to let him remake her as Madeleine, and when finished, he exults in the fantasy of a lover returned from the dead. But Judy has saved a telltale clue, a necklace, which gives away the plot. Scottie hauls her back to the tower and forces the whole truth out of her. At a crucial moment in what might be a reconciliation, Judy is startled by a nun climbing the stairs and falls backward to her death. The film ends with Scottie cured of his vertigo, but alone, looking down at the body of his dead lover, twice-dead Madeleine.

But to return to our problem: the putative distinctions and tension among these levels of self-presentation in the public world—“who I take myself to be,” “who I am,” and “the person you take me to be”—especially in intimate relations where each matters a great deal to the other, often show up in conflict, misunderstanding, offense, wounded vanity, and attempts at setting things right. Moreover, every moderately psychologically aware person is also aware of the possibility of such discordance and can take that into account too. So there is some evolving, mutable, functional interdependence among my understanding of another, my understanding of their understanding of me, and my self-understanding, as well as mutable assumptions about what could or could not be possible, given the other and given the terms in which he or she matters to me. The relationship is dynamic, not static. What happens, what people do, is much more important than what people say, since the latter is never completely trustworthy, even if the

speaker is sincere. So often our only means of determining what is real and what is theatrical is what we see, or what we think we see, in what a person does, and *in a person's face*. (This is a kind of visual intelligibility not unrelated to painting and photography.)

So it is not for nothing that the mysterious opening credits of *Vertigo* focus on a face—the face of some unknown woman, never shown in its entirety, but only in a half close-up, and then in sections. She, the face we see, is not a character in the film (perhaps as unknown as Madeleine/Judy will forever remain), and her identity and role in the film are never returned to, never explained. And we literally read the real names of the actors on the face.

In the first part of the film—the Elster plot to murder his wife—we start out with at least four “selves,” since each is pretending to be someone else. There is Scottie’s real self (a retired detective) and Madeleine’s real self (Judy Barton, Elster’s mistress, enlisted to seduce Scottie so he could be used in the plot). Then there is the person Scottie is pretending to be (a casual wanderer, with no connection to Madeleine’s husband, who just happens on Madeleine as she jumps in the bay), and who Judy is pretending to be (Madeleine, Elster’s wife).

As just noted, we might add the person whom Scottie takes Madeleine to be (he actually seems to buy the “possession by ancestor” fiction, or at least fears that it could lead to real suicide), and the person Madeleine takes Scottie to be (she knows he is not a casual wanderer and that he has been set up, but she believes herself to fall in love with “the real Scottie”). That is, each of them knows something about the other that they pretend not to know. One of the great complications raised by the film—as if this were not all complication enough—has to do with “*who* the woman is” whom Scottie falls in love with, given all this posing and false self-presentation, and what consequences flow from the near-impossibility of distinguishing real from apparent in this and perhaps many such important relationships.

Now unknowingness in various forms in general (from ignorance to being deceived, to fantasy-thinking, to self-deceit) is something like a necessary condition of the possibility of Hitchcock’s cinematic world. There is no other director as adept and insightful in exploring cinematically what it is to live in, to endure, such a state of profound unknowingness, as well as depicting what great risks lie in store for anyone who challenges everyday complacency, the easy confidence that things are largely what they seem. That easy confidence itself, not acknowledging or appreciating the depth of this unknowingness, is also full of risks, chief of which is a moralism narrow enough to count as a kind of blindness. The list of Hitchcock’s films in which the wrong person is blamed for or suspected of something—often confidently, smugly

blamed—is very long, and *suspense*—the primary technique used by Hitchcock to draw viewers into the film, to “co-experience” it, rather than merely observe it—is built around either what we or the characters know that others don’t, or what we and other characters don’t know but badly need to know in a dangerous situation. There are “shadows of doubt” everywhere in his films, doubts that have all sorts of implications for what the characters decide to do, and a kind of doubt that is not easy to eliminate. In *Vertigo*, the unknowingness theme has a specific inflection, a concentration on these multiple and shifting personae, a theme obviously also related to acting and film in general, with Hitchcock creating and deploying personae as actively as Elster and Scottie. (In fact, in this film, these multiple cinematic personae almost get out of hand. It is well known that Hitchcock wanted Vera Miles to play the role of Madeleine/Judy, but she became pregnant and couldn’t accept. Nevertheless, it is reported that Hitchcock insisted that Novak play many of the scenes as he imagined Vera Miles would. So we have Kim Novak playing Vera Miles playing Judy Barton playing Madeleine Elster playing Carlotta Valdes.)

This link between increasing social dependence (something that, for Rousseau, begins with the division of labor) and a growing fear of untrustworthy, theatricalized public personae either in submission to this dependence or in self-deceived insistence on independence, is easy enough to see. We are *conscious* of this dependence and know that we must take some care, sometimes great care, about how we are perceived, if we are to achieve any of our ends, and that we must depend on others, knowing that they are also taking such care. Since each of us knows this about the other, part of taking such care involves assessing the genuineness of the self-representations of others, such that aspects of our own self-representation will already reflect such an assessment. In ever more complicated networks of dependence, much of what we accept as fact, as reality, especially the large swath of reality that we cannot see or experience ourselves, is, unavoidably, a matter of testimony from others, others with whom we are sometimes in competition, and many others who, we know, have their own agendas and frailties. We are in the world of Henry James and Marcel Proust.

There is an implicit ideal in all of this, representing oneself as one actually is, and being taken by others to be who one actually is. But Hitchcock is also interested in showing us that what makes this so hard in romantic relations is the ineliminable role of fantasy and desire in such self-presentations and in being perceived. I’ve only time to discuss two scenes in the film to indicate how this might work. This first is an invocation of the femme fatale introduction in film noir, where the male antihero is struck dumb—captivated by the allure of the femme fatale.

The scene is the first time Scottie sees the fake Madeleine, and at the end of the scene, Hitchcock suggests that this female power is also wrapped up in male fantasy, projected fantasy. There is much to say about the way the scene is staged, but anyone who has seen it will acknowledge that Hitchcock makes it quite plausible that a person could fall in love, be struck dumb with romantic desire, by the sight of someone's back. It is clear at the end of the scene how the slightest gesture by Stewart can indicate how captivated he is.

In the course of following the fake Madeleine around, she stages a first suicide attempt by jumping into San Francisco Bay, and Scottie rescues her. We can already see that his concern for her, knowing nothing about her, goes far beyond the duties of a Good Samaritan. That is, remarkably, Scottie does not seek medical attention for Madeleine, but takes her back to his apartment. (Perhaps he already has something in mind.) Madeleine continues throughout to pretend that she is unconscious, and so allows Scottie, probably worried about hypothermia, to completely undress her and put her to bed. We know this because after they get there, we see a right-to-left pan of Scottie's apartment, which shows her clothes, all of them, undergarments included, hanging on a line in the kitchen and then shows her sleeping, naked, in what is obviously his bed. The apartment scenes are, with respect to our theme, beautifully thought out "framing" scenes. It is when she is naked that Judy is at her most deceptive, and it is when elaborately remade and clothed by Scottie that the genuineness of Judy's love for Scottie can be seen and reciprocated.

We only have time now to jump to the most decisive scene, after Judy has been completely transformed and the dead Madeleine has, it seems, come back to life. The scene not only sweeps Scottie away, but it is clearly intended to, and largely does, sweep *us* away too in a brief moment of relief and emotional release. Perhaps we are swept away because the desire to recreate the erotic power of a past is not just a neurotic obsession of one character. The relation between or the great tension between romantic love, the beginnings of a relationship, and companionate marital love, its future, is an important theme in Hitchcock, paradigmatically in *Rear Window*, and the rituals in marital love that seek to recreate the original romantic love are testimony to the power of this fantasy in everyday life. We know Scottie is still deceived, and we sense that something catastrophic will happen soon, but we are invited to, and we largely do, indulge ourselves in the passion of the moment. How could we not? It is the most devoutly wished thing in any human fantasy—overcoming death itself, bringing a loved one who has died back to life. Typical of Hitchcock, we can identify with Scottie's ecstatic experience—and one has to be made of stone, or consumed

by cynicism, not to be carried away by this “return” to the past and to the earliest moments of their love—even while we appreciate the irony. He thinks he has created a simulacrum, a theatricalized version of Madeleine, but he has authored the *real* Madeleine, the Madeleine whom he loved, for she was a simulacrum played by the same “actress,” Judy. (But, of course, there is no second chance; it’s always too late.)

This is all we have time for. But I also want to suggest that there are problems like these in philosophy—such as, how can we ever reliably understand one another, given how our dependence on each other creates so many incentives to misrepresent and misunderstand?—which are not problems with a solution, as if there could be a theory of “other-knowledge” that could be defended abstractly. There is and can be no such theory. We can at least try to understand the nature of the difficulties and the nature of the importance of such ideals and such barriers, and for that we need imaginative geniuses like Alfred Hitchcock.

Author's Note

This paper is a short summary of one of the arguments made in my book, *The Philosophical Hitchcock*, just published by the University of Chicago Press (2017).