

The Face in the Mirror: The Manipulation of the Female Image in *Vertigo*

“No man is happy without a delusion of some kind,” said Christian Nestell Bovee. The male characters of Alfred Hitchcock’s film, *Vertigo*, seem to have taken this quotation to heart. Like Mr. Bovee’s quote states, deceptions and falsehoods in this movie are generated from men in order to fulfill some selfish motive. In *Vertigo* the preferred medium by males to perpetrate their ruses is the female visage. At the core of the film’s plot is Gavin Elster’s and Scottie Ferguson’s manipulation of the image of Kim Novak’s character. Through these major plot elements and more subtle factors such as mise en scène and music, *Vertigo* promotes the ideology that women submit to their image being altered by men, for the male’s own selfish reasons, in order to gain the man’s affection.

Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* conveys the idea that there is a discontinuity between a woman’s image and her true self. Her “true self” is essentially her personality and who she really is. Her “image” is her hollow exterior representation which may or may not be at odds with the “true self.” This focusing and reducing down of a female to a mere image conveys objectification which implies male superiority. It says that women have only aesthetic worth, while men are deeper, thinking beings. The most frequently utilized device by Hitchcock to signify this duality is the mirror. Including an object and its reflection in the mise en scène reinforces the idea of two components. Reflections of Madeleine / Judy are seen numerous times: in Eddie’s as she leaves, in the glass door in the flower shop, in her hotel room when she meets Scottie again, after her transformation, during Scottie’s realization, and when shopping for the gray suit. Likewise, the other major female in the film, Midge, is shown to have a double when she reveals her painting. The camera takes Scottie’s perspective and the audience sees Midge on the left hand side of the screen mimicking the painting’s pose which can be seen on the right. Also Midge’s

reflection appears in the window after Scottie leaves. Lastly, the other important woman in the film, Carlotta, is just a painting. The only real representation of her is her image and her story of being repeatedly dominated by males.

However, men in the film seem not to possess an isolated image component. Men's reflections are only rarely seen. Yet the few occasions when a man and woman can be found simultaneously reflected in a mirror communicates that the woman is being dominated. This occurs in three places: in Eddie's as Gavin and Madeleine leave, in the clothing store, and in Judy's apartment with Scottie. In these instances, Judy / Madeleine is always closest to the mirror with the male on the opposite side. As a result a "female sandwich" of sorts is formed: male, female, female, male images. This surrounding of the real female and her image by the man conveys that she is dominated on every front by the male. The store scene especially communicates this. When Madeleine realizes Scottie wishes to dress her in the same gray suit as Madeleine, she flees to the corner of the room and stands beside a mirror. Scottie pursues her and stands right behind her. Madeleine's face is turned towards the left, making it look as if she and her image are being squished on both sides by Scottie. While this is occurring Scottie is dominating her in reality as well. She protests the buying of the suit saying, "I don't like it." However without any heed to her wishes Scottie rebuts, "We'll take it." In this and the other instances, the male towers over her and in her reflection, signifying that he is the one in control.

Another clue Hitchcock presents that males lack a discontinuity between self and image is given when Judy shows Scottie the two pictures in her room: one of her and her mother and the other of her father. The picture of the two women shows Judy's mother on the left and Judy on the right with a wooden post in between them. The two are wearing similar hair styles and clothes while in very similar body positions, standing tall and arms at the sides. It is hard to tell

which one is which because of the brevity of the shot. This is a reference to the double; one of the ladies is the object and the other is the reflection mirrored around the post. In the picture of the father, he too is standing straight grasping a pole on his left side. However there is not another male to balance the photo, i.e. no reflection. This also conveys that the male is superior and an individual by having his picture taken alone. The females on the other hand are merely mostly identical looking reflections, devoid of a male's individuality.

From the very beginning, *Vertigo* seems to endorse the exploitation of the female image by men, and signify that this will be a theme. After the "Vista Vision" logo fades out, the lower right side of a woman's face fades in to start the movie. It is not the face of Kim Novak or any other female star's. Rather it is an unidentifiable woman which could represent the female sex in general. Next the camera pans left and the woman's lips fill the screen. Then the words, "JAMES STEWART" appear to form a mustache of sorts upon her upper lip. Next the camera pans upward to frame the female's eyes just before the name, "KIM NOVAK," flies in from the top to rest upon the bridge of the nose. The Jane Doe's eyes then quickly dart to her left then right. The camera then proceeds to pan again to the left, just so the woman's right eye fills the screen. Out of the eye then comes, "VERTIGO," followed by a swirling vortex. A long list of credits is shown after the vortex zooms out. And finally this opening ends with the woman's eye reappearing and the words, "DIRECTED BY ALFRED HITCHCOCK," zooming out towards the screen. In this opening sequence Hitchcock is essentially using the image of a woman for personal motives; that is, to show the opening credits to his movie. We know nothing about the woman except the view of her face yet she is "used" as merely a pretty backdrop.

Several components of this scene signify that the camera's gaze is in a male point of view and thus dominating the unnamed woman. First of all is that the audience is never allowed to see

her entire face. Rather, they are allowed to view parts at a time by the camera stopping to focus on Ms. Doe's lips and eyes. This is called "fetishization," according to Laura Mulvey, and allows the woman to be reduced from the human being that she is to individual parts, making the female less threatening:

[Sigmund Freud] asserted that the male psyche, in attempting to reassert a sense of control and power, might sometimes focus obsessively on one object that *can* be controlled. Tied to the way women are figured under the male gaze, fetishization works further to objectify women in order to make them less of a threat. If they are regarded as objects and not fully capable human beings, then women can be kept in subordinate positions (Benshoff and Griffin 238).

In addition to the factor of degradation, fetishization also ties back to man's desire for control over the woman. Instead of considering her body as a whole, focusing on parts to manipulate is a much easier task. Then through the altering of smaller components, the molding of the entire image is achieved.

Another component of the opening sequence that signifies the male gaze is the diverting of the woman's eyes. Historically throughout cinema, men are the ones who possess the controlling gaze and women are the objects of it (Benshoff and Griffin 235). Since the woman in this scene only stares back at the camera very briefly while both of her eyes are in view, she is acknowledging that she is the object of the gaze. And by diverting her eyes the way a king's loyal subjects would, she is affirming her subordination to the camera's male point of view.

The last significant portion of this intro is the music. The dainty harp score that is playing the entire time the woman's face is being shown only recurs once in the movie which is the montage in which Judy is being transformed back into Madeleine. In those successive shots, Judy is seen having her lipstick put on, nails done, and hair dyed. It is important to note that only these specific body parts are shown, nothing more, which is another example of

fetishization and domination of the female image previously mentioned. Also this is the only scene in which the viewer explicitly sees the process of a man manipulating a woman's image for personal motives. Since the opening is the only other time we hear this music, it signifies the same exploitation is occurring here.

It is peculiar that the women in *Vertigo* seem to long for this exploitation to occur. After Scottie takes Judy to the store to buy the gray suit, she begins to realize that he wants to mold her into Madeleine. After some sobbing, she gives into his initial desire: "Well I'll wear the darn clothes if you want me to... if you'll just like me." Yet Scottie is not satisfied with just a similar wardrobe. "Color your hair," he responds. Again she refuses, but again her opposition is short lived. Scottie then pleads with the illogical statement, "Judy please, it can't matter to you," and goes to stand next to her, casting her in his shadow. This lighting effect shows his dominance and foreshadows Judy's inevitable submission. Instead of becoming enraged at Scottie's assumption that she does not have a preference for her looks, after thinking for a moment, Judy replies, "If I let you change me and do what you tell me, will you love me?" Judy let her image be tampered with once by Gavin Elster, and her compensation was some material wealth, being turned into an accomplice to murder, and having her heart broken. However she is willing to again turn to putty and be crafted by a male just so he will love her.

Unexpectedly, Midge goes on to exhibit the same desire. At the beginning of the film, Midge seems to have no interest in Scottie whatsoever, even having previously broken off a marriage engagement with him. Yet as the movie progresses and Midge learns of Scottie's obsession with Madeleine, their relationship changes. Her change of intentions is signified by her change in careers, she goes from underwear design to painting. Whereas before her undergarment designing conveyed that she was not concerned with outer appearance since

underwear is never seen, her switch to painting says just the opposite. She is now solely focused on aesthetic value and image. Also when Scottie enters her apartment she waits upon him, as opposed to making him get himself a drink earlier in the movie. Her change of desire is explicitly revealed when she shows her painting to Scottie. By hybridizing the images of herself and the object of Scottie's obsession, she hopes to redirect his fixation onto her. It is reasonable to believe that like Judy she too would alter her appearance in return for Scottie's love.

But the reason why Scottie becomes enamored with Judy rather than Midge is because Midge alters the image herself. She hypothesizes at what Scottie would want to shape her as. However she is wrong and this demonstration of influence and independency by a woman repulses Scottie. He abruptly leaves which makes her upset at her failure. On the other hand, Judy agrees to do what Scottie tells her. "I don't care anymore about me," she says. Both want Scottie's affection, but Judy lets Scottie be in control whereas Midge does not. Midge's actions repulse Mr. Ferguson whereas Judy's submission to the alteration of her looks affirms male dominance and incites Scottie's love.

Dominance and deception pervade *Vertigo*. It's labyrinth of a plot is driven by the innumerable falsehoods weaved by men throughout the movie. Yet these male puppet masters would be nowhere without their female marionettes. They tug the female's strings every which way to satisfy solely themselves with no regard for the female's desires. As Scottie says, "... Judy, it can't matter to you." And surprisingly it does not matter to women, as long as they receive male affection in return. But this affection is a ruse; the man loves the image of the woman, not her true self. Nevertheless, going back to the quote by Christian Bovee, the man is happy even if it is all a shallow delusion.

Works Cited

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