



# Vertiginous Hauntings: The Ghosts of Vertigo

Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli, Martine Beugnet

► **To cite this version:**

Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli, Martine Beugnet. Vertiginous Hauntings: The Ghosts of Vertigo. Film-Philosophy, 2019, 23 (3), pp.227-246. 10.3366/film.2019.0114 . hal-02919629

**HAL Id: hal-02919629**

**<https://hal-univ-paris.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-02919629>**

Submitted on 23 Aug 2020

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# Vertiginous Hauntings: The Ghosts of *Vertigo*

---

Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli, University of California, Davis  
Martine Beugnet, Université Paris Diderot

## Abstract:

While the initial reception of Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) was unspectacular, it made its presence felt in a host of other films – from Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1983), to Brian De Palma's *Obsession* (1976), and David Lynch's *Mulholland Dr.* (1999). What seemed to have eluded the critics at the time is that *Vertigo* is a film about being haunted: by illusive images, turbulent emotions, motion and memory, the sound and feeling of falling into the past, into a nightmare. But it is also a shrewdly reflexive film that haunts filmmakers, critics, and artists alike, raising fundamental questions about the ontology of moving images and the regime of fascination (exemplified by Hollywood) that churns them out. Douglas Gordon's *Feature Film* (1999), D.N. Rodowick's *The Wanderers* (2016), and Lynn Hershman's *VertiGhost* (2017) are contemporary examples of how the appropriation and contemplation of some of the film's most iconic motifs (the figures of Madeleine, the spiral, the copy or fake, and the fetish), themes (*liebestod*, obsession, the uncanny) and strategies (mirroring, duplicity, and disorientation) ask us to rethink the relation of fetishism to fabulation, and supplementarity to dissimulation and social engineering. *Feature Film*, *The Wanderers*, and *VertiGhost* are supplementary works, but like the original film they are about duplicity, doppelgänger, and dissimulation. What interests us is how they challenge the authority over, or even proximity to, that which returns in the form of the supplement. And ultimately, attaching themselves to the chain of forgers and forgeries, these supplementary works take their place in the vertiginous sequence of substitutions the film established: a neat allegory for a reign of the digital ghosting that Hitchcock could never have anticipated.

*Film-Philosophy* 23.3 (2019): 227–246

DOI: 10.3366/film.2019.0114

© Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli and Martine Beugnet. This article is published as Open Access under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial Licence (<http://www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/>) which permits non-commercial use, distribution and reproduction provided the original work is cited. For commercial re-use, please refer to our website at: [www.euppublishing.com/customer-services/authors/permissions](http://www.euppublishing.com/customer-services/authors/permissions).  
[www.eupublishing.com/film](http://www.eupublishing.com/film)

**Keywords:** Alfred Hitchcock; Jacques Derrida; Supplement; Appropriation; Hauntings.

The initial reception of Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) was unspectacular – it attracted mixed reviews and underperformed at the box office. Critics found it “devilishly far-fetched,” ultimately regarding the “labyrinthine tale” of obsessive love and murder as an “unbelievable story.” While the reviews uniformly acknowledged the “beautiful cinematography,” the “superb soundtrack,” “masterful editing,” and the “authenticity of the locations,” they complained that the pace was “too slow,” the opening was “too long,” and the focus on San Francisco and the surrounding areas was “too heavy, giving a travelogueish effect” (Crowther, 1958, p. 30; *Harrison's Reports*, 1958, p. 79; *Variety*, 1958, p. 6). What seemed to have eluded the critics at the time is that *Vertigo* is a film about being haunted: by illusive images, turbulent emotions, motion and memory, the sound and feeling of falling into the past, into a nightmare. But it is also a shrewdly reflexive film that haunts filmmakers, critics, and artists alike, raising fundamental questions about the ontology of moving images and the regime of fascination (exemplified by Hollywood) that churns them out. For *Vertigo*'s haunting and deceptive images are forgeries: in the film, Judy Barton (Kim Novak), the “common red-headed” sales girl, is made up to look as if she were Madeleine Elster, the glamorous heiress to a shipping magnate; Scottie Ferguson (James Stewart), the “hard-headed detective”, is easily seduced by the promise of possessing what appears to be the ideal woman (Madeleine); and Gavin Elster (Tom Helmore), the seemingly concerned husband, devises an elaborate plan to get away with murdering his wife (Madeleine). The same figure (Madeleine) that serves as the object of desire and murderous hatred is nothing but a forgery, made up to look the part with hair dye, fancy clothes, directed by men (Elster and Hitchcock) to seduce others (Scottie, and presumably the audience).

*Vertigo* seemed to fade from public view until it was released on video in 1983. Since then it has been considered one of the most important films of all time, only to be controversially restored in 1996, and digitally remastered in 2018.<sup>1</sup> This narrative, however, only gives us a partial understanding of its many vanishings and returns. Even if its reception

---

1. After a long absence, *Vertigo* was resurrected in 1983 as a faded video copy of its previous form, again in 1996 when it was restored to VistaVision, shot in 70mm and digitally remastered, and for the 60th anniversary of the film, when it was remastered from the original VistaVision negative to a 4K digital version.

## *Vertiginous Hauntings: The Ghosts of Vertigo*

was tepid and the film disappeared from public screenings, *Vertigo* made its presence felt in a host of other films – from Chris Marker’s *La Jetée* (1962) and *Sans Soleil* (1983), to Brian De Palma’s *Obsession* (1976), Paul Verhoeven’s *Basic Instinct* (1992), Nicole Garcia’s *Place Vendôme* (1997), and David Lynch’s *Mulholland Dr.* (1999) to name only a few. Similarly, it has fascinated generations of film critics and scholars who contemplated and continue to ponder how and why the film keeps on provoking such a range of conflicting interpretations – from theories of identification and subjectivity to auteurship, the male gaze, gender relations, fetishism, meta-criticism, narrative, and identity crises.

For Alain Boillat (2004), the exegesis of Hitchcock’s work has become counterproductive: “the mass of writing, coming from various schools of thought tend to obscure an endlessly interpretable film *dispositif*, now susceptible to illustrate any theory [whether] psychoanalytic, narrative, [or] *gender studies*” (p. ii). But even such reflections do not stop Boillat (and ourselves) from supplementing Hitchcock with his (our) own reading, his (our) own version. So irrepressible is *Vertigo*’s haunting that artists, surfing the digital zeitgeist, have joined ranks with Hitchcock obsessed filmmakers and critics. The numerous exhibitions devoted to Hitchcock – *Spellbound* at the London Hayward Gallery (1996), *Hitchcock et l’Art: Coïncidences Fatales* at the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montreal and Centre Pompidou, Paris (2000), *HITCH* at Glasgow Print Studio (2003) – attest to contemporary curators’ and artists’ obsession with his oeuvre (Jacobs, 2013). As a plethora of derivative works plundered, rearranged, rewrote, replayed, and even reshot Hitchcock’s original images, *Vertigo* entered into the gallery in the guise of video installations, appearing in exhibition spaces like so many offshoots of the sequence where Madeleine (pursued by Scottie) visits the Museum of the Legion of Honor.

The interpretative tools deployed by film criticism to approach *Vertigo* do not suffice to address this new corpus for it is not merely at the level of film’s grammar, or that of psychological or semiotic constructions, that such byproducts operate. The common point between these works of appropriation might be described in terms of what Jacques Derrida (1967) defines as the supplement, namely the practice of mediation that exceeds the simple substitution of representation for presence, and, rather than hunting for the “thing in itself,” embraces art as artifice or techné. Accordingly, we examine a cross section of installation and video works that revisit *Vertigo* in a variety of forms, media, and second-hand practices, as instances of “supplementary art” that, in turn, work to unmask the function of the supplement already at play in Hitchcock’s film.

To address the logic of doubling and the construction of the gaze as contingent on technical forms of mediation is to point to the process of lack and fetishization as historically and technologically grounded (but not, as psychoanalytic interpretations propose, as the unchanging component of an a-historical structure of the human psyche). Following generations of critics who have been captivated by the promise of some return of the real (by rescuing Madeleine, who was never real in the first place), contemporary artists adopt the path of technique and forgery and the process of successive appropriations as creative and productive. Such a logic of imbricated mediations lies at the heart of Derrida's account of the supplement:

Through this sequence of supplements, a necessary process emerges: that of an infinite succession that ineluctably multiplies supplementary mediations, producing the meaning of the very thing that they put off:<sup>2</sup> the mirage of the thing itself, of immediate presence, of originary perception. Immediacy is derived. Everything starts with the intermediary. (Derrida, 1967, p. 218)

Derrida's theory of the supplement grows out of his examination of the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who uses the term both to describe the creative activity of writing and his relationship with women. Where *Vertigo* and its critical and artistic appropriations are concerned, it is not merely the description of the supplement as a series of mediations that points to its pertinence, but the concept's function in the interpretation of an economy of gender roles. Derrida examines Rousseau's (allegedly successful) attempt at "supplementing" the loss of the (idealized) figure of the (adoptive) mother (who is already a supplement for the biological mother) with that of his lover Thérèse, as a "sequence of supplements" (Derrida, 1967, p. 226).

Bringing together Rousseau's autobiographical (*Confessions* [1782–1789]) and theoretical writings (particularly the *Essay on the Origins of Language* [1781] and *Emile* [1762]), Derrida endows the supplement with a dual nature and function: the supplement adds and replaces, working at the level of language as well as identity, making good of a loss in the representation and projection of the self but also in the relation to the other – namely women (Kakoliris, 2015). Just as writing is meant to supplement the lost sense of immediate presence afforded by

---

2. *Différer* means to delay, yet the term is also consciously chosen for its closeness to the concept *différance*, the denial of a fixed meaning anchoring the sign to an original referent.

## *Vertiginous Hauntings: The Ghosts of Vertigo*

speech, women are meant to supplement for an original loss created by the disappearance of the mother (the reverse, the possibility of a sense of loss experienced from the point of view of women, is not envisioned by either Rousseau or Derrida). By extension, the idealized representation of the feminine figure supplements the lack of the real thing as well as the impossibility of sexual fulfillment. Just as the presence of his lover, Thérèse, is the necessary supplement to the loss of the woman he called *Maman* (his supplemental mother, lover, and educator), to Rousseau, writing is a necessary, vital activity. Yet, as Derrida points out, the supplement is riddled with ambivalence since there is a danger inherent to the supplementary (and here, Derrida's exegesis of Rousseau's supplement as a "dangerous supplement" echoes Baudrillard's notion of the simulacra). Whilst it is meant to re-establish a lost presence, the supplement always threatens to overlay actual presence. It is an "unnatural" addition that saps immediacy, pulling it towards representation and imagination (Derrida, 1967, p. 201). Rousseau, Derrida contends, both foregrounds and denies the productive function of the supplement, embracing mediation yet wishing to efface it at the same time: "the process of substitution both makes good of and marks out a specific loss" (p. 219).

Film is clearly a supplemental art form. Hollywood cinema, in particular, has been accused of exploiting a life-like form of representation to create an illusion of presence, the making good of a lack that crystallizes with particular efficiency in the figure of the present yet distant idealized female star. Hitchcock's *Vertigo* stands out as the key example, a vertiginous quest to find some actual or authentic presence whose loss has been buried under layers of supplementary narratives and figures. Here the supplement can take the form of a ghost, that is, a self-effacing figure that "occupies the middle ground between presence and complete absence" (Derrida, 1967, p. 219).

In *Vertigo* we are confronted by so many ghosts it is almost impossible to discern between actual apparitions and their countless simulations. For haunting takes vertiginous turns in the film. Indeed, the protagonist, Scottie, is haunted by an idealized vision of a woman (Madeleine), who is haunted by her great-grandmother, Carlotta Valdes, who is haunted by the powerful man who takes their child from her and raises it with his wife. Haunting quickly transforms into possession: Madeleine is possessed by the ghost of Carlotta who leads her to suicide; Scottie is possessed by Madeleine whose death leads him into madness. Accompanying the pursuit of an ideal woman, is Bernard Hermann's famous soundtrack that conjures memories of tragic romance (*liebestod*), which seems to follow this would-be tragic hero as he leads us on a

cinematically stunning virtual tour of San Francisco's historic monuments, the so-called "portals of the past". Rather than face any historical ghosts, these portals conceal a long history of seduction and control. The men who behold these landmarks imagine themselves returning to a time when, as the film repeatedly reminds us, men had power and freedom. But this image stares back at them with what William Rothman calls Hitchcock's "murderous gaze". Two-thirds of the way through the film, we are shocked to find out that the mysterious and tragic Madeleine that Scottie so desperately tries to save is really only a performance played by Judy.

While there may not be any actual ghost haunting *Vertigo*, virtual ghosts continue to haunt Scottie who, in his pursuit of the ghost of Madeleine, finds Judy and attempts to remake her into Madeleine. Rather than escape, Judy is driven by her desire to be idealized or at least to become the subject of a virtual romance. At Scottie's demand, Judy reperforms a version of Madeleine in order to recapture his love. But alas, it is "too late". For Scottie, Judy's reperformance of Madeleine is not as good as when she was coached and molded by Elster. While Elster might seem free of such delusion, he is also obsessed with the specter men "who had the power and the freedom" to throw women away or kill their wives with impunity. Virtual ghosts of ideal women and ruthless men still linger. But hidden in, and possibly behind, this chain of obsessions is what Gilles Deleuze calls "the powers of the false" (1989). Although the performance of Madeleine by Judy (both played by Kim Novak) is a fake, it is the power of these false images and acts that continue to enthrall us.

The powers of the false generate their own hero in the figure of the forger. The forger is dependent, like a parasite, on the presence of the ghost that it will eventually phagocytize. And yet, this cunning figure permeates all levels of *Vertigo's* narrative, production, and dissemination: from the director who dupes his audience into believing "that someone dead can enter and take possession of a living being", to the composer who draws us into a seemingly romantic-tragedy in the tradition of Richard Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, and the actors whose public images lead us to believe that they are unlike the unseemly characters they portray. These forgers metamorphose into one another (Flaxman, 2011, p. xviii). "There is no unique forger", as Deleuze argues, "if the forger reveals something it is the existence behind him [or her] of another forger" (1989, p. 134). The forger is the master of serial artifice, the master of supplementarity.

For Deleuze, film is the forger's ultimate medium, combining photographic realism and illusionism, the false sensation of presence and authenticity exposed by modernist cinema's forger-*auteur*.

## *Vertiginous Hauntings: The Ghosts of Vertigo*

Hitchcock's cinema did not embrace modernist anti-illusionism, but nonetheless derived its enduring power of fascination over modern filmmakers, critics, and, recently, video artists from an intertwining of cinematography, forgery, and haunting. In *Vertigo*, forgery is integral to the narrative, playing out in the form of self-citation, taking the guise of haunting. The film is constructed as a series of repeated scenes, the revisiting of the same locations by characters performing as *revenants* – literally, ghosts that are defined by their “returning” to the same places, the same situations. But forgery is also woven into the cinematography, surfacing in the way fluid sequences of wandering, walking, driving, disappearing, following, and spying are punctuated by close-ups, thus the insistence on pointing out certain details as if they were clues or evidence, to better deceive the investigator as well as the spectator. Museums and galleries, as well as churches and hotel rooms, feature prominently in this recurring pattern, seemingly anticipating the return of Hitchcock's characters in the present-day context of installation art. Here citations hone in on the distinctive Hitchcockian style of filmmaking, revisiting and analyzing it by separating its various components: the characters and their milieu, as well as the editing and framing that underpin the construction of the gaze (male, surveilling, objectifying, but also deceiving and deceived).

I have previously argued that “*Vertigo*'s complicated narrative structure, its psychological twists, and its discontinuous treatment of time, space, and perspective make it difficult to recreate” (Ravetto-Biagioli, 2011, p. 101). *Vertigo* is a film that both “transforms with new theoretical readings or filmic offshoots and questions these readings by offering other possible relations and critical reflections” (p. 102). In other words, the film seems to absorb its admirers, as well as critics and their theoretical ruminations, expanding with and into them. It draws filmmakers and critics into its vortex that spirals outward into some many copies, remakes and make-overs. Douglas Gordon's *Feature Film* (1999), Lynn Hershman's *VertiGhost* (2017), and D.N. Rodowick's *The Wanderers* (2016), are contemporary examples of how the appropriation and contemplation of some the film's most iconic motifs (the figures of Madeleine, the spiral, the copy or fake, and the fetish), themes (*liebestod*, obsession, the uncanny), and strategies (mirroring, duplicity, and disorientation) ask us to rethink the relation of fetishism to fabulation, supplementarity, dissimulation, and social engineering.

What happens when the logic of the supplement thus becomes subjected to the regimes of (re)production? Rousseau was already anxious about the loss of authenticity (of a truthful self and intended meaning) implied in the passage from oral (perceived as the immediate or



un-mediated) to written expression (deferred, marked by absence). Mechanical and digital reproduction, ushered in the realm of unbounded citation and forgery where, according to Derrida, once produced, every sign must be “abandoned to its essential drifting” –

the possibility of extraction and of citational grafting [...] of functioning cut off [...] from its “original” meaning and from its belonging to a saturable and constraining context. Every sign, [...] can be cited, put between quotation marks; thereby it can break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely non-saturable fashion. (Derrida, 1986, p. 320)

As with Rousseau’s “dangerous supplement”, *Vertigo* “cumulates and accumulates presence [...] renounc[ing] the *present* and the *proper*”, but it thwarts any subsequent “attempts to master them better in their meaning, in the ideal form of truth, of the presence of the present and of the proximity or property of the proper” (Derrida, 1967, p. 199), as Rousseau had hoped. The supplement is always the work of the forger – the one who captures and extracts the image of his or her paramour so as to enjoy his or her own private pleasures in the form of a masturbatory fantasy. Like a supplement, *Vertigo* adds only to replace one forger with another. *Feature Film*, *VertiGhost*, and *The Wanderers* are supplementary works, but like the original film they are about duplicity, doppelgänger, and dissimulation. By attaching themselves to the chain of forgers and forgeries, these supplementary works make it hard to tell what type of meaning or value they add to Hitchcock’s original film and what they derive from it. What is clear is that they challenge the authority over, or even proximity to, that which returns in the form of the supplement. How indeed can unruly ghosts become a supplement that can be relocated to some deferred (put off) or promised sense of presence (intimacy)?

Hershman’s *VertiGhost* is based on a simple concept that starts with going into the same gallery room in the Legion of Honor that Hitchcock filmed in 1958. In a corner of gallery six, Hershman places a mirror with a dollar sign on it, reflecting the mannequin with Madeleine’s clothes standing in front of it. On the adjacent walls she hangs two paintings, a photograph, and mounts two screens that project a video installation. This 15-minute video consists of exact reenactments of 35 key scenes of the original film, all shot on location at The Palace of Fine Arts, Nob Hill, the Legion of Honor where Madeleine exits her green Jaguar sedan to enter the museum and sit in front of the “Portrait of Carlotta,” and Fort Point, where she stands at the edge of the bay before jumping in.

## *Vertiginous Hauntings: The Ghosts of Vertigo*

But the installation does not simply remake or reprocess these iconic scenes as, for instance, Les LeVeque's four channel video installation *4 Vertigo* (2000) does.<sup>3</sup> Instead, Hershman multiplies the images of Madeleine by having three different actresses dressed up in replica outfits and play her: Yuliya Slepukhina, a Ukrainian model who bears a distinct resemblance to Kim Novak; Nkechi Emeruwa, a Nigerian psychologist; and Natasha Boas, one of the museum's curators who dresses as Judy. Each of these actresses reenacts different scenes from the film, but all of them are shown returning simultaneously to that same (reinstalled) bench in room six of the Legion of Honor where Judy dressed as Madeleine gazed at the "Portrait of Carlotta." In the video, the actresses return to behold a replica of John Ferren's prop painting "Portrait of Carlotta", custom made for Hitchcock's film. However, we (as visitors) do not find the copy of the original prop in the museum. Instead we find a computer generated and blurred version of the same portrait in its place. The blurred portrait seems to be in motion, catching only one of Carlotta's eyes in focus, and replacing the other eye with a go-pro video camera that captures the image of visitors who pass before it. These images of patrons gazing at Carlotta are projected on a small screen in the same room and online at the installation's website. Hershman likens the blurred image to our fuzzy understanding of surveillance. When asked why she installed a distorted image of Carlotta, she reflects, "I blurred it because [...] it is [like] blurring the truth of surveillance". Surveillance supplements and, therefore, replaces the confrontational gaze (that gave us the illusion of co-presence) with yet another voyeuristic one – except that the source of this voyeuristic gaze is what I have called the "spectator's own *distracted gaze*" (Beugnet, 2017b, p. 219). In *Vertigo*, the absorbed, indeed captivated, quality of Madeleine's contemplation of the portrait is exemplary both of an obsolete representation of the museum experience (nowadays typified by a crowd of wandering visitors) and of gendered spectatorship. Traditionally, men have been cast in the role of producers of images, in which the female spectator, unable to grasp the supplementary nature of such productions, becomes immersed. Or, as Mary Ann Doane puts it, "for the female spectator, there is a certain over-presence of the image – she is, the image" (1982, p.78). In contrast, the gaze, as Laura Mulvey (1975) described it, functions like the

---

3. With *4 Vertigo* LeVeque condensed the entire 128-minute film 4 times, changed the vertical and horizontal orientation of each version, and used a computer algorithm to generate a 10-minute version of the whole film that stutters and seems to spiral inwards and outwards in a kaleidoscopic effect.

supplement, as a series of mediations: Scottie's surveillance of Madeleine is absorbed in her own narcissistic gaze, but it also serves as a relay for the spectator's gaze at Madeleine through Scottie. However, Hershman's revisiting of the scene reminds us how Madeleine's absorption is faked, her masquerading of raptness is part of a set up that controls and monitors Scottie's movements and how he sees. Just as Carlotta's gaze once signaled Scottie's part in a circular system of deception and surveillance, Hershman's restaging completes the loop whereby the visitor's gaze and movements are, in turn, observed and displayed.

For Hershman, the "truth of surveillance" is also the necessary awareness that with the internet of things all our devices communicate with those products we see online or in shop windows, so as to track and profile us. In order to reinforce the feeling that objects are watching us and invisibly communicating with one another, she places bouquets of flowers on the benches in the gallery that have hidden within them 3D-printed motion sensors that resemble a leaf. The motion sensor sends a message to the camera to begin filming the patrons who install themselves in the position of Madeleine/Judy. Surveillance images not only supplement the actual experience, the co-presence with the art works, but they also expose the visitor to a wider audience beyond the museum. In this case, Hershman cannot control the dissemination of the image.

The image of Carlotta not only stares back from some fictional past, but now captures the gaze of those that look at her. This circularity of looks and looking makes us aware that we are confronting a work of art, but also the fact that, while the museum stages this work for us, it also monitors which works draw in more visitors and how much time we spend looking at them. The work of art is measured on its own performance. In the case of *VertiGhost*, however, the notion of performance becomes exponentially more complicated because current visitors come to watch ghostly visitors made-up in the image of Madeleine and Judy who, in turn, are already an embedded set of performances: Kim Novak plays Judy, who performs a fabricated version of Madeleine to make Scottie Ferguson and the filmgoing audience believe she is Gavin Elster's real wife, and that she is haunted by the ghost of her great-grandmother Carlotta Valdes. Once the real Madeleine is murdered by her husband, Judy (the fake Madeleine) will be rediscovered on the streets of San Francisco and forced by Scottie to reperform her act as Madeleine. But the performance will never be the same since Scottie will come to realize that the Madeleine he loved was really nothing but an act – an act that Judy performed much better when directed by Gavin Elster. Hershman suggests that Novak's performance of Judy, who performs Madeleine, continues to be copied by

## *Vertiginous Hauntings: The Ghosts of Vertigo*

the many visitors to gallery six who have dressed up as, played, and staged their own versions of Madeleine over the years.

However, these would-be actors and actresses might have been disappointed to discover that the “Portrait of Carlotta” (a mere prop, a rather garish painting created specifically for the film) was not in the museum’s collection. Instead they find, with *VertiGhost*, Hershman’s distorted image of Carlotta and the painting of artist and poet, “Pierre-Edouard Baranowski” (1918) by Amedeo Modigliani that the museum hid away since the late 1950s because the curators were afraid it was a fake. By juxtaposing the fake portrait of Carlotta that visitors have thought to be real next to the real Modigliani (thought to be a fake), Hershman taps into one of *Vertigo*’s central themes: not that fiction and reality have become increasingly blurred (that is an old story), but that reality is itself a construct that is full of pre-established fictions that continue to haunt us.

*VertiGhost* demonstrates how the ghosts of *Vertigo* are themselves “dangerous supplements,” “threatening us with death,” or worse still, as Rousseau fears, “cohabitation with women”<sup>4</sup> (Derrida, 1967, p. 216). Rousseau’s reading of the dangerous supplement as a seductive, but “‘fatal advantage’ ” that “leads desire away from the good path” (Derrida, 1967, p. 216), reveals the underlying relation of the supplement to what Mulvey (1975) calls “fetishistic scopophilia” (p. 14). According to Rousseau, the supplement is a direct result of the sacrifice of one’s presence in exchange for a future return in the form of value, which he defines as authorship, the production and control of symbolic meaning. Speech and the very presence of the subject are sacrificed for writing that aims for the symbolic reappropriation of that sacrificed presence. For Derrida, the supplement represents the drive to control the future by projecting one’s own image on it. It is this phantom image that haunts us, limiting the future to a set of possibilities – possibilities that conform to the limits of that resemblance (Kwitter, 2002, p. 7).

But as Derrida observes, more than Rousseau himself, the figure of presence, subjected to sacrifice, is Rousseau’s lover Thérèse, who physically vanishes only to reappear as a fetishistic image that can be enjoyed and controlled without the actual Thérèse being present. This substitution bears a distinct resemblance to what Mulvey described as

---

4. Derrida quotes from Rousseau’s *Confessions*: “Jouir! Ce sort est-il fait pour l’homme? Ah! si jamais une seule fois en ma vie j’avais goûté dans leur plénitude toutes les délices de l’amour, je n’imagine pas que ma frêle existence y eût pu suffire, je serais mort sur le fait” (1967, p. 223).

*Vertigo's* fetishistic appeal, that is, the over-valuation of the female star's "physical beauty [that is] transform[ed] into something satisfying in itself" (1975, p. 14). Underneath this substitution of woman who is present (e.g., Judy) for a manufactured image of woman (Madeleine or Carlotta) is the staging of woman as man's fetish object (a phallic substitute) designed to mitigate man's fears of castration or death. Or, as Derrida puts it,

the experience of auto-eroticism is living in anguish. Masturbation reassures ("soon reassured") only through that culpability traditionally attached to the practice, obliging children to assume the fault and to interiorize the treat of castration that always accompanies it. Pleasure is thus lived as the irremediable loss of the vital substance, as exposure to madness and death. (1967, p. 216)

*Vertigo's* repetition or doubling of men obsessed with power and freedom to control women amounts to turning women into an image – a pure appearance without any material reality. Ironically, it is this spectral image of Madeleine, Carlotta, or the specter of enjoyment that returns to haunt and threaten Scottie and every man who dreams of her. Rather than controlling and enjoying phantasmatic apparitions, the supplement seems to behave more like a ghost, which Derrida will later define as "always revenant. One cannot control its comings and goings because it begins by coming back" (1994, p. 11).

*VertiGhost* can be seen as yet another iteration of Hershman's long history of questioning the ascent of the blonde to the status of iconic ideal, desirable, feminine beauty, which can be traced back to her four-year performance as Roberta Brietmore – a fictional persona of a divorced blonde woman living in San Francisco. Brietmore was furnished with her own credit cards, checking accounts, a driver's license, and an apartment. Hershman documented the character's external appearance and her internal psychological struggles, including her regular sessions with a psychiatrist. Like Madeleine, Roberta has vanished and reemerged many times. She first resurfaced in 1978 as three actors were hired by Hershman to perform her. Since then, the surveillance doll, *CybeRoberta* (1995–96), the avatar in the online virtual world of *Second Life* that bears the name Roberta Brietmore, and as a chorus line of Robertas at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (2017) have all supplemented and replaced Hershman's original performance. Roberta and Madeleine resemble one another as well as the actresses that portray them, in that they are made to look the part of desirable feminine beauty as dictated by Hollywood and all of those aggressive marketing campaigns for blonde hair dye, haute

## *Vertiginous Hauntings: The Ghosts of Vertigo*

couture, and cosmetics. Though, Hershman like Novak (who appears in *VertiGhost*) have supplemented, that is, modified what Rousseau meant by a threatening “cohabitation with women” and what Hitchcock implied when he suggested that Scottie’s obsession with Madeleine was a form of necrophilia. What is dangerous for these women is living with this supplementary woman inside and beside themselves – the one that threatens to devour the living.

Gordon’s *Feature Film*, on the other hand, contains no image of women. Instead of remaking the look of *Vertigo*, or the look of the cool blonde as an icon of seduction by obsessively framing the female body, it remakes Bernard Herrmann’s original soundtrack and obsessively frames a small selection of body parts of the conductor who directs the orchestra. *Feature Film* presents James Conlon, who was musical director of the Opéra National de Paris at the time the film was made. In the film, Conlon is shown as he conducts a new live interpretation of Herrmann’s complete score for *Vertigo* in a Paris studio with the hundred strong orchestra of the Paris Opera (who are only heard but never seen). For this work Gordon made two continuous recordings: the first he shot in super 16, using three semi-fixed cameras all trained to capture Conlon’s eyes, hand movements, and gestures; and the second recording captured two constantly moving filmic projections of the initial recording that were blown up on 35mm film. This footage was then cut and presented as a detailed study of the conductor’s arms, hands, face, moles, facial expressions, movements, and gestures. The film’s reliance, exclusively, on extreme close-ups, its shallow focus, and incessant horizontal and vertical panning movements, make it claustrophobic and disorienting. The relentless panning movement that follows Conlon’s hands and arms in and out of the frame, in and out of focus, blurring and sweeping, gives the impression that the camera is obsessively searching for something elusive or something that moves too quickly to capture. The blurring or persistent disfiguring of the image in *Feature Film* echoes my reading of *Vertigo* in the context of my work on the figure of blur:

By modulating the thresholds of visibility and invisibility, highlighting, and delaying the emergence of the figures on the screen, or their return to the shapeless matter of blur, such bridging amplifies the miracle of presence, or the imminence of its effacement, playing on the desire of the spectator. (Beugnet, 2017a, pp. 40, 42)

In *Vertigo*, blur resides in the interstice between the desire to take form and the passage from one image into another. While Hershman prolongs this passage between desire and the image by blurring the “Portrait of

Carlotta”, Gordon leaves us only with morphing effects and effacement. It is not until right after the 4-minute musical prelude that we even get a glimpse of Conlon’s face, and it is only a partial image – a profile that cuts off the tip of his nose. But this visual assemblage links the conductor’s hands and downward gaze to the sound of opening credits and the establishing shot of *Vertigo*, where a nameless man’s hands grasp the last rung of a ladder as he flees onto a rooftop pursued by Scottie and a rank and file policeman.

Even though Gordon has severed the image of the film from its soundtrack, the frenzied sounds of the opening chase scene, the sound of falling, and the music’s central motifs clearly link Conlon with what Victor Burgin calls “the remembered film [...] detached from its original setting, [that] satellites the other—each echoes the other, increasingly merges with the other [...] [becoming] a hybrid object” (Burgin, 2004, p. 59). Ghosts of remembered images from *Vertigo* are cast adrift; we are effectively watching two films at once – our own film and Gordon’s supplementary film – which creates a sense of disorientation because the two films do not match. In order to jog our memory, Gordon often projects *Vertigo* in the gallery space on a small television screen hidden in a corner or just around the corner. Yet, this diminished image appears on video in what seems to be a faded pan-and-scan transfer. Hitchcock’s film runs in its 128-minute entirety, muted and dwarfed by the large cinema screen that projects *Feature Film*. Because *Feature Film* is roughly fifty minutes shorter than the original, the musical arrangements are separated by brief black dissolves and moments of pause. In these moments of deadtime, we hear the distorted and distant voices coming from the original film. Hitchcock’s soundtrack is reduced to background noise that is barely audible over traffic of visitors in the gallery. When the music is silent, “the screen shows only blurred red and black zones from the recording studios”, leaving the viewer with “nothing but the distant whisper of the dialogue” (Broeker, 2007, p. 79). As Raymond Bellour aptly puts it,

that visitor – man or woman, but in Hitchcock’s work, always a bit more man than woman – will never have both images in view, and like Scottie throughout this mirror-film, will be destined to wander from one to the other. (1999, p. 2)

While we might be put in the place of the wanderer who floats with this turbulent and ambivalent sound, it does not mean we can identify with Conlon or Scottie, any more than we can put ourselves in the place of conductor, director, or other conjured characters.

## *Vertiginous Hauntings: The Ghosts of Vertigo*

In *Feature Film*, however, there is “a strategic absence of the femme fatale” (Monk, 2003, p. 184) who, with *Vertigo*, enthralled us and thereby controlled us through her absence – even before her death, Madeleine was felt in through the music as a kind of longing and loss. As Philip Monk (2003) suggests, Gordon’s film may free Madeleine from the captive gaze of the men who want to possess her, but it reveals that underneath the image of the beautiful alluring woman lies a series of rivalries between men – between Hitchcock and Gordon as filmmakers, between Herrmann as composer and Conlon as conductor, between the musical score and the male protagonist’s emotional affect, between the two men (Scottie and Elster) who vie to control Madeleine. These tensions are played out in Herrmann’s masterful motifs: the elusive song of Madeleine appears with the hypnotic sound of strings, Scottie obsessively pursues this mysterious fugue with the sounds of a woodwind ostinato, descending into what Steven Smith (1991) calls “muted brass dissonance” (p. 221). But even these musical shifts between major and minor modes are false rivalries, since without the snare of an enthralling image (the seductive Madelaine), there is no longer any ground to fight over. What disappears in *Feature Film* is the gendering of sound that divides Scottie’s (the protagonist’s) emotional affect from Madeleine’s siren sound. We are left with only the circular, intensifying loop-structure and its obsessive returns and repetitions that culminate in a “full-blown waltz”, but, as Royal Brown (1999) points out, by the time the music reaches its climax, it is already too late. He writes, “what would have been a dance of love in a story of fire and passion has become a dance of death” (Brown, 1999, p. 7). Rather than circling in on an object of desire or a figure of death, in Gordon’s film these musical circlings, recircling, and suspensions are ungrounded, left to float directionless outside of any chronological time-frame (Sullivan, 2006, p. 229). We, therefore, can only experience how the film feels. But when matched with the relentless tight close-ups, the frenzied panning and tracking shots of Conlon’s face, eyes, hair, hand gestures, and arm movements a counter-picture emerges, leaving us with neither the longing for love nor a profound sense of loss, only a strange sort of frenzied ambivalence that moves from obsession to phobia and back again. Just as the extreme close-up eventually breaks down the smallest figurative elements of painterly, photochemical as well as digital/pixel matter, movement destroys attempts at fixing and defining the image. It ultimately disfigures the image, revealing the powers of the false at work, as an endless process of becoming (morphogenesis).

If the female figure is absent from Gordon’s *Feature Film*, male characters have been edited out of the double projection that forms the



core of D. N. Rodowick's *The Wanderers*.<sup>5</sup> Two side by side projections, without sound track, show excerpts from Roberto Rossellini's *Voyage to Italy* (*Viaggio in Italia*, 1954) and Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, screening only those images where male characters are absent, concentrating on the female protagonists of both films, the places they visit, what they see as well as landscapes and cityscapes they drive through. The dual screening traces Katherine's (Ingrid Bergman) pilgrimages from her uncle's house to the museum, the catacombs, and various sites in and around Naples in *Voyage in Italy*, while at the same time it follows Madeleine (or Judy) as she wanders in and around San Francisco, stopping by those iconic sites – the graveyard at the Mission Dolores, the Legion of Honor Museum, the hotel that was once Carlotta's house and which bears traces of the dead woman's presence. These reoccurring tropes are the visual reminders of the crisscrossing narrative patterns that tie the two characters to one narrow path: while Madeleine is seen at the window of the McKittrick hotel, where Carlotta went mad after her baby was ripped from her, on the left screen Katherine, haunted by the fading possibility of motherhood, is confronted at every turn with pregnant women, women pushing prams or walking with children.

The absence of the male figure does not set the female characters free; rather, the editing out of the male protagonists creates an uncomfortable "sequence of supplements", replete with visible absences, ellipses, jump cuts, while at the same time the intensified focus foregrounds the oppressive nature of a gaze that preys on the women's every moment, tracking every emotion that appears on their faces. Whether passing through the countryside, negotiating the streets of San Francisco or Naples, or visiting museums in their respective cities, in this version of the films they are permitted to occupy the space alone. Yet, theirs is not the leisurely journey of *flaneuses*, but the uneasy wandering of one who is observed. According to Rodowick, *Vertigo*

is organized spatially by an investigative and punishing male gaze leading to madness and death as it winds through San Francisco's serpentine streets. [While *Voyage to Italy*] is dominated by the emotive face of Ingrid Bergman as she negotiates the labyrinthine streets of Naples, observing and reacting to the persistence of life in an environment overwhelmed by the force of passing and past time. (2016)

---

5. We realize there are different iterations of this work, but we are going to only talk about the one where the two films are projected side-by-side.

## *Vertiginous Hauntings: The Ghosts of Vertigo*

As the sequences unfold next to one another, striking juxtapositions take place and the images start to respond to each other in both graphic and seemingly narrative terms: from across one frame, Madeleine (Kim Novak) looks at Katherine (Ingrid Bergman), who drives through Naples on the left, while on the right the camera starts to track through the narrow streets of San Francisco; the portrait of Carlotta casts a glance at Katherine who reflects on her husband's caustic remarks, images of a funeral taking place in Naples align with images of the aftermath of Madeleine's death; occasionally, the two cars (in both cases, a light-colored jaguar) line up, as if the limits of the frame were porous, or the two images formed a continuous space.

*The Wanderers* exposes the two facets of the supplement: the technique of the medium and the logic of replacement and substitution that governs over the existence of the female figure, which the parallel projection reveals and unsettles. This is not about film supplementing life anymore, but video supplementing film, until certain juxtapositions call attention to the overlap. In some instances, images emerge from both screens and seem to bleed into one another: fades and motion blur obscure the content, making it difficult to ascertain which film the images come from (even if one is shot in black and white and the other in technicolor). Contrary to Hershman's and Gordon's work, in *The Wanderers*, blur appears neither as the expression of the distracted gaze, nor the mark of a perceptual shift of the visual towards the tactile. Instead, the images collapse into indeterminacy or even formlessness. This formlessness returns both as a ghost effect and as an interstitial space of potentiality, as what Giorgio Agamben would call the potentiality to "not-be" (1999, p. 186). As a surfacing moment of de-formation of de-figuration, one that initiated in film yet is more readily associated with video's visual regime, it also signals a moment of exchange or "passage," an "in-betweenness of images" (Bellour, 1990).

The two videos are of unequal length (there are more scenes of Katherine alone in *Voyage to Italy* than there are scenes of Madeleine/Judy by herself in *Vertigo*, therefore *Vertigo*'s is shorter). As a result, they form asynchronous loops. The number of side-by-side combinations is random and unlimited. In *Vertigo*, when Scottie suggests that he join Madeleine in her wanderings, Madeleine muses that "one person wanders, two people are going somewhere". Yet in Rodowick's montage, there is no end to the dual journey, just parallel wandering and chance encounters between the images: the correspondences are purely accidental, and each loop generates new sets of combinations. For example, the same scene where Katherine tells Alex (George Sanders) "This is the first time we have been really alone ever since we married", matches up in a first loop of

*The Wanderers* with Madeleine exiting the flower shop and entering her car as seen by Scottie in the back alley. On a second loop this same scene (from the opening sequence of *Voyage to Italy*) matches with (the fake) Madeleine driven by Scottie to the Mission San Bautista just before the real Madeleine's death. The pivotal scene in *Voyage to Italy* where Katherine acknowledges that she and her husband (Alex) really do not know or like each other very much is opened up to new possibilities: first there is a heightened sense of voyeurism since in both films' sequences the camera seems to shoot through the windshield onto the female protagonists (one from the perspective of Scottie, who from inside the car watches Madeleine, and the other from the perspective of a disembodied gaze onto Katherine from an unknown perspective outside the car); this is followed by a sense of fatality through Madeleine's impending death, and Katherine's and Alex's potential break-up (ironically it is the many images of death that will bring them back together). But with each iteration there is also a renewed sense of potentiality – the capacity to not-be (actualized, realized, fully defined). Such potentiality is ruled by algorithmic possibilities. With each loop, as with the start of a new game of cards, the images are reshuffled. While only the same images can return, it is the combination that puts off and differs in the form of so many combinations. But there is no projection into the future (Rousseau's fear), just an open-ended set of endless possibilities for more and more realignments. In sum, there is no perfect alignment, but every configuration offers something different, a looping back to previous alignments, marking their differences and opening up (deferring) on to future iterations of the same scenes that will align in some other form.

The underlying principle of *The Wanderers* is not to reveal, through parallel montage, some hitherto hidden truths. In its reliance on chance juxtapositions, or, to borrow Derrida's preferred terms "*prise* (capture)" and "*surprise*" (1967), the work embraces the logic of the supplement at its most unsettling and productive. The supplement always says "more or less something else" than what was intended; it points to the necessity (for the writer and, by extension, the artist) to engage with a system whose "laws and life" one cannot "dominate absolutely." One must always, to a certain extent, let oneself be "governed" by it. And it is in the interstice between what has been effectively calculated and that which escaped the artist's intention that the reception of the resulting work, the spectator's engagement, becomes productive (Derrida, 1967, p. 219). *The Wanderers* is emblematic of the digital's potential to mine the archive and supplement it to infinity. In its combination of the archetypal form of the digital – the loop – with the principle of chance, however, it foregrounds mediation as a process, dependent on a self-ruling technical

## *Vertiginous Hauntings: The Ghosts of Vertigo*

substrate through which images retain a form of autonomy, a capacity to surprise us.

To watch Hitchcock's film one more time, and to engage with its appropriations in the form of supplementary art – to wander through Hershman and Gordon's installations, or to sit through another loop of *The Wanderers* to discover a new variant – is to be reminded that film images, even the most predetermined ones, resist their fastening into a singular experience or a stable meaning. Hershman, Gordon, and Rodowick do not simply recreate a "revenant" cinema manifesting itself in the space of contemporary video and installation art, but one that exposes the mechanical ghost at work under the surface of images, whose presence at the heart the lush, transparent images of classical Hollywood cinema Hitchcock had once exposed. If the capacity of the ghosts of *Vertigo* to return and haunt us endures, it is because, in the vertiginous sequence of substitutions the film established (rippling over the rest of Hitchcock's oeuvre), it forms such a neat allegory for a reign of the digital ghosting that Hitchcock could never have anticipated. And as the logic of the supplement slips over into the digital uncanny, chains of supplements appear to spiral out into copies, clones, memes, mashups, and gifs, escaping the control of their successive forgers to haunt the recesses of the web.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Agamben, G. (1999). *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Baudrillard, J. (1983). *Simulations* (P. Beitchman and P. Foss, Trans). New York: Semiotext(e).
- Bellour, R. (1990). *L'entre-images 1. Photo, cinéma, vidéo*. Paris: La Différence.
- Bellour, R. (1999). The Body of Fiction. In D. Gordon (ed.), *Feature Film: A Book by Douglas Gordon* (pp.). London: Artangel.
- Beugnet, M. (2017a). *L'Attrait du Flou*. Paris: Yellow Now.
- Beugnet, M. (2017b). An Aesthetics of Exhaustion? Digital Found Footage and Hollywood. *Screen*, 58(2): 218–228.
- Boillat, A. (2004). Éditorial. *Décadrages*, 3: ii–viii.
- Broeker, H. (2007). *Douglas Gordon: Between Darkness and Light*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz.
- Brown, R. (1999). The Music of *Vertigo*. In D. Gordon (ed.), *Feature Film: A Book by Douglas Gordon* (pp.). London: Artangel.
- Burgin, V. (2004). *The Remembered Film*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Crowther, B. (1958, May 29). *Vertigo*, Hitchcock's Latest Melodrama Arrives at the Capitol [Film Review of *Vertigo*, 1958]. New York Times.
- Deleuze, G. (1989). *Cinema 2: The Time Image* (H. Tomlinson, Trans.). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Derrida, J. (1967). *De la Grammatologie*. Paris: Minuit.
- Derrida, J. (1986). *Margins of Philosophy* (A. Bass, Trans.). Chicago: Chicago University Press.

## Film-Philosophy 23 (2019)

- Derrida, J. (1994). *The Spectres of Marx: The State of Debt, The Work of Mourning and the New International* (P. Kamuf, Trans.). New York: Routledge.
- Doane, M. A. (1982). Film and the Masquerade. *Screen*, 23(3-4): 74-87.
- Flaxman, G. (2011). *Deleuze and the Fabulation of Philosophy: Powers of the False Vol. 1*. Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press.
- Jacobs, S. (2013). *Framing Pictures*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Kakoliris, G. (2015). Writing as a Supplement: Jacques Derrida's Deconstructive Reading of Rousseau's Confessions. *Philosophy Study*, 5(6): 302-313.
- Kwitter, S. (2002). *Architectures of Time: Toward a Theory of the Event in Modernist Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Monk, P. (2003). *Double-Cross: The Hollywood Films of Douglas Gordon*. York: York University Press.
- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. *Screen*, 16(3): 6-18.
- Ravetto-Biagioli, K. (2011). Vertigo and the Vertiginous History of Film Theory. *Camera Obscura*, 25(3(75)): 101-141.
- Rothman, W. (1982). *Hitchcock: The Murderous Gaze*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sullivan, J. (2006). *Hitchcock's Music*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Vertigo [Film Review of Vertigo, 1958]. (1958, May 14). *Variety*, 210(11): 6.
- Vertigo [Film Review of Vertigo, 1958]. (1958, May 17). *Harrison's Reports*, 40(20): 79.