ROBERT J. BELTON

Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* and the Hermeneutic Spiral

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This book is dedicated to the memory of my mother,
Alberta Marion Belton (1921–2016), whose wide-ranging intelligence
and playful wit gave me a taste for art, language, music and film
when I could barely walk.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Like so many others before me, I have long been enchanted by Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958). I was, however, also puzzled over why it has such a hold on anyone's imagination, let alone my own. Certainly it has something to do with its handsome cinematography by Robert Burks, lushly romantic score by Bernard Herrmann, and meditative (if now somewhat dated) pacing by George Tomasini. But there is something else—a kind of productive artistic "disagreement" between its mood of abstracted reverie, which causes most viewers to lose focus, and its proliferation of intriguing details, which pulls them back to its specifics. In Hitchcock criticism we see both poles—immersion in its generally plaintive mood vis-à-vis sharp focus on minutiae highlighted for often very different critical ends.

Although I am sure I had seen it before, I remember first becoming truly fascinated with *Vertigo* in Paris in 1984. The film had been pulled from circulation in 1973 but reappeared theatrically in 1983 in advance of a home video release a year later. This was before the intensive restoration undertaken in the mid-1990s by Robert Harris and James Katz (Frumkes, 1996). When I think of the film, I find myself unable to distinguish my thoughts about it from my thoughts about my own experiences at that time, when I was engaged in research for a book about surrealism and its idiosyncratic ways of proliferating indeterminate yet suggestive meanings (Belton, 1995).

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In its concern for semiotic plurality and indeterminacy, Surrealism anticipated postmodernism. Through the former, I earnestly embraced the latter's idea that we were moving into an era in which concerns were being raised about authorial irrelevance and critical freedom, if not total autonomy, in creating knowledge about cultural objects and the social world (Eagleton, 1983). I anticipated that traditional qualitative research would be reimagined, though I had no specific idea of what form it would take. I did know, for example, that there was a move in ethnographic writing to increasingly individualized, first-person descriptions in which writers included themselves in their interpretations. I knew that the practice had begun as "insider ethnography" but was moving toward "autoethnography" (Hayano, 1979). I suspected that this meant something similar was inevitable in critical thinking about cultural objects of all sorts. For my Surrealism work I adopted Clifford Geertz's model of "thick description," which enables the writer to understand a cultural object less as a thing than as

> a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another . . . , like . . . a manuscript—foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries . . . . (Geertz, 1973, 10)

I now know that the goal of autoethnography and related approaches is to acknowledge that writers interact with the objects of their research in such ways as to make it difficult to assign responsibility solely to the originating author for the result (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). This results in an amalgamation of elements instead of the classic clarity of the sender–receiver pattern of information theory (Shannon, 1948). What emerges instead is something connecting individual writers to the social formation around them without restraining their insights to those knowingly produced by the makers of the cultural objects in question. Now writers can create interpretive materials that are not objective, less dispassionate, and more speculative and emotionally charged by materials that traditional approaches might consider irrelevant. For instance, a critical reflection might productively include the writer's own history and culture in addition to those of the author (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). Autoethnographers contested the idea that a writer must be invisible and that their findings must represent only the characteristics of their object of study (Charmaz and Mitchell, 1997). There have been criticisms of this approach on the

grounds that it is self-indulgent (e.g., Coffey, 1999), but others feel it is a useful response to what has been called the crises of representation and legitimation (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000).

George Marcus and Michael Fischer used the phrase "crisis of representation" to identify anthropology's deliberations on how best to describe social reality, given that no one interpretation can completely explain it (Marcus and Fischer, 1996). Clearly this relates to postmodernism's challenge to universalizing methodologies. Similarly, the "crisis of legitimation," introduced by Jürgen Habermas, indicates a lack of confidence in institutions or leadership (Habermas, 1975). Together, these crises have led writers to question notions of reliability and objectivity and move instead toward storytelling as a kind of qualitative research. There are some who think such an approach would foster readers' identification with authors and, through them, come to a fuller social understanding (Sparkes, 2002).

This book takes these insights for granted as it offers an exploration of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. Not merely an autonomous cultural object, it is a virtual "home base" of sorts—a kind of fictitious "place" at which and from which various critical operations are carried out. I see it through the lenses of personal involvement and, especially, the experience of other things understood in relation to it in various orders or categories. The book attempts to capture the fluctuations of critical engagement as it fixes on *Vertigo* itself, then moves away to explore other works by Hitchcock and others, then returns with new interpretations that modify or even destroy the critical views originally formed, and so on.

Chapter 2, "The Hermeneutic Spiral," introduces the notion that interpretive flexibility and originality, while desirable and arguably inevitable, can cross a line beyond which some will put too much of themselves into their interpretations. Should the meditations of critical "outliers" be discarded as overly enthusiastic, or can they be rescued by showing that in certain contexts they unearth interesting new insights? In other words, how do we decide what is "good" criticism and what is excessive? Some suggest that the original context of a cultural object's production can filter out interpretive extravagance, but there is little agreement about what this context is. For instance, everyone acknowledges that *Vertigo* was inspired by an original novel—Boileau-Narcejac's *D'entre les morts* (1954)—but departs from it significantly. However, which of the following is the "right" contextual filter—Samuel A. Taylor's reworking of Alec Coppel's screenplay, Hitchcock's own biography as a whole or Hitchcock's

biography limited to the later 1950s? All have been used in published Hitchcock criticism.

This section displaces the question of how to delimit context and instead describes how all such variations are instances of differences in esthetic cognitive processing patterns unique to individuals. Psychology provides some insight into how such things happen as the result of cognitive biases, the first two of which—the backfire effect and confirmation bias—are introduced. I also introduce some current theories of esthetic cognitive processing from the worlds of visual culture studies (Whitney Davis), philosophy (Stephen David Ross) and cognitive science (Helmut Leder). Lastly, the section proposes that the traditional interpretive model of the hermeneutic circle must be replaced by the metaphor of a spiral because the former cannot logically address the critical "interference patterns" introduced in texts by their accompanying paratexts (supplementary materials ranging from titles to interviews) and intertexts (texts that influence each other in multiple ways, as Shakespeare's *The Tempest* [1610–11] informs Margaret Atwood's *Hag-Seed* [2016]).

Chapter 3, "*Vertigo*," provides a general overview of the film and its reception, and it introduces the idea that different interpreters literally see and attend to different things, which makes it possible for them to come to different conclusions. I then turn to the film's opening, which is theoretically most viewers' first point of contact. The sequence operates as a paratext that directs our attention by creating a mood that expressively foreshadows certain developments later in the film. I also introduce a subcategory of paratext, the epitext, to give the first example of how material outside a cultural object comes to play a role in our interpretations of it. In this instance, the epitext is the famous set of interviews featuring Hitchcock and French New Wave filmmaker François Truffaut, which also shows how a later Hitchcock film, *Psycho*, potentially provides insight into our interpretation of *Vertigo*. A spiral/eye motif appears to relate to a fascination with navels, but even that is ambiguous. It can be seen as a genuine expression of Hitchcock's autobiographical fetishism or a simulated (i.e., cultural appropriation) of Freudian thought. It may even prove to be nothing more than an expression of his voracious appetite for practical jokes.

Chapter 4, "Forcing Insight with Sight and the Availability Heuristic," provides a brief interregnum during which I explain why and how I came to force the production of new meanings from old material. I follow it with an even briefer consideration of the availability heuristic, a kind of

sorting among semiotic variables produced not by the context of the cultural object itself but by the notions one brings to one's consideration of it from *other* cultural objects.

The first of these other cultural objects is a classic experimental film, which provides an entirely different set of drivers and constraints. Chapter 5, "*Vertigo*, Duchamp's *Anémic Cinéma*, and a Žižekian brassiere," describes the fusion of verbal humor and optical illusions in Marcel Duchamp's *Anémic Cinéma*. Thanks to the availability heuristic, this film offers a cinematic example of sexual irreverence that one can trace in other cultural objects. Specifically, critical exposure to *Anémic Cinéma* draws one's attention to sexual irreverence in other works through confirmation bias, resulting in the foregrounding of certain details that pass unnoticed or as less salient in early viewings of *Vertigo*. I argue that some of these are examples of "Hitchcockian blots," after Žižek, that have gone unnoticed. A case in point is the symbolism of a brassiere, which I take further here than do the relatively few scholarly articles that allude to it.

In Chapter 6, "*Vertigo*, Man Ray's *L'Etoile de mer*, and flowers," I follow an even more circuitous path, browsing through the 1928 film *L'Etoile de mer*, written by Robert Desnos and filmed by Man Ray. In the process of unveiling it as a "writerly text," per Roland Barthes, I discover the origin of a minor detail in the film that was misinterpreted and repeated by others. The discovery provokes a reinterpretation of another detail in the film, a close-up of a hyacinth, providing another Freudian symbolism that can unravel further details in *Vertigo*. Interestingly, the motif seems to symbolize both a threat to sexuality and a reinforcement of it, making it an example of enantiosemy—one signifier that generates opposing signifieds.

In Chapter 7, "*Vertigo*, Kubrick's *The Shining*, *Spellbound* and liberty," we pick up speed in the processing of *Vertigo*'s features in the light of other texts. Multiple intertexts compete for our attention. *Vertigo*'s use of stairs is contrasted with that in Kubrick's *The Shining*, and Hitchcock's own *Spellbound* features a character ostensibly paralyzed by a related psychosexual fear. Interpreted in different ways, however, this sexual anxiety can be flipped on its head to serve as a signifier of sexual appetite, which in turn can be seen as a call for erotic liberty. In this way, we not only return to the enantiosemy illustrated by the hyacinth in the preceding section, but we also elaborate it in a new direction.

Chapter 8, "*Vertigo*, Lynch's *Twin Peaks* and the record player," explores how a minor motif, the record player, has significance beyond simply being part of the *mise en scène*. In the worlds of other filmmakers,

mainstream and avant-garde alike, turntables serve as devices that generate anxiety and symbolize sexual activity and violent acts. In *Vertigo*, however, they cast light on the possibility that there is a rich vein of risqué humor in the film. The section concludes with a brief note that the prehistory of audio technology itself carries a set of connotations that may have an impact on our interpretation of at least one Hitchcock film.

I ask two fundamental questions having to do with existential philosophy and Freudian trauma in Chapter 9, "*Vertigo*, Etrog's *Spiral, The Shining* and traumatic memory." Here I test the limits of philosopher Stephen David Ross's "inexhaustibility by contrast" by deliberately playing the role of a critical outlier who sees a correlation between two cultural objects that certainly have no connection. Etrog was a Romanian-Canadian sculptor who also made experimental works in other media, including film. Hitchcock would have had no idea who he was. Nevertheless, does an understanding of Etrog's experimental film *Spiral* help us to conclude that Hitchcock was a genuine existentialist? Moreover, does an appreciation of Etrog's harrowing childhood cast any light on Hitchcock's use of childhood trauma as a justificatory trope? Or can such matters be construed more simply as meditations on the nature of memory?

Chapter 10, "*Vertigo, The Shining*, spatial mental models, and the Uncanny" explores the possibility that spirals, mazes and the built environment are to be understood not as actual spaces but as internal, psychological structures that are malfunctioning. Scattered within them are objects that signify cognitive distress. They take the form of uncanny objects teetering between an inanimate world and a threateningly animate one.

CHAPTER 2

The Hermeneutic Spiral

Years ago, I had a friend who was utterly convinced that *Superman*, the 1978 Richard Donner film starring Christopher Reeve, was a sequel to Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). I asked him how he could possibly have made such an outrageous association. His answer was that *Superman* begins with the story of an alien infant's intercession in earthly affairs, a process that was just being set into motion at the end of *2001* by the Star Child orbiting Earth. As absurd as that sounds, it is the case that the Star Child was intended by novelist Arthur C. Clarke to be seen destroying nuclear weapons (Clarke, 1968). This makes a connection to a superhero slightly more plausible. However, it is also the case that Kubrick deleted the nuclear element of the narrative on the grounds that it was too similar to the ending of his 1964 black comedy *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (Agel, 1970). The director's decision to leave the film open-ended created a sort of semiotic gap.

Viewers' brains are hardwired to fill gaps with patterns that make sense (Conrad, 2010), so it is actually more "normal" to make interpretive leaps of faith than to rely on traditional documentary evidence. My friend proceeded to demonstrate the plausibility of his argument by describing an early sequence in the superhero movie in which signifiers of childhood and heroism overlap. Superman's earthly parents-to-be, Jonathan and Martha Kent, are changing a flat tire when the jack fails. The child, whom they have discovered in a field just moments before, lifts the back end of the truck off the ground to facilitate the change. The orbiting child-hero

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