

FILM 331 2012
In-Class Presentation

***Vertigo* (1958) and
Formalist Film Theory**

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Outline

- *Vertigo* is a 1958 film directed by Alfred Hitchcock
- Summary of film
- Formalist film theory
- Eisenstein and montage
- Analysis of sequence one: Dream sequence
- Analysis of sequence two: Necklace comparison
- Conclusion

Brief Summary of *Vertigo* (1)

- **Scottie Ferguson is a retired detective who suffers from acrophobia.**
- **He is asked by his friend, Gavin, to follow Gavin's wife, Madeleine. His friend believes that Madeleine is being possessed by a spirit of some sort and fears for her.**
- **Voyeurism takes place as Scottie follows Madeleine. He watches her closely as she goes about her day to day tasks.**
- **Madeleine suddenly jumps into San Francisco Bay and Scottie dives in to save her.**
- **Sparks fly after he pulls her to safety and Scottie and Madeleine eventually fall in love.**
- **Madeleine commits suicide by apparently jumping from a church tower.**

Brief Summary of *Vertigo* (2)

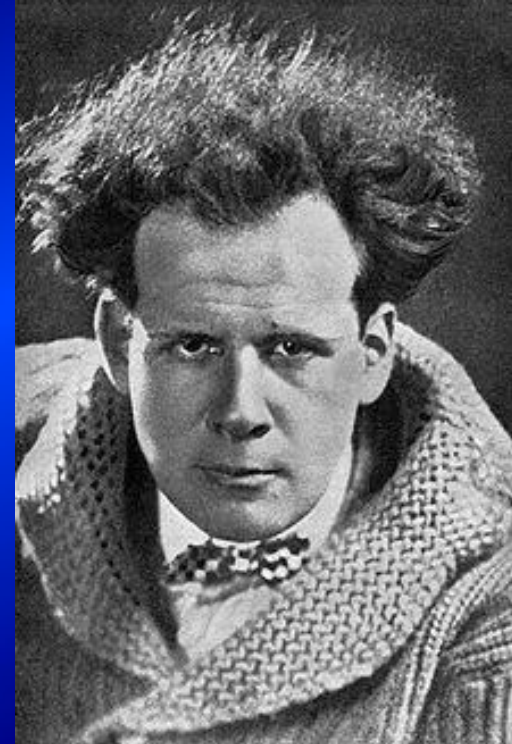
- Because of his fear of heights, Scottie blames Madeleine's death on himself and becomes haunted and depressed by the whole situation.
- Later in the film, Scottie spots a woman, Judy, who reminds him of the deceased Madeleine.
- Because of this he is drawn to her and convinces her to go out with him.
- A flashback from Judy's perspective reveals the truth.
- Judy and Scottie fall in love as Scottie obsessively alters Judy's appearance so that she resembles Madeleine.
- Scottie eventually realises the truth just before he takes Judy out at night.

Formalist film theory

- **Film as art: “ By works of art ... we mean works created by special techniques that designed to make the works as obviously artistic as possible” (Shklovsky 18)**
- **Art is “thinking in images” and the “making of symbols” (Shklovsky 16-17)**
- **Defamiliarization (Ostrenanie): The purpose of art is to “impede perception.” Poetic language is different from prose language (Shklovsky 16).**
- **All of this is achievable through a number of devices**

Sergei Eisenstein and montage

- Influential Soviet filmmaker and theorist.
- Responsible for films such as *October* (1927) and *Battleship Potemkin* (1925)
- Eisenstein was opposed to the introduction of sound, especially dialogue.
- Shklovsky :“A satisfactory style is precisely that style which delivers the greatest amount of thought in the fewest words” (19).



Sergei Eisenstein and montage

- “Segment of film that summarizes a topic or compresses a passage of time into brief symbolic or typical images” (Thompson and Bordwell 493).
- Combining shots in order to create meaning : “We must interpret to understand” (Thompson 122).
- Montage can also generate emotional response from the audience by engaging our sense and feelings (Thompson 121).
- Five methods of montage: Metric, rhythmic, tonal, overtone and intellectual.
- Various techniques used.

Sequence One



Sequence One

- **Tonal montage:** “refers to the dominant emotional sense – the tone – of a montage pattern” (Polan 21).
- **Non-diegetic sound reflects Scottie’s psychological state.**
- **Collection and linkage of flashbacks and fearful thoughts create an abstract meaning.**
- **Bold and dynamic graphical style. Flashing colours, flower bouquet and Scottie’s head.**



Sequence Two



Sequence Two

- Camera is manipulated to focus on Scottie's reaction to what he has seen in the mirror.
- Extreme close-up of Judy's chest and then Carlotta's chest.
- Flashback and juxtaposition techniques are used to show Judy's necklace and Scottie's memory of "Madeleine's" necklace.
- Dissolve to a close-up of Scottie's face.



Conclusion

- *Vertigo* is not a formalist film, but there are key sequences in the film that have significant formalist tendencies.
- The film raises the question of what is real.
- There is no one way of perceiving the world.
- The two sequences are both examples of montage and Hitchcock uses multiple techniques including flashbacks stylised graphics to put across what Scottie is thinking.

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