

1 / Opening Sequence to Ernie's Restaurant (0:00–16:49)

The story for *Vertigo* was taken from a French novel by Pierre Bouilleau and Thomas Narcejac whose title literally means "from among the dead," but the French words, *D'entre les morts* are curiously close to Jacques Lacan's expression, "between-the-two-deaths," that period between a literal death and a final death, after the soul has wandered in the underworld to discover the truth of his or her death. All cultures celebrate some form of this interval, usually as a period of mourning marked by the stabilization of the corpse. The rather gruesome facts of the case are that it takes time to get from flesh to bone, and the meaning of the word "sarcophagus" means, literally, "eater of flesh." Stone was a magic substance in ancient times, not just for its relation to the underworld, but for its role as the chief substance of architecture. Think, for example, of the Neolithic and Iron Age constructions of stone circles where ritual observation of the sun and other events were the first complex and completely accurate clocks that humans ever created. The Mayan calendar still stands as the most accurate mechanism ever created, with their unit of the bakhtun, lasting 144,000 days, and long cycle starting at creation and ending in a couple of years. The Mayans figured this out by creating stone monuments in the remarkably flat jungle of the Yucatan, using cornices, columns, staircases, and profiles on their pyramids and observatories to tighten up their night-time observations.

Stone figures in *Vertigo* as the stuff of the towers that mark critical points of the story. They are related to a specific dimension, height, which is the basis for the film's anxiety. Scottie's first trauma repeats a favorite Hitchcock motif: that of a subject suspended by the hand of an Other. Stone is literally going to eat up Scottie's flesh, and it does seem to eat up his colleague. This is one of those moments that we slip past and accept what comes next. But, does Scottie really survive? It seems impossible to get help in time; he was ready to fall when the uniformed policeman tried to pull him up. We are in a position to choose between two alternatives. Either Scottie does survive and we watch a story of a live character, or Scottie actually falls to his death and what we watch is the fantasy he constructs in the last few seconds of death, or the dream of his soul after death.

It really doesn't matter which we choose; the story makes sense either way, and there's no payoff for making the right guess. The reality of this alternative set-up, however, has been historically recognized. Ambrose Bierce, a writer of tales of the supernatural, lived in San Francisco and was a model for the book-seller that Scottie consults later in the story. One of his most famous stories had to do with the execution of a Civil War spy. The noose goes around his neck and he's pushed off a bridge, but the rope gives way and miraculously he escapes by swimming down the river and running through the woods. He makes it back to his plantation home, where his wife anxiously waits, but just before they can embrace he is choked, violently, and we realize that this escape was imagined in the few seconds between his fall and his actual death.

The death narrative is a common plot device, and the benefit is that it works whether or not the audience knows or believes it's there. Bierce's story, "An Incident at Owl Creek Bridge," puts it front and center, but in a general sense every story creates an interval between two deaths in relation to what happens to the audience. Sitting in a dark theater, the audience becomes as close to this idealized interval as it gets. Immobile, silent, watchful — they fantasize with the help of a mechanized eye that floats from place to place and is able to move back and forth through time. Their first death is literal: sitting down and staying quiet. The second death is the end of the story, the discovery of a truth or key to a puzzle. So, even without the specific motif such as Bierce's death narrative, the experience of any work of art involves taking a step across a boundary that separates life from death. This is not a choice but a necessity, something required to liberate our imaginative resources.

Does this mean that, like Scottie, we are also related to the vertical dimension of architecture, that this absence of ground beneath our feet create an anxiety that drives our interest and attention enough to make it through the fantasy of art? **It certainly means** that there is something like a wind-up effect of being at the top of a tower, that we go up, we come down. If, during this trip up and down we also watch a story about someone else going up and someone else going down, all the better. We immediately recognize the stakes of the game.

But, *architecture*? There is enough of it in *Vertigo*, whose recognizable sites and buildings in San Francisco add a component of realism. Process shots use editing to combine streets that don't really combine in the real San Francisco, but in most cases attention to actual landscape detailing is painstaking. The view out of Midge's window shows Russian Hill with the famous meander of Lombard Street. Coit tower locates Scottie's apartment, both for us and for Madeleine. We visit so many famous San Francisco sites that there are tours offered to take movie buffs around to all the scenes. This realism is needed to balance off Scottie's increasing involvement with the dream-like obsession of Madeleine. He's isolated by his traumatic encounter with death. He's retired from the police force; his college friend and old sweetheart Midge watches him closely. His loss of the symbolic network that gave him an identity has left him at loose ends.

This feeling of isolation makes Scottie vulnerable to the proposition of Gavin Elster, an acquaintance from Scottie's past. His British accent makes us think that the two might have met at Oxford or Cambridge instead of Cal Poly, but we accept the device of a friend who married into money and is in the position to offer Scottie a job to keep him busy. Elster's office is in the middle of the docklands district that dominated before Oakland took over. Hitchcock walks past, carrying what everyone says is a trumpet case, but the curve on the end of the case makes it clear that is more like a cousin of the trumpet, a cornucopia: a horn out of which all kinds of goods — and evils — flow in abundance. In mythology, the cornucopia was a gift that Zeus gave back to Amalthea, a goat who had nourished Zeus in his infancy. He had broken off her real horn accidentally, so to make up for this he returned her a magic horn

that would grant whoever possessed it whatever they wanted. The trick of the curved trumpet case can't be missed. It's one of those fine touches that Hitchcock loved to plant in his movies, and no critic has ever caught it. Like Alladin's lamp, Elster offers Scottie the chance of a lifetime, to spy on a beautiful woman; we also learn later that falling in love is a part of the plan.

The dead soul wandering in the underworld, one of the possible outcomes of the first minute of action, is the idealization of the eye. The body dies, but vision goes on, through a kind of momentum. The fact that Hades literally means "the invisible" means that the voyeur can't be seen. As a private detective, this is also part of the job, and the audience accepts Scottie's promised invisibility as a normal condition. But, the real voyeur of any and all films is the audience, who resembles nothing more than a bunch of dead people having a death dream. The camera mechanizes and floats the eye, carrying it into a gallery of idealized visibility. We can watch people in their most private moments, zip forward and backward in time, hide in objects, journey across the planet, even to some other planet.

The floating eye sensation is going to be a theme throughout the movie. We will follow Scottie's car as it sails over the waves of city streets, as it turns left and right, as it slides into the neo-classical spaces that Madeleine visits — places like the Palace of the Legion of Honor, which seems much larger than it needs to be for the few visitors we see. Again, the use of images of places in the film induces an effect of the uncanny — the story in the story that puts Scottie in the shadow of a "chiaroscuro" set up to create a frame inside the literal frame of the cinema. He watches from this shadow as Madeleine floats inside her own fantasy, just as we sit in the auditorium shadow watching the both of them from our own protected POV.

Elster's office, with its images of the San Francisco of the past and paintings of boats at sea sets up a kind of gallery of instruction. Scottie's given the program, a kind of map of the underworld he's asked to enter, and shown the kind of things he may encounter — everything, strangely, except an image of the woman Elster asks him to follow. This is another spring-loaded device, holding back the one thing we and Scottie want and need to see. Madeleine, the wife who is haunted by her dead grandmother, Carlotta Valdez, will be covered with veils that make Scottie all the more anxious to see her, while preserving his status as invisible.

Elster and Scottie play the parts of another ancient story, that of Gygis and Candaules. Heroditus tells of the king who offered his favorite commander the chance to see his beautiful wife unclothed. This is another Lacanian idea; it's not enough to have an experience, even the most intimate of experiences; one has to imagine a witness, a "Big Other," present to confer value and status on the experience. King Candaules wants Gygis, in effect, to know just how lucky he is. Gygis, however, realizes the danger of the situation, that in playing the Big Other, he will be subject to the King's later remorse and revenge, so he makes a secret deal with the wife to kill the king. *Vertigo* is this story in reverse. The king and the wife are

partnering to victimize Scottie, by turning his voyeurism, his service as a perfect watcher, a professional watcher, in fact, to their own ends. Namely, they want him to witness a crime and testify as the expert that he is as a former policeman. — All of the crime except the final small part where a switch will be made. This part will be inaccessible, they know, because Scottie's fear of heights will prevent him from getting to this critical place in time. He will have to infer the truth from what he sees, but what he sees will be arranged, like Elster's office, as a series of images made on purpose to be seen in the right places and in the right order.

Isn't this the essence of what movies are all about?