

#### **4: Inquest to the Discovery of Judy (1:18:14 – 1:31:42)**

The first part of the story is over. The inquest shows off Scottie as the ideal witness. He had played the part Elster has trained him to play. As a former policeman, his reliability is unquestioned in court, but we know him to be the most unreliable of witnesses, a witness who has allowed himself to be fed data, to be led by the nose, to be coached unconsciously to seeing what he did not see.

The trap's perfection was Judy's isolation from the real Madeleine. She didn't have to look like anyone, or act like anyone, because Scottie had never seen the real Madeleine, and there were no portraits or photographs — strangely! This is one of those MacGuffin element — something the audience has to swallow without complaining or the story won't work. Hitchcock discovered the role of the MacGuffin early, so it's important to mention it. The MacGuffin is the subject of a joke. Two men are in a compartment in a train, just before it leaves the station. One is securing a piece of luggage on the rack above the seats. The luggage has a strange shape (just like Hitchcock's trumpet case that is actually a Cornucopia case), and the traveling companion asks what it contains. "A MacGuffin," is the reply. But, "what is a MacGuffin?" the puzzled traveler asks. "It's a gun for shooting elephants in Scotland," he explains. "But there ARE no elephants in Scotland," the even-more-puzzled traveler responds, to which the companion replies, "Well, this isn't really a MacGuffin, either!"

The joke can be read in two ways. The first way is that it's a means of handling a nosy question that penetrates too far into a private matter. It turns an answer on itself in a way that the nosy inquirer should be able to realize that it's none of his business. The second way to read it is as a piece of deep philosophy. The MacGuffin exists as long as we don't know what it is. If we ask to see it, it won't be there. It exists because it doesn't exist. In this sense, the MacGuffin is exactly like the uncanny, a meaning that grows out of its opposite. Freud discovered that the etymology of the German word for uncanny, *Unheimlich*, could be disassembled until you found that it was something concealed, but concealment, along with security and protection from the prying eyes of strangers, was the function of the home, the *Heim*. So the center of the meaning of the home was something un-home-like, something uncanny, *Unheimlich*.

A subtle MacGuffin that works throughout the story is Scottie's likely death at the beginning of the film. It is "metonymized" out of existence. We are asked not to think of it, not to accept it as even a possibility. Yet, we don't have any information about how he was rescued. We "catch him later," so to speak, balancing a cane in Midge's apartment, bragging about his recovery. This of course could be something he imagined in the final few seconds of life, but if we consider this consciously it will destroy the story. As a metonymy, however, it lurks in the background. It provides the suspicion that is the energy behind Madeleine's own "death narrative," her zombie like behavior. We can see it in the mirror, but when we look at the idea

directly, it disappears. This is ideal for film, because too many ideas interfere with looking at the screen that is our mirror for the duration of the story. It shows us, it thinks for us, it does our feeling for us as well. All we have to do is pay attention, which is the reason for over-determination and the constant reminders provided by exposition.

There's not much to watch however during Scottie's recovery from his second trauma. Mozart is not going to do it. He's not going back to Midge no matter what. We know he's going to continue his obsession with the perfect woman of his dreams, the automaton Olympia-slash-Madeleine, who was all the more attractive because she was, as a doll, a mechanism, really empty, really a perfect mirror for his desire.

Depression, obsession, suicidal thoughts? It's time for another joke, also involving a train. Two groups of travelers meet at a train station, a group of professors and a group of computer scientists. They are both going to conferences and it is essential for the logic of the joke that they are taking the train and not flying, as is the usual custom these days. The computer scientists are looking at their watch, thinking about boarding the train. They ask the professors if they've got their tickets, and the professors say, "yes," they have one ticket for the three of them, and that's all they are going to need. —How can that be? ask the puzzled computer scientists. —Just watch, reply the professors. The two groups board the train, taking the first available seats. The train starts up and leaves the station and fairly soon the conductor starts his walk down the aisle to collect tickets. Just before he comes to their compartment, the professors — all three of them — get up and pile inside the washroom at the end of the car. The conductor enters, cancels the computer scientists three tickets, and then knocks on the washroom door. One hand sticks out of the door, the conductor punches it and leaves. The computer scientists are very impressed at this trick of saving the cost of two tickets.

It turns out they meet each other on the way back from their respective conferences. Waiting on the station platform, the computer scientists are acting now that they are "in the know" of this clever trick. They have bought their one ticket and plan to scoop the professors in using it. They ask, smugly, if the professors have bought their one ticket yet. —No, the professors reply, they have not bought any ticket.

—How can that be? ask the computer scientists. —Just watch! reply the professors.

They all board the train. The conductor starts his march down the aisle, and the computer scientist quickly rush into the washroom. The professors sit still. Before the conductor gets to their car, however, one of the professors gets up and walks to the washroom. He knocks on the door, announcing himself, "Conductor!"

If you're wondering how exactly the professors managed with just one cancelled ticket you're the kind of person who always misses the point and doesn't know when to laugh. The flaw in

the logic of this joke is like the MacGuffin — it's to be ignored so that you can enjoy. The joke is about reception theory and suspension or concealment of knowledge. Like Scottie, the computer scientists do not know what the joke really is. It's on them, not on the conductor. They are made to witness the conductor, and this is part 1 of the joke that they will be victims of in part 2. Part 2 uses their knowledge as false knowledge, and the willingness that they demonstrate in offering up their ticket is amusing.

*Vertigo* is of course not so funny. Scottie's obsession, his two or three traumas, and his psychotic episodes are depressing for any audience to watch. The joke structure is, still, no matter, still a structure, and its construction of Scottie as a witness who will "automate" the perfect crime makes it all the more fascinating. Scottie, an expert observer, just like the computer scientists, doesn't realize that there is a part 2 to the joke, the part where we will voluntarily turn over the goods.

The depressing, spooky quality of *Vertigo* plus the ending in death makes it a tragedy in main form, unless we take the death-narrative idea to its final conclusion. In these terms, we return to the high place twice, once in a way that does not resolve Scottie's original guilt over having let down his colleague, literally; again in a way that seems only to repeat the trauma. But, the story is, at least, played out for all to see. It's Judy who jumps out of guilt for her role and complicity in Madeleine's death. Just what did she think would happen at the top of the tower? She must have suspected that Elster would have his wife filled to the legal limit with tranquilisers. We can overlook the details of how Elster and Judy got down out of a tower and out of an area that must have been swarming with emergency personnel. That's what the MacGuffin is for.