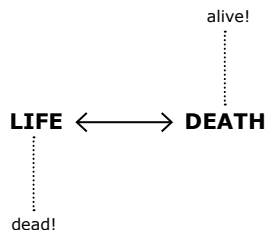
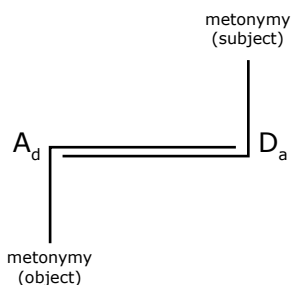


VERTIGO: an introduction to the visual uncanny

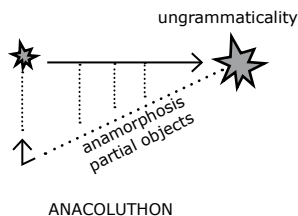
In Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), a policeman Scotty Ferguson must retire after a near-death accident has made him acutely fearful of heights. As a favor to an old classmate, now a ship-construction industrialist, Gavin Elster, he is hired to follow the magnate's wife, Madeleine. Madeleine seems to be obsessed with the idea that she is the reincarnation of a Latina, Carlotta Valdes. Scotty follows her to a museum, where she sits staring at Carlotta's portrait. He discovers that she has rented a room that once belonged to Carlotta. He saves her from a suicide attempt, and the surveillance ends as Scotty falls in love and is drawn into Madeleine's fantasy. Leading him to a rural convent, she climbs a tower with Scotty in pursuit but jumps to her death — an apparent suicide. After the Coroner's hearing where Madeleine's death is ruled a suicide, Scotty suffers a nervous breakdown. Some time later, he returns to his pastime of walking the streets of San Francisco, where he spots a shop-girl, Judy Barton, who eerily resembles Madeleine. He approaches her with the proposition of re-making her into his remembered image of Madeleine. Reluctantly, she agrees to a change of hair-style, a new wardrobe, and a series of dates to expensive restaurants. Scotty, however, discovers the jewel that Madeleine had had copied from Carlotta's portrait. The scheme becomes clear at once. Elster has hired the tawdry Judy to play Madeleine and fake a suicide so that Elster, hiding at the top of the tower, could toss down his real wife. Elster used Scotty as a credible detective to authenticate the case for Madeleine's madness and Scotty's vertigo as a guarantee that he wouldn't reach the top of the tower in time to discover three people instead of one.



In Jentsch's contrasting poles of the uncanny, the "transitive" boundary between life and death is blurred. Note for later: these "kernels" of opposites lie, in Lacan's system, at a radical center that belongs to the "gap" of metonymy.



The metonymical kernels in the Jentschian uncanny can be, themselves, polarized by their objective or subjective qualities. This becomes significant when, as in *Vertigo*, the "live" element of the dead role, Madeleine, is played by the actress Judy.



When the kernels are connected (metalepsis = metonymy of a metonymy) the "de-mark" or out-of-place sign initiates a revisionistic analepsis where ordinary objects are re-interpreted as clues and keys.

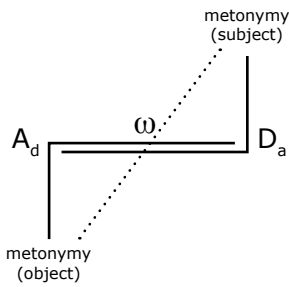
The Jentschian Uncanny. Ernst Jentsch, "On the Psychology of the Uncanny" (1906), divided the uncanny into two parts: cases where a live person has evidence of something dead within them (automatic response, a compulsion, automatic control from without, a curse, etc.), and cases where the supposedly dead continue to exist in some form. The first case could be abbreviated A_d , the second as D_a . *Vertigo* is striking in its exploitation of these two aspects. When Judy plays Madeleine, she is literally creating an A_d , a zombie-like character possessed by the soul of Carlotta, a case of D_a . The reciprocity between A_d and D_a seems to demonstrate a functional tautology, but in this case there is a (Lacanian) "flaw in the process of causality itself," without which there would be only the uncanny tale of a haunted woman. The flaw reveals something true about the Jentschian doublet. The duo is really a trio: Madeleine, Carlotta, and Judy, the actress we don't discover until our POV representative, Scotty, discovers the piece of jewelry that serves as the "tell." This third reveals to Scotty that he has been duped into serving in the role of an expert witness to Elster's murder of his wife. Who would doubt an ex-policeman in court? This converts Scotty's anonymous surveillance space into a stage, where scenery was set around him, cultivating his actions and his commitment. Lured out from the space of a "cool detective" (cf. Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot), he becomes a "hot detective" (Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer). In this lure, Scotty played the role of another D_a , the "dummy" (*le mort*, in French), enduring another Lacanian trial, the interval "between the two deaths." This interval has multiple roles in *Vertigo*. First, it is the overall condition of Scotty's retirement, his survival (?) of the accident that resulted in the fall of the uniformed officer. Fear of heights is Scotty's mark, or, as Deleuze would put it *de-mark*, that which sets him apart from nature. The film begins with a roof-top chase and ends in the monastery tower.

The A_d/D_a connection, symmetrical and "idiotic" because it creates two metonymies (Judy, the "efficient cause" of Madeleine; and the "surplus" jewel that is the Tell. Connecting these metonymies (*metalepsis*) "solves the mystery," which is to say it relieves the tension that Hitchcock has carefully built up, a kind of pleasure reported as pain that qualifies all hysterical discourse. The subject-on-stage, the voyeurism of the Master who watches his design trap its unwitting victim, and the circularity of the "knowledge" constructed to lead Scotty back to a vertiginous point of discovery further qualify *Vertigo* as "hysterical." The role of the jewel as an "inner Real" (R_2) an object-out-of-place, works in hysteria to the outer construct of artificiality that held Scotty in place on the stage of the Other (R_1), confirms this classification.

The Freudian Uncanny. Freud confirms Jentsch's views but adds the interesting etymology of *Unheimlich*, which appears to descend directly from its opposite, *Heimlich*. Like the "idiotic symmetry" of D_a and A_d , the definition creates its own metonymical surpluses. Home protects but also conceals, and concealment/unconcealment then involves "that which should have remained concealed." The dialectic between visibility and invisibility leads him to the optical and anamorphic challenges to identity found in E. T. A. Hoffman's story, "The Sandman" (1816). Also in this story are examples that relate directly to Judy's role, first as the adept actress and later the stiff shop-girl. Olympia is an automaton who fascinates the young visitor Nathanael, who takes her to be the daughter of the professor, Spalanzani. Olympia's reticence suggests the Turing Test model of mind: that a machine is alive (D_a) if the perceiver cannot tell the difference between its answers and the answers of a real human. The possession of Nathanael/Scotty (A_d) completes Jentsch's symmetrical formula, but Freud then shows how these metonymical remainders combine in the ambiguous figure of Judy, whose identity is uncannily Real: she is *exactly who she is*, the actress hired to play the role of the beautiful wife of Gavin Elster. The optical object, the jewel, combined with other optical replicas (the portrait of Carlotta), to frame Judy in a case of mistaken identity, which in hysterics terms is the only (self-referential psychotic) option.

The Phallic objet petit a. High places and towers have a bad reputation from "bad Freud" books and popularizations, but there is a point in looking closely at the relationship between

desire, the object-cause of desire that Lacan said could not be symbolized, and the role of the partial objects that, though resistant to symbolic capture, embody the idea of resistance to representation. Scotty's brush with death in the first minutes of the film, and his return to the monastery tower twice in the film, once for the symbolic death, then for the "real death" of Judy, show just how this 'a' can serve the needs of narrative in film. The phallic is many things for Lacan, and almost as many for Hitchcock. Primarily, the phallic is that which appears and disappears — making it a natural medium for the Freudian uncanny. Something concealed within includes the small 'd' and 'a' contained by the zombie and the living dead, respectively. The objet petit a is the perpetual metonymy created by the structural relationship between demand and desire. Because of human neotony, mastery is achieved only through the false devices of the imaginary and the symbolic, in stages Freud famously identified as oral, anal, and phallic. In the last of these three, it is castration that allows organization of pleasure around the phallus, a seeming paradox, but the key is that it is "symbolic castration," meaning "castration by symbols." Scotty, the hysteric, is powerless because his trauma cannot be assimilated into his networks of symbolic relationships. He must drop out of the police force, for example. The tower is, architecturally, a partial object. It is the essence of building but only a part, the "high and most apparent" part. Vertigo is the experience of finding nothing beneath one's feet; and in metaphor, metonymy is exactly "that which has nothing beneath its feet." It is the symbol of nothing, and when nothing has been named, famous paradoxes and stories have resulted, such as the story of Odysseus in the cave of the Cyclops. Giving his name as "Nobody," he insures his escape as the thick-headed Cyclops, calling for help, will have only the pronoun, not the proper noun, understood by his laughing neighbors. "Nobody has blinded me!" gives Odysseus just enough time to scoot back to his boat, *hanging beneath* the sheep the Cyclops must let out of the cave to pasture.



Anamorphosis in the uncanny serves as a means of "converting" transitive polar oppositions into intransitive "open" relations based on defect (hypotaxis, metonymy, partiality).

The partial object, the object out of place, resists representation. It is the de-mark that does not fit well in Judy's jewel case, because it proves that she is not Judy, which is to say that she is Judy "more than Judy herself." The small *a* guards the gap in the circular knowledge (S_2) that brings Scotty back to the tower. The nun, invisible in the shadows, steps into the light and closes the circle by putting Judy beneath the metonymy of her role.

Anacoluthon, analepsis, metalepsis. Madeleine's act is maintained by the suspension of a metonymy at the beginning of the film (the role of the actress, Judy). The final metonymy, the jewel, leads to a flashback that recovers the concealed-beneath line of logic that Scotty had not seen: the plot with himself as a principal actor, the credible witness needed to guarantee Elster a perfect crime. The fact that the film is divided perfectly into metaleptic and analeptic halves, with metonymies playing the critical roles of discovery, coupled with the use of "phallic" towers and the symptom of vertigo, seal the argument that this film is a graphic portrayal of the anacoluthon, the figure of forward motion made dysfunctional by a "hypotactic" error coming at the end, generating meaning "retroactively" through an analepsis that employs anamorphosis (re-interpretation through a shift in the POV). Too many Greek words? Bear up; there is an economy that links these terms together; any one term will "pay for" the others as they come into triangular shape. A further labeling strategy is based on the dominance of motility motifs in the metaleptic phase (looking for some lost object), the dominance of scale inversions (<>) in the analeptic phase, and a concentration on identity issues in the final phase (Judy>Madeleine>Judy). In the hysteric's world, identity is always based on the reverse angle that puts the subject "on stage." The evil eye does the same in the historical examples of the uncanny. It is "out there" looking at us, but we can't locate it. It stares at us from empty spaces, from the eye-sockets of skulls. It is the D_a element that provokes in us an A_d response. But, we always leave out something, drop something, overlook a clue: metonymy.

Heights or Depths? Towers and rooftops seem high, but it is the depths that Scotty fears, the void beneath that cannot support. Hitchcock connects this fear to winding: the circuitousness of San Francisco city streets, the winding stair in the monastery tower, the curl in the hair in Carlotta's portrait. In *Organs without Bodies: on Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 163, Slavoj Žižek notes that the tower is the "point at which the gaze inscribes itself into reality, the point at which the subject encounters itself as gaze." Hitchcock grasps this point by portraying Scotty's nightmares in terms of an encounter with his own face, the "subject on stage." The phallic tower positivizes the real role of pleasure-fear as an undergrowth, a dark presence inscribed into all normal, *Heimlich*, homey, appearances, the element that makes them *innately* uncanny, *Unheimlich*, that which was hidden and *should have remained hidden!* There is no escape, in the hysteric's discourse, no line that can be drawn to separate the inside from the outside, the safe from the dangerous, the home from the wilderness. Permeability is not an exception to the rule of orderly demarcation of space and time, it is the RULE!

The Lacanian Uncanny. The Lacanian uncanny is described in detail by Mladen Dolar, in an article published in the journal *October* (1991). Many of Lacan's main themes — between the two deaths, the extimate, anxiety, the centrality of the death drive, etc. — are firmly in the camp of the uncanny, and on that account, Lacan could be regarded as "the uncanny psychoanalyst." In his account of the unconscious, for example, Lacan demonstrates how all experience is retained and processed through a mathematical-like sorting process that creates rebus-like glyphs similar to the riddle-answers given by the Oracle at Delphi. But, with his special emphasis on the gaze as the "reverse angle" counterpart to our usual POVs (points of view), he provides a bridge to the more familiar literature that accompanies the uncanny: that of the fantastic, including the fictional works of Borges, which employs the double, travel through time, contamination of reality by the dream, and the story within the story (*mis-en-abîme*) as well as Tvetan Todorov's (empiricist) theory of the fantastic and Julia Kristeva's thesis about the abject. This is the same bridge that crosses over to the territory of the film, where the uncanny must be grounded in the material spatial and temporal structure of scenes, characters, and audience interactions. It is especially in Lacan's theory of the four main discourses, the hysteric, the master, the university, and analysis that we can carry over into film study a more accurate account of the role of the gaze, which Todd McGowan shows has been abused in over forty years of film criticism.