

Scottie's Place/Judy's Place

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Several years ago, I was discussing John McLaughlin's paintings with Nicholas Wilder, the painter and former art dealer. He said that McLaughlin's paintings were "bedroom paintings." "Bedroom paintings?" I asked. "What does that mean?" Nick answered that often people would buy a painting by McLaughlin to hang in their living room. After a while, they would move the painting to their bedroom where they could live with it more intimately. I said, "My ambition in life is to be a bedroom painter."

Once someone asked, "What bedroom?" Without thinking, I answered, "The bedrooms in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*."

Scottie's bedroom in *Vertigo* is the site of one of the most perverse movie love scenes. Scottie carries "Madeleine" to his bed and undresses her while she (really Judy) pretends to be unconscious. This scene was too sexually provocative for Hitchcock to include; he could only suggest it by showing "Madeleine's" wet clothes hanging out to dry and with the bed-

room's shadowy lighting and warm atmosphere. What might a painting have witnessed here?

Later, they make love in the second bedroom of the film, Judy's room in the Hotel Empire. Again, it is after she sacrifices her identity, resuming the appearance of the fictitious "Madeleine." As they embrace, Scottie cannot distinguish the real woman from his memory. In *Vertigo*, presence and identity spiral between truth and illusion. Scottie learns tragically to be critical of his romantic constructions.

Why did I want to put my paintings in these bedrooms? To find out, I visited the sites in San Francisco where *Vertigo* was filmed. I especially wanted to see what I could of the two bedrooms. Sitting in a car across from the Brocklebank on Nob Hill where Scottie first began to follow "Madeleine," I felt that I was on his surveillance job.

Scottie's apartment is below the one thousand block of Lombard St., the steepest and crookedest street in San Francisco. The tourists couldn't understand why I was looking at the nondescript modernist house several blocks below where I should have been. I was fascinated by the porch, where Scottie and Judy reveal their mutual desire for each other after their experience the night before in his bedroom. Although the railing and other details of the house had changed, the doorbell and the mail slot had not. These ordinary objects, which I barely remembered from the movie, were strangely familiar, the perfect emblems of the sexual desire between



Scottie and Judy. They seemed both what they were and something else entirely. I couldn't believe that they were so exposed and bare to the world, yet unrecognized.

At the York Hotel, formerly the Hotel Empire, no evidence remains of the huge neon sign that ran down the front of the hotel. From inside Judy's hotel room one often sees its sharp turquoise light and part of a giant "P." This light is especially strong when Judy finally comes out of the bathroom, dressed again, at Scottie's insistence, as "Madeleine." The hazy turquoise light dissolves her form, turning her into a ghost or mirage. As she walks forward, Judy emerges from "Madeleine," slowly coming into sharper focus. She entreats Scottie to love her as herself. To her left is the bed where they will soon make love. There is no lampshade for the night light on the headboard — and there, as she advances, a shade inexplicably appears. While her advance seems continuous, cross cut with looks from Scottie, the appearance of the shade reveals the mechanics of the illusion. The first part of her walk was shot on location at the Hotel Empire and the second part in a studio mock-up in Los Angeles. Someone forgot to check if the lampshade was on the headboard in San Francisco.

I am surprised that Hitchcock could overlook such a detail in this crucial scene. Was it so small a mistake that even Hitchcock didn't notice? Perhaps he didn't mind, or perhaps there are hundreds of such disconti-





nities in this and every other film. But I doubt it. Hitchcock was a perfectionist, and as Judy comes forward there is almost nothing except the lampshade in view. Hitchcock must have liked the unexplained appearance of the lampshade. Perhaps he even intended it. With this “mistake,” Hitchcock takes credit for the creation of “Madeleine.” The lampshade is another of Hitchcock’s cameo appearances. Like a film director, a lampshade modifies and changes light. <sup>1</sup> It reminds us of the director’s manipulations at the moment when “Madeleine” is most revealed to be Scottie’s creation. Could Hitchcock have wanted us to be subconsciously aware of this discontinuity? The lampshade’s unexplained appearance is his confession of the mechanics of his illusion, and this awareness makes us critical of Scottie’s obsession and manipulation. Gilles Deleuze calls such details in Hitchcock’s films “demarks.” “Certain of Hitchcock’s demarks are famous, like the windmill in *Foreign Correspondence* whose sail turns in the opposite direction to the wind, or the crop-spraying plane in *North by Northwest* which appears where there are no crops to spray.” <sup>2</sup>

So why would I like my paintings to be hung in bedrooms?

A painting in a bedroom can be seen in reverie, where the most private narratives are born. *Vertigo* tells us that in these intimate places, we must reassess our fantasies and assumptions. All changes begin in the bedroom.

And why was I drawn to the bedrooms in *Vertigo* in particular?





The *Vertigo* bedrooms exist in our memories and imaginations. Inserted into them my paintings are in a private, intimate space. But these imaginary places are also a real public space, which we all share. Perhaps they are the only places we share.

After giving a talk on my work last summer at the Art Center in Pasadena, a student asked, “How can you say that your paintings belong in bedrooms? They are too big.” Before I could think of an answer, another student yelled out, “We need bigger bedrooms.”

Yes, that is what we need: huge bedrooms, long expanses of empty floor leading to intimate furniture. A painting is hanging over the bed. It has no sense of presence. It doesn’t belong. Instead it makes us wonder where we are. Have we found ourselves by mistake on a stage or perhaps wandering in the set of a movie? Is this bedroom to be used for the dance number in a romantic comedy?

Or is it the bedchamber of a cheap horror film?

### Notes

1. The lampshade also closely resembles the “cantilevered bra” drawn by Midge, Scottie’s former girlfriend early in the film. As the lampshade modifies light, the bra molds the female form — creating its own kind of illusion. Scottie jokes about the bra’s designer having a good “hobby.”
2. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1, The Movement Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 203