

# *Vertigo*'s Musical Gaze: Neo-Riemannian Symmetries and Spirals

Kenneth M Smith

---

*Right from the famous title sequence of 'Vertigo', we are in the presence of something marvellous. Saul Bass created a hypnotic design of spirals rotating in space, overlaid with a few uncanny shots of Kim Novak's eyes. The music rotates in tandem: endless circles of thirds, major and minor, interspersed with shuddering dissonances. Herrmann did not invent this off-center tonality; it was used by Rimsky-Korsakov, Debussy and Ravel. But the relentlessness is all Herrmann's. The music literally induces vertigo: it finds no acceptable tonal resolution and spirals back on itself. Herrmann has told us what the movie is about.*

*Vertigo*, by Alex Ross, New York Times, October 6, 1996

## **Das Unheimliche and the Gaze**

One could be pedantic with Alex Ross; the mesmerising eyes of Joanne Genthon (*Vertigo*'s woman who only ever looks: Carlotta Valdes) may be attributed falsely to Kim Novak but they are nonetheless uncanny. And what better chord progression to drive Bernard Herrmann's uncanny harmonies than cycles of major third relations, particularly exploiting the neo-Riemannian 'hexatonic pole' that for Richard Cohn (2004, p. 286) embodies that very Freudian concept (2004; 2006). Cohn exhibits progressions from Monteverdi to Wagner, Gesualdo to Schoenberg, finding that the hitherto nameless motion from a major chord to the minor chord a major third below it (see Ex. 1) encompasses aspects of what Ernst Jentsch and Sigmund Freud called *Das Unheimliche – The Uncanny*.<sup>1</sup> The now well-known progression deploys any two complimentary chords from a hexatonic cycle (henceforth an H-transformation). The famous 'love theme' in *Vertigo* climaxes on such an H-transformation, the 'obsession motive' (Tom Schneller, 2005, p. 193) moving from E minor to A<sub>b</sub> (in first inversion with an appoggiatura D) and cadencing on an A minor chord with suspended ninth (see Ex. 2). Repeated a bar later, A<sub>b</sub> re-cadences on a C hyper-major chord. The first cadence represents a SLIDE-transformation<sup>2</sup>, the second, an LP transformation. The common factor to both resolution chords is the interior E minor triad standing in H-relation to the A<sub>b</sub>. The *Vertigo* H-transformation is constantly adjusted and its inherent symmetries are re-balanced almost every time we hear it. The preparatory A<sub>b</sub> chord is 'impure' because of the *Tristan*-like appoggiatura; the resolution has a variable root, fluctuating between an Am<sup>9</sup> and Cmaj<sup>7</sup>, relying on inner pitches for its identity; a potential E root is withheld, though pitches E and B (and often G) are the common denominator.<sup>3</sup> In fact the theme's rising E minor triadic anacrusis makes the subsequent descent from E to B in the third bar a symmetrical variant (a composing-out of the opening's hypnotic arpeggios perhaps). On the neo-Riemannian *Tonnetz*, the alternative roots

---

<sup>1</sup> Freud's use of the noun *das Unheimliche* and its adjectival form *unheimlich* is carefully chosen for its associations. *Heimlich* (homely), in English and German has a double meaning: beautiful/not-beautiful. *Unheimlich* therefore, is something creepy (once beautiful now not beautiful), a secret (*Geheimnis*) that should be kept at home. We must avoid thinking of the two as opposites, as Lawrence Kramer demonstrates: "the *unheimlich* is not the opposite of the *heimlich* – the long known, the familiar – but a distortion of it." (1990, p. 320)

<sup>2</sup> The SLIDE transformation (a combination of L, P and R) was coined by Lewin (2007, p. 178).

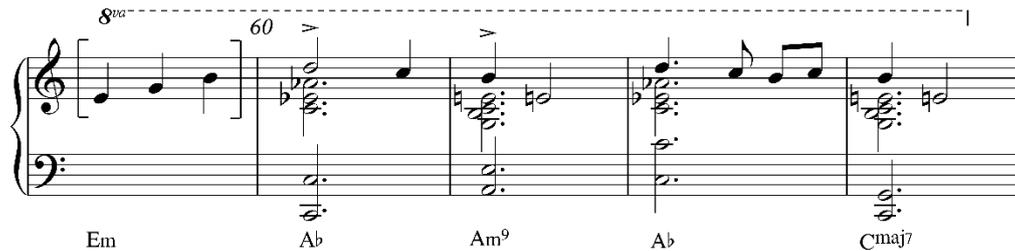
<sup>3</sup> Although mostly absent, E acts as the compromise root.

(E, C or A) show the A $\flat$  resolving to three alternative neo-Riemannian staples, each displaying its own peculiar symmetry (see Fig. 1).

**Example 1 Cohn’s ‘Hexatonic Pole’ (Cohn 2004, p. 285)**

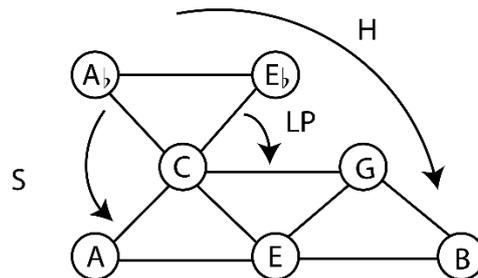


**Example 2 Bernard Herrmann, ‘Scène d’amour’, from *Vertigo*, bars 60-64**



© 1958 (Renewed 1986) by Famous Music Corporation. International Copyright Secured. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission.

**Figure 1. Basic Transformations in the ‘Love Theme’ from ‘Scène d’amour’**



A staple of Danny Elfman, the basic H-transformation is relatively widespread in cinematic music today and I agree with Cohn about its uncanny properties, but in a film with such complex psychodynamics, we can dig deeper into its psychological matrix. Adding to the vast body of work on Freud’s concept, undertaken in various academic disciplines,<sup>4</sup> my reading

<sup>4</sup> Among the most significant examples include the book length study by Nicholas Royle; Royle and other contributions from literary theory – are noted through the course of this essay. In musicology: Christopher Gibbs finds a mirror of the debate surrounding the Uncanny in Schubert’s setting of Goethe’s *Erlkönig* (“I seek to discover not what psychoanalysis reveals about the poem, which undoubtedly offers rich material, but rather what the nature of the critical debate itself, viewed psychoanalytically, reveals about the combination of Goethe’s words with Schubert’s music”: see Gibbs 1995); Joseph Kerman finds the Uncanny at work in Beethoven’s late C# quartet, Op. 131 (2001); Lawrence Kramer (1990) , examines the ‘other voicedness’ as agent of the Uncanny, similarly in Beethoven string quartets (Op. 18/vi), adding Schumann’s *Carnaval* to the debate, also noting the parallels Schumann found between Nathaniel’s Clara in Hoffmann’s ‘The Sandman’ and Schumann’s Clara; Lóránt Péteri examines the concept of Scherzo in Beethoven, tracing the phenomenon in Haydn (“My contention is that the scherzo genre, commonly seen as founded on Haydn’s op. 33 string quartets (1781) and coming to a first fruition in various Beethoven cycles - a genre that is a product, chronologically and culturally, of European modernity – shows a particular propensity to act as the musical vehicle for the uncanny quality”: 2007 p. 332). Michael L Klein (2005) produces a web of semiotic musical codes (p. 81) for the Uncanny in the 19th Century, including 18th century topics such as ombra; his chapter include formal and Schenkerian analyses of Brahms Piano Quartet in C minor Op. 60, Beethoven’s *Eroica*, Schoenberg’s *Gurrelieder*, Schubert’s C minor D. 958/iv among others.

of Freud's essay *Das Unheimliche* (1919) teases out four features of the uncanny that I will show to be pertinent to the themes of *Vertigo* and its idiosyncratic chord progressions: *repetition*, *repression*, *animation* and *vision*.

Firstly, the uncanny (or *unhomely*) is associated with 'the constant recurrence of the same thing – the repetition of the same features or character-traits or vicissitudes, of the same crimes, or even the same names through several consecutive generations' (Freud, 1919, p. 3686); let us call this simply *repetition*.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, there is *repression*: the uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression.<sup>6</sup> This reference to the factor of repression enables us, furthermore, to understand Schelling's definition of the uncanny as something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light (Freud, p. 3691). Thirdly, there is *animation* of the inanimate, as Freud demonstrates: '[i]n fact, I have occasionally heard a woman patient declare that even at the age of eight she had still been convinced that her dolls would be certain to come to life if she were to look at them in a particular, extremely concentrated, way (p. 3686).'<sup>7</sup> Finally, there is the property of *vision* and an obsession with the eyes as a locus of the uncanny. Freud relates the story of the child called Nathaniel whose life was framed by repetitions of the childhood fairy-tale of *The Sandman* who stole children's eyes: 'anxiety about one's eyes, the fear of going blind, is often enough a substitute for the dread of being castrated' (p. 3684). This acute impotence is caused by an inability to see despite being seen. These four issues from Freud, which for me seem so central, are tightly squared in Jacques Lacan's mature theory of 'the Gaze', that leads us to question our very grounding as subjects. This is particularly true of *Vertigo*. Gaze theory was extended into film theory in the last forty years, famously through Laura Mulvey's critical reading of *Vertigo* in her seminal audio-visual text, the much critiqued article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975). The present article aims to use the music of *Vertigo* to recalibrate Lacan's theory of the gaze as it figures in film theory and the acoustic realm, while suggesting ways in which this new formulation of the gaze forms a homology between music and the visual aspects of film. It explores ultimately how my four Freudian principles as agents of the uncanny qua gaze figure in the film soundtrack.

Summary of the ink spilled since Mulvey used Lacanian psychoanalytic theory of 'the Gaze' as 'a political weapon' to accuse us of objectifying the female subject, must be the

---

<sup>5</sup> This is traced as musical repetition in some cases, including the "compulsive repetition" in the scherzos that Lóránt explores (2007, p. 325). The generational repetition is a key concept in psychoanalysts Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok (1994) whose 'phantom' is the return of the secrets of our parents through the Uncanny – a transgenerational sense of repetition which "the subject unknowingly inherits from his parents and exists encrypted in his unconscious" (Palmer 2012, p. 23). The idea of transgenerational repression and trauma feeds into Marianne Hirsch's concept of 'post-memory' (see 1997). Nicholas Royle (2003) extends this by considering Derrida's 'Spectres of Marx' (pp. 277-288).

<sup>6</sup> Klein (2015) makes this clear, along with repetition, "a once familiar thought is transformed into an uncanny one" (p. 12) through cycles of repression. He demonstrates this at work musically in Schubert's *Moment Musical in A*.

<sup>7</sup> This concept of *animation* recurs through the secondary discourse as well as Freud's essay. In Hoffman's 'The Sandman' the doll is Uncanny for its potential animation; such dolls, discussed in Freud's clinics (p. 3686) and Jentsch (1906) notes that "Conversely, the effect of the uncanny can easily be achieved when one undertakes to reinterpret some kind of lifeless thing as part of an organic creature, especially in anthropomorphic terms, in a poetic or fantastic way" (p. 12). The Uncanniness of artificial intelligence (machine or human?) is for this reason often termed 'the uncanny valley'. Reanimation of the inanimate has been analysed in musical terms in Paul Dukas' *Sorcerer's Apprentice*: "Let us take what is undoubtedly the most uncanny passage in *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, where according to the programme, the broom split in half comes to life again as two different brooms. Exactly the same constellation of musical phenomena - formal standstill, complete stop, a static nature deriving from multiple repetition of a motif and the quasi-bitonality incumbent in parallel motions, coupled with a combined *moto perpetuo* built up and outlined step by step." (Lorant 2012, p. 326)

subject of an extended footnote as she has been critiqued from almost every conceivable angle.<sup>8</sup> Emanuel Berman claimed that ‘Mulvey mobilizes Freud’s work ... for her ideological purposes, missing its subtleties’ (p. 975–996), and I would argue that Mulvey’s misunderstanding of Lacanian theory is never stressed quite enough. The terminological problem is understandable since Lacan’s mature theory was particularly abstruse, translated only in 1977, two years too late for Mulvey. Her misunderstandings may not actually undermine her theory that the video camera favours the heterosexual male ego, and her argument probably holds up on without any Lacanian prop.<sup>9</sup> I contend merely that in her over-zealous attempt to turn Lacan’s theory towards the cinema, she missed a more radical reading of both the film and our ways of watching (or being watched by) the uncanny screen itself. While our identifications with characters in films may be structured by our own gender or sexuality, the true Lacanian gaze is indifferent to these secondary features. Mulvey conflates and confuses ‘the gaze’ with ‘the look’ as they figure in Lacanian theory. As distinct phenomena, the look is what I hold when I focus on something; the gaze is what I imagine to be gazing back at me in crucial moments when I feel uncannily objectified *myself* (Lacan, 1977). In Mulvey-studies only Tom Cohen confronts this, citing Slavoj Žižek’s clarification that the gaze is a category of *animation* – the site of ‘personification of the inanimate Thing (*das Ding*)’ (1995, p. 351). As I *look* at Kim Novak wandering the streets of San Francisco, her air of mystery is where the *gaze* is; *it is animated*, gazes back at me, and *I* feel objectified. The gaze exists even before I have seen her glassy-eyed stare and the distance that her eyes convey, though these things may intensify it. *We feel* uncanniness and imagine it to be emanating from the Big Other. And the gaze is watching us. In this context, we are experiencing the gaze as a phenomenon of subjectivity (we are being gazed at by the screen with its many close-ups of eyes perhaps) rather than something merely embodied as a signified within an artwork. Such a reading would also bring us closer to the sounds that this screen emits (perhaps we can feel the sensation that we are being heard while hearing).

---

<sup>8</sup> Donald Spoto (1976) followed Mulvey’s psychoanalytics to examine the drive towards death in the film (p. 308). Robin Wood (1977; 1989) analyses our balance of empathy between Scottie and Judy; he calls the opening sequence ‘the most extreme and abrupt instance of enforced audience identification in all of Hitchcock’ (1989, p. 380). Virginia Wexman (1986) offered a Marxist reading that criticised Mulvey’s ‘idealist’ reading. Marian Keane (1986) argued that the camera is not simply aligned with a male point of view, Scottie as voyeur being the film’s principal sufferer. Emanuel Berman (1997) discussed Scottie’s plight as an Oedipal rescue fantasy. A reading of a feminine Oedipal drama came from Karen Hollinger (1986) who showed Carlotta to be a powerful maternal presence, subverting the male order, while Tania Modleski (1988) showed that femininity is throwing the masculine viewpoint into crisis. Stanley Palombo (1987) argues that we suffer from the viewpoint of a parent, a few years before White (1991) claimed that men and women were equally spoiled by identification with cinema’s role models.

<sup>9</sup> It seems clear that the video camera does, in general terms, privilege the male perspective that treats the female body as ‘object’. There are moments that contradict this however, but these tend to prove the rule. For example, in *Rebecca*, we are astutely aware of the female gaze: the insecure young nameless heroine is often being dismissively looked up and down by women (first by Mrs Van Hopper, secondly by the sinister Danny); the house, as it represents the sinister Housekeeper and the former Mrs De Winter is also looking at us from the angle of the maternal superego. In this respect, Hitchcock describes the music as crucial to revealing the Uncanny maternal gaze of the house Manderley, in which Elisabeth Bronfen finds a unity of the gaze and the Uncanny (2004): “Hitchcock often stages an arrival at an unfamiliar home in such a way that the spectator has the uncanny impression that the house itself is returning his or her gaze. This disembodied gaze, which according to Jacques Lacan constitutes the subject, is effectively a missing gaze, in the sense that it is purely phantasmatic.” (p. 36) We find a similar phenomenon in Freud’s Uncanny (un-homely) when he describes the sensation of “painted women” gazing at him from the windows of houses (“Nothing but painted women were to be seen at the windows of the small houses, and I hastened to leave the narrow street at the next turning”). There are clearly alternatives to the ‘male gaze’ (though I would tend to agree with Mulvey that that phallogocentric camera angle dominates in cinema) particularly in *Rebecca*, where we watch a woman (an unnamed ‘I’) being watched, and who in turn watches her husband stare into space. Perhaps the gaze is his? The truly interesting point is the role of music with this female gaze in *Rebecca*; as Hitchcock notes in response to Truffaut’s comment that “Whenever home is mentioned, it’s as the Manderley mansion or the estate. Whenever it is shown there is an aura of magic about it, with mists, and the musical score heightens that haunting impression.” – “That’s right, because in a sense the picture is the story of a house.” (Cited in Bronfen, p. 60)

A partner to the eye that fill the screen in *Vertigo* is found in another Herrmann soundtrack in *Endless Night* (1972). Here, the idea of *repetition* as an uncanny factor of the gaze is even more forcefully expressed. In the final scene, the murderer (acted by Hywel Bennet) is undergoing psychotherapy, and it becomes clear that the film we have seen is just one of his many (different) *repeated* versions of his life story, tape-recorded by the therapist: “You Sometimes tell it as it seems to you, and sometimes you tell it as you would like it to seem to us. Why don't we go right back to the beginning and start all over again?”. This triggers an outbreak of the murderer's *repressed* childhood with visions of a picture on his wall that he hid as a child – a portrait of a giant eye with the words “Thou God Seest Me”, and we remember his mother's words: “Never liked being watched did ya?”. The eye of the picture is then *animated*, coming to life as the eyes of Hayley Mills' character, his murdered lover. The camera disappears into her pupil, giving (this viewer at least) the sensation of the uncanny gaze. Herrmann's music continues themes from *Vertigo* – his famous disorienting effect of figuring the gaze as inverted harp glissandi with bitonal, jarring orchestral chords. The ‘Endless Night’ theme song is then reprised, now accompanied by full orchestra with Ondes Martinot and electronic sounds, where it was earlier sung diegetically by Mills within the film accompanied on Baroque instruments, a song which shares the same melodic contour as Herrmann's more famous *Twisted Nerve* theme (which features both Mills and Bennett), that thus found its own repetitive life not only in *Endless Night* but in the infamous *Kill Bill* whistling scene. The music, albeit on a different level, moves out of the subjective frame that the film contains – it *gazes* at us both as a phenomenon of subjectivity, and as a signified of the gaze within the film(s). The song's gaze is also Uncanny: it is *animated*, moving from the diegetic as we see it produced, to non-diegetic; it *repeats* itself through the years; it is *repressed* as the characters ignore the impact of the song until it fulfils its own dark prophesy (‘endless night’); it is aligned with a kind of *vision* with the giant eye that fills the screen.

Anthony John explores Herrmann's *Vertigo* score in light of the gaze; after referring to Mulvey's *looked-at-ness* he claims,

Herrmann's musical composition proves no less seductive than Hitchcock's visual composition, adding an aural dimension to Mulvey's exclusively ocular critique. Through the combination of music and image, we are (with Scottie) invited to objectify Madeleine from the moment we first see her. (John, 2001, p. 517)

John makes two errors to my mind: (a) he takes Mulvey at face value, perpetuating her misconstrual of the gaze (‘through watching he controls someone who is unaware that she is being watched’, p. 520); and (b) he assumes that the musical and visual parameters work consistently to the same objectifying end. Surely, however, if we watch the cinema screen, and feel fascinated by it, then in a strictly Lacanian way the screen is gazing at us, paralysing us; we are ‘glued to our seats’ by it. How apposite then that our first image in *Vertigo* is the Saul Bass titles with their close ups on Joanne Genthon's eyes (note that the actress herself is uncredited in the film; she lies outside it – she is the woman that does not exist). Lindeman suggests that the vertiginous feeling comes from the gaze in this sequence: ‘The depersonalized feminine face that supports these significations is both the object of the camera's scrutiny and the source from which the vertigo emanates; its eyes which look ‘off’ relay the spectator's gaze to an ‘elsewhere’...’ (Lindeman, p. 60-61).

Music must play an expansive role here. In fact, the inspiration behind gaze theory was Jean-Paul Sartre's anecdote about hearing uncanny sounds while spying through a keyhole (Lacan, 1981, p. 182). The noises he heard were indexical of the Big Other's presence that objectified him as a watcher (a listener). Music can do the same in film; it is uncanny merely

by virtue of the fact that it is non-diegetic for the most part (remember David Raskin's famous quip – 'Ask Hitchcock where the cameras come from.').<sup>10</sup> Scottie, the 'hero' whose gaze we are alleged to follow (Mulvey), never hears music; the music is a gaze only for *our* benefit. Whenever music is played he asks for it to be turned off, and it can't reach him in his catatonia. Perhaps music lets us consider more forcefully than the image alone the intensities and thresholds of the gaze that objectifies Scottie, but as it does so it works on us directly. The irony here is all the greater in that Scottie's character in the original novel was profoundly musically sensitive; on the very first page, when carefully negotiating the encounter with his new 'boss' ("I want you to keep an eye on my wife") he is concerned that the sound of the conversation expresses every musical nuance ("If the note [of his nervous laugh] was wrong, it was only by a fraction of a semitone.") The pitch of the unpitched sound is uncanny, and this uncanniness is musical.

Stan Link notes *Vertigo's* ability to watch the watchers: 'The visuality of film resides in its own looking, as well as in its being looked at' (Link, p. 76), but I argue that the *music* of the film objectifies not only the film's characters, but also us the spectators. Thus, using Lacanian theory, but remembering its basis in those four Freudian principles of the uncanny—*repetition, repression, animation* and *vision* – I propose that three overlapping musical gazes are at work in *Vertigo*, each considering the four facets of the uncanny in different amalgams. *Gaze 1* uses symmetrical tonal constructions, in which a static and lifeless interval-cycle *repetitious* symmetry is the paradigm, which is manipulated in order to function within diatonic *animation*. This gaze works because something spoils the crystalline surface, as in Roland Barthes' (1981) concept of the 'punctum' in photography where a tiny detail pierces us and allows the *repressed* sublime to flood in, reminding us of the larger frame. *Gaze 2* works because of *repeated* pedal tones, particularly the pitch D, that are so insistently *inanimate* as to form a peculiar blockage between us and the *repressed*. *Gaze 3* follows the film's fascination with spirals overlaid with images of *the eye*. In these spirals, *repetition* is *animated* by working outwards from the sterile circle. Spirals work partly to break the symmetry as in *gaze 1*, but I examine this now at formal level – spiralling outwards from individual progressions and motifs – to build vast sections of the work, and situate these within the bigger picture of *repressed* imagery that breaks free at the close of the film.

### **Gaze 1: The Circle of the Eye to the Spirial of the Fall**

Saul Bass's visuals superimpose spiralling figurations of bodies in free fall upon the circles of the iris. Spirals, as symbols of the vertiginous feelings associated with height and falling, register a movement that lies beyond the circle, subtly redirecting it and deviating from it – *animating* the eyes as uncanny; they are asymmetrical. In subtler places than the opening visuals, the spiral's profound manipulation of a circle plays out at some obvious levels of *Vertigo*. At macro-level, endless *repetition* in the Nietzschean sense of the 'eternal return' occurs, where history repeats itself with injections of difference each time:<sup>11</sup> Carlotta Valdes's

---

<sup>10</sup> This was Raskin's reply to Hitchcock's suggestion that an orchestral score for *Lifeboat* would be out of place on account of the boat's isolation. See Alex Ross, New York Times, October 6, 1996.

<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche's famously oblique comments on the eternal return yield several interpretations. For readers of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (1882, section 341), there is an injunction to live as if our actions would be repeated endlessly – a relatively straightforward ethical interpretation. For readers of *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1883–1891), a phenomenological argument continues a pseudo-scientific, speculative line of thought in which, because time is endless, the reality of the earth will repeat itself. An alternative metaphysical interpretation from takes the eternal return as being a general sentiment against the religious concept of afterlife (see Rose Pfeffer 1965); a similarly general return is referred to as the 'representational version' (Dombowsky 1997, p. 29), a return of *differences*, drawn from a Heidegger's writing on Nietzsche. For Deleuze's (awry but slightly more profound) reading of Nietzsche, the repetition that Nietzsche refers to is also the eternal repetition of

spirals of hair become Madeleine Elster's, becomes Judy's; Gavin Elster becomes Scottie. This will be explored at the end of this article. At micro-level, asymmetrical diatonicism is used to subvert 'circular' or symmetrical chord constructions and chord relations, providing a correlation with the image of spirals superimposed upon the eyes (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2. The Opening titles of *Vertigo* by Saul Bass**



In pitch terms, symmetries abound in Herrmann's score and often come from relatively standard sets associated with *repeating* interval cycles. Such sets, when employed, always suffer minor perturbations that tip the balance of symmetry. Such manipulations grow and grow, unravelling into a full diatonic deluge. This happens most forcefully when the circling repetitive opening title music supports the focus on the organ of *vision* of Genthon. As the camera zooms into the pupil, the image disappears into it the spirals and Herrmann opens up a new world of Romantic harmonic progressions, yearning themes and lush orchestration that engage us more compellingly. The out-of-place perturbations that catch our ears and become uncanny, set up the gaze. In the first moment of the film, for example, the flutes and first violins play a perfectly rounded construction: an augmented chord with G $\flat$ , B $\flat$ , D $\sharp$  pitches (Ex. 3). Bar 2 slips one of the Ds chromatically to an E $\flat$  hyper-minor triad – the very thing played in bar 1 by the clarinets and second violins except the D replaces a C, to be the root of a half-diminished (*Tristan*) chord. In bar 2, both orchestral groups play the same chord (symmetry?) but in retrograde with each other to maintain the jarring minor second.

**Example 3. Bernard Herrmann, Opening Bars of *Vertigo***

The musical score consists of two staves. The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. Both staves feature a series of notes with accents and triplets. Below the staves, four chords are indicated: D $\flat$  C $\emptyset$ 7, E $\flat$ m $\text{maj}$ 7, D $\flat$  C $\emptyset$ 7, and E $\flat$ m $\text{maj}$ 7.

*difference*, rather than repetition of the *same*, based on lines from the *Nachlass*, collected as *Der Wille zur Macht*, Deleuze referring to "the repetition of the dice-throw, the reproduction and reaffirmation of chance itself" (Deleuze 1986, p. 28). My remarks, and the usefulness of the concept in *Vertigo*, veer more towards the representational and Deleuzian interpretations.

© 1958 (Renewed 1986) by Famous Music Corporation. International Copyright Secured. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission.

In his *Film Score Handbook*, David Cooper claims that this ostinato ‘embodies in musical terms, three of the key motifs of the film and its *repetitions* – mirror images, spirals and obsession – by means of the constant repetition of a two-bar arpeggiated figure that has a number of axes of symmetry’ (Cooper, 2001, p. 22). As Royal Brown avers, ‘In *Vertigo*’s opening motive, the down-up motion of the top line is opposed to the up-down motion of the bottom’ [citation missing]. This combination of arpeggios makes and breaks symmetry by manipulating the whole-tone augmented triad into both the hyper-minor and *Tristan* chords, both of which are slightly more forcefully diatonic. As Salman Rushdie purportedly claimed, ‘vertigo is the conflict between the fear of falling and a desire to fall’; the pitches desire to move and also want to stay still (Wood, 1965, p. 74). Is this a symmetrical system mobilised by diatonicism, or is pure diatonicism arrested by whole-tone symmetry? Whichever way we might hear it, an uncanny gateway opens up between two worlds. A micro-tendency for C<sup>7</sup> to resolve to F is an injection of diatonicism, yet the dominant seventh and its inverse, the half-diminished chord are also part of the symmetrical octatonic universe. The question of the chord’s identity craves our attention; it gazes at us and we become its objects, imagining a sentient symbolic being at work behind. Brown aligns the asymmetries of these harmonies with the asymmetries of the sexual dynamics at play, referring to Scottie’s castration:

While *Vertigo*’s Prelude, then, suggests tonality, it generally lacks the sense of harmonic movement characteristic of Western music and instead creates a sense of stasis that seconds the feminine orientation of the title sequence and its imagery, not to mention the whole Orphic bent of *Vertigo*’s narrative and structure. (Brown, p. 31)

The reference to ‘lack’ is the language of castration: and this is not an uncommon reading of the film – Scottie’s debilitating vertigo being a constant reminder of his ‘impotence (and our own)’ (Berman, p. 2). Remember Freud’s association between castration (in this case loss of *vision*) and the uncanny ‘gaze’: ‘the feeling of something uncanny is directly attached to the figure of the Sand-Man, that is, to the idea of being robbed of one’s eyes’ (1919, p. 3683). The chord that Herrmann works towards is the famous bitonal *vertigo* chord, a sort of ‘castration chord’ associated with his incapacitating weakness, heard every time he is attacked by a wave of vertigo. It combines E<sub>b</sub> minor and D major chords, paying an obvious debt to the opening ‘spirals’ (now adding the pitch A to make it fully bitonal). Apart from the very occasional diegetic sources, this is the only ‘Mickey Mousing’ in the score. As Marshall McLuhan imagined, the sonic world focuses differently to the visual:

We hear sounds from everywhere without having to focus. [...] We simply are not equipped with ear lids. Where a visual space is an organized continuum of a uniformed connected kind, the ear world is a world of simultaneous relationships. (McLuhan 1967, p. 111, cited in Link, 2004, p. 79)

McLuhan may oversimplify the difference in how the ear and the eye ‘focus’, the music can certainly focus the eye. In shocking and vertiginous moments, for example, as Link claims, ‘[h]earing has reached out, selected an object, excluded others, objectified them and sequentialized them’ (2004, p. 80). The *vertigo* chord’s ‘dizzying dissonance’ (Sullivan, 2006, p. 5) is a clear symbol of Scottie’s agoraphobia, supporting the *visual* famous camera technique of pulling back and zooming in simultaneously (while the two harpists famously glissandi in opposite directions), showing in fact the process of focus itself. The chord was lifted verbatim in *North by Northwest* (Brown, 1982, p.39) as Cary Grant hangs to Mount Rushmore. It is a

bitonal Ivesian construction (Herrmann discovered Ives in 1927, and was a lifelong devotee) and its superficial symmetry is registered on the *Tonnetz* (see Fig. 3). The F#/G<sub>b</sub> mutual third joins the D and E<sub>b</sub> minor triads as a kind of SLIDE-transformation. When the separate elements of the total chord resolve by fifth root-relations, its triadic aspects form a clearly symmetrical pattern, appearing to invert. However, this inversion occurs through a PLR transform (D–G minor) and PRL (E<sub>b</sub> minor–A<sub>b</sub>), adding a mobilising asymmetry to the ostensibly symmetrical patterning – it adds something impure and diatonic. Although the RL and LR are symmetrical, they asymmetrically join with the P of each transformation. This P transformation, while certainly tipping the balance of symmetry, is less significant than usual in Herrmann’s harmonic language. It is certainly the least applied transformation in the score. As Brown asserts,

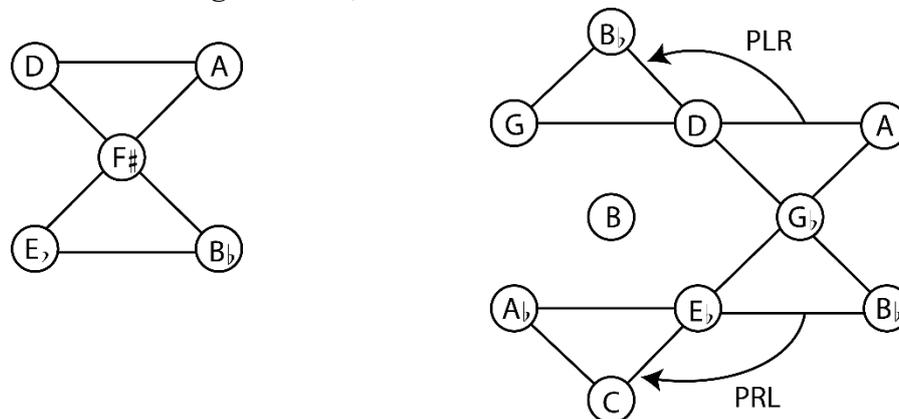
Herrmann began to rely even less on the types of dramatic shifts from major to minor mode that one can find in numerous romantic composers such as Tchaikovsky; instead, he devised a chordal language that *simultaneously* has major and minor implications. [...] Herrmann created a *vertical* synchronicity that sets up a strong opposition to Hitchcock’s *horizontally* created synchronicity. (1982, p. 24)

Further:

What Herrmann began to do with great consistency in his Hitchcock scores was to isolate the characteristically Western interval of the third from the minor/major or major/minor equilibrium of the tonic triad. (1982, p. 20)

He notes that the classic ‘Hitchcock’ chord is what Lendvai might call a ‘hyper-minor’ (Brown, p. 20), a minor chord ostensibly, but with two major thirds within it. Nevertheless, these chords are not formed from repeating interval-cycles, there is a deviation – a widening of the circle.

**Figure 3 The ‘Vertigo Chord’, its bitonal construction and transformations**



Does symmetry in both the visual and audio field, then align the uncanny gaze with its repetitions, animations, repressions and visions (gazes)? I argue, while it certainly does in some senses, perhaps the points of uncanniness occur at the boundary between symmetry and asymmetry. The cue ‘Dawn’ further questions the relations between symmetrical and asymmetrical systems. As the semi-catatonic Scottie approaches a Madeleine look-a-like who has bought her Jaguar, the three triads that were compressed into one in the ‘obsession’ motif are now dispersed in their uncanny repetition and intersect a broadly diatonic framework that animates them (again, a mark of the uncanny). After the famous scene in which the mentally

unresponsive Scottie hears Mozart without any response, the triads A $\flat$ , C and E, are offered sequentially, and form the hexatonic cycle that would force our neo-Riemannian ears to prick up (see Ex. 4 and Fig. 4). As Cooper describes,

The middle three chords of the progression, F $\flat$  major (enharmonically equivalent to E major), A $\flat$  major and C major are tonally distant from each other but are connected by single common pivotal tones. Such progressions of major chords that rise by the interval of a major third seem to encode mounting anticipation and confidence because of their increasing tonal ‘brightness’. (2001, p. 130)

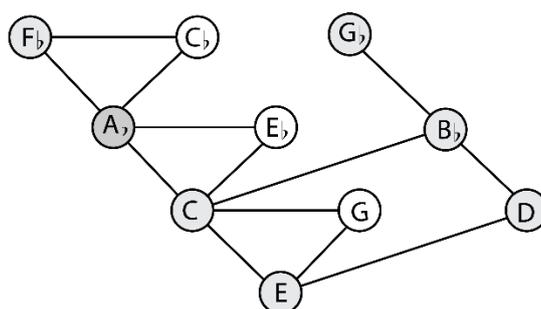
Each chord sticks out of the diatonic surface because none can exist in the same key as any other. That they accompany something astutely uncanny is clear in the film, even without being full H-transformations. Madeleine has returned, but she is not Madeleine; the ‘obsession’ motive returns, but this is not part of the ‘love theme’. There is repetition (or return) here, and the new differences within this repetition are uncanny. After a B $\flat$  hyper-minor chord (see Ex. 4) the score calls for a five-note whole-tone scale (C, D, E, G $\flat$ , B $\flat$ ), another *repeating* interval in symmetrical arrangement that is added to the *Tonnetz* in Fig. 4; note how, with E at its core, the additional pitches of G $\flat$ , B $\flat$ , and D, not only form the sevenths of each of the hexatonic chords A $\flat$ , C and E (though now not heard as such presumably), but also form the augmented triad that opened the work. This relationship is symmetrically formed from a collision of two different arrangements of symmetry: a chromatic space followed by whole-tone space; whole-tone chord relations followed by whole-tone pitch material, separated by the T $_5$  version of the prelude’s hyper-minor. The *repetitions* of both symmetrical (whole-tone, ic-4 cycles) and asymmetrical (diatonic) realms *animate* each other because the static symmetry returns from its frequent *repression* to disrupt the diatonically driven harmonic flow, which renders more normative subjective/objective relations without which, the symmetrical self-enclosed cycles would be inert. And this, I argue, is one place where the sonic corollary of the uncanny *visual* gaze is most strongly found.

**Example 4 ‘Dawn’, bars 25 ff.**

pos. nat.

Fm      F $\flat$       A $\flat$       C      B $\flat$ m<sup>(maj7)</sup>      WT

**Figure 4 ‘Dawn’ Hexatonic chords and Whole-tone Pitch Relations**

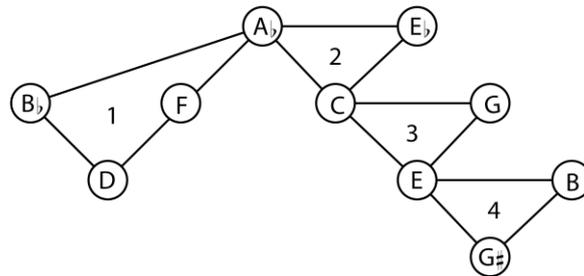


Other cues establish and subvert similar symmetry/asymmetrical gaze points. The final passage of ‘Goodnight’ (see Fig. 5) begins with the formalised B<sub>b</sub><sup>7</sup> and projects the same major third cycle before closing the cue on B<sub>b</sub>’s tritone-relative, E. In ‘The Hotel’ the B<sub>b</sub><sup>7</sup> supports the sinister D–E–F–E–D–E<sub>b</sub>–D motive from ‘Carlotta’s Portrait’ (see Ex. 6) but is framed by F minor and A minor triads, causing false relation (A<sub>b</sub>/A<sub>4</sub>). A D major second inversion triad occupies the centrepiece of this harmonic progression, creating further symmetrical relations, but the balance is tipped by the over-exposure of D, and the diatonic force of B<sub>b</sub><sup>7</sup>. ‘Madeleine’s car’ (see Ex. 5), with its perpetual repeated syncopation, alternates the same B<sub>b</sub><sup>7</sup> with a French sixth on E with which it shares three pitches. Both the French sixth and the dominant seventh transcend major-minor boundaries as they could resolve to either mode, but the former is symmetrical in construction; again the oscillation between the two creates a gaze point. Cooper describes how ‘[t]he effect of these whole tone chords from the standpoint of diatonic harmony is one of suspension and irresolution, conventionally lending them an air of mystery’ (2001, p. 91). This mystery (qua gaze) is itself directly relatable to the uncanny, because the whole-tone French-sixth chord is like the dominant-seventh that we know well, but the fifth is diminished – grotesquely distorted: something familiar, but estranged.

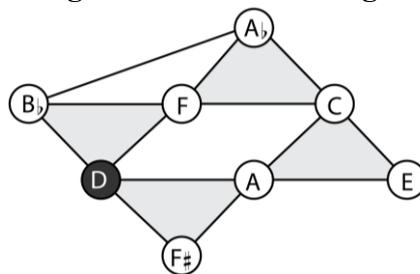
Alex Ross suggested that ‘off-center’ tonality is relentless in Hermann, but we might ask whether *Vertigo* has a soundtrack that spirals outwards from a central tonality (asymmetry), or circles around one without touching it (symmetry)? Table 1 maps ‘gaze’ relationships that work at different levels in the film, leading to a musical consideration in the lower two rows. I suggest that symmetry can mark specific types of objectivity (in the sense of closed, finite objects) that can produce fascination (H-poles, whole-tone, octatonic), and that composers can introduce a modicum of diatonic asymmetry that implies a bigger subjectivity beyond the surface to embody a threat to subjectivity behind the gaze. However, using Rimsky-Korsakov as his example, Ross suggests that fragments of symmetry (the mysterious octatonic passages associated with the sea-queen from *Sadko* for example) can peak through a diatonic surface and lure us into a new experience of ‘the Real’. To be clear, I do not claim that the gaze is inherent in either Western constructions of harmonic symmetry or asymmetry, but that the one can peak through the other, the gaze operating on the liminal borders. When a symmetrical passage suddenly gleams out of a crack in the diatonic surface, our focus is directed to it, setting its gaze in motion. The point is that in the kind of discourse I am describing, both symmetry and asymmetry are context-dependant constructions that can form alternating subject-object relations. The *audio-visual* aspect of the gaze operates at the limits of both subject and object in combination with the other three of my four Freudian precepts: *repetition* of interval-cycles (symmetrical chord progressions), *animation* of those constructions (through interaction with

diatonic drives) and *repression* (the diatonic flow tends to cover-up symmetrical progressions except when they are particularly strong).

**Figure 5. ‘Goodnight’ Hexatonic chords and B $\flat$ <sup>7</sup>**



**Figure 6. ‘The Hotel’.** Grey triangles mark the chords given (excl. B $\flat$ <sup>7</sup>)



**Example 5: ‘Madeleine’s Car’ from *Vertigo*, bars 1-2**



© 1958 (Renewed 1986) by Famous Music Corporation. International Copyright Secured.  
All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission.

**Figure 7. Gaze Relationships in *Vertigo***

Subject	look(s) at	Object	and	The Big Other	gazes back at	Subject
Maddy		Carlotta		The Past		Maddy
Scottie		Maddy		Desire		Scottie
Judy		Scottie		Love		Judy
We		Vertigo		Mystery		Us
Listeners		Symmetry		Asymmetry		

## Gaze 2: Repetition and the ‘Objet Petit d’<sup>12</sup>

A very particular gaze in the score is provided by a frequently repeated pitch class. Freud claimed that ‘whatever reminds us of this inner “compulsion to repeat” is perceived as uncanny’ (Freud, 1919, p. 3690), and reiterated pitches in music were examined in this light by David Schwarz in *Listening Awry* (2006). Schwarz contended that pitch reiterations formed an insuperable obstacle between a looker and the Kantian sublime (pp. 27-57); in short: the gaze. Using Lacan’s theory to explore Schubert songs (‘Ihr Bild’, ‘Die Stadt’, ‘Der Doppelgänger’ and ‘Die liebe Farbe’) Schwarz claims, ‘reiterated notes that set failed sight in these works gaze at us’ (p. 32). Further, ‘In ‘Die liebe Farber’, a single note [F#] is reiterated across the entire score, gazing at us as the embodiment of a narrator’ (Schwarz, 2006, p. 32). Schwarz distinguishes between repetition (teleological) and reiteration (static), terms differentiated in the following discussion. In *Vertigo*, the pitch D is prominent throughout the film as what Brown calls an ‘obsessive presence’ (1982, p. 18-9). Schneller uses the same terminology:

Notice the emphasis given to the note *D*, not only as an appoggiatura over the underlying  $A\flat$  major chord but also as the highest and longest note of the phrase. Its perpetual recurrence, both in this and other contexts, establishes *D* as the score’s ‘Obsessive’ note (Schneller, 2005, p. 199).

This pitch originates in *The Trouble with Harry*, whose opening four-note horn call’s last pitch D (see Ex. 7) sounds like a leading-note to  $E\flat$ . As we heard, the prelude of *Vertigo* opened with just such a D jarring against an  $E\flat$  minor triad. In the ‘obsession’ motive this becomes the blazing appoggiatura against  $A\flat$ . In the bitonal *vertigo* chord it grounds one of the triads. The purest example of the pitch’s prominence occurs in the theme associated with Carlotta Valdes (Ex. 6). A D first intones a Cuban Habanera rhythm while chromatic thirds weave around it to create the effect of a ghostly Carmen, reminding us of Norma Desmond’s associative theme from Franz Waxman’s *Sunset Boulevard*. As Cooper notes, Herrmann had used the Habanera rhythm before in the cue ‘Siesta’ from *Garden of Evil*, 1954, but in *Vertigo* it becomes ‘a wraith-like dance, the life sucked out of it, trapped in cyclic repetition, without development or progress’ (2001, p. 99). My *Tonnetz* representation (see Fig. 8) attempts to flexibly accommodate the triads implied in the cue, and shows the comparative symmetries around the clearly central pitch D. The chords are generally *tethered* to pitch D as the pitch consonant with each chord; D *represses* harmonic movement (restricting it), yet *animates* it with its ghostly Habanera; it *repeats* at various levels, and as in Schwarz’s hearing of Schubert, it *gazes* at us. The number in each triangle refers to the order of appearance of chords. For symmetry, compare moves 1 and 4, 2 and 3; chord 5 (the augmented triad) has a symmetry of its own. At points in *Vertigo* this persistent symmetrical augmented chord alternates roots  $G\flat$  and  $B\flat$ , while the D hammers through from above. In similar symmetry, the famous nightmare sequence (see Ex. 8) reiterates D while the bass’s descent from  $B\flat$  to E implicates both as symmetrically divided roots of a French sixth. Brown claims that in ‘Carlotta’s Portrait’.

The repeated D also refuses to allow the cue to modulate, thus creating a feeling of stasis that aids in the isolation of the parallel thirds. [... W]ith the repeated D linking

---

<sup>12</sup> The ‘objet petit *a*’, *a* standing for ‘little other (*autre*)’ is Lacan’s algebraic term for the ‘object-cause’ of desire.

the entire musical cue, Herrmann is able to stress that what appears to be an opposition is also the inside and outside of the same situation. (Brown, 1982, p. 27)

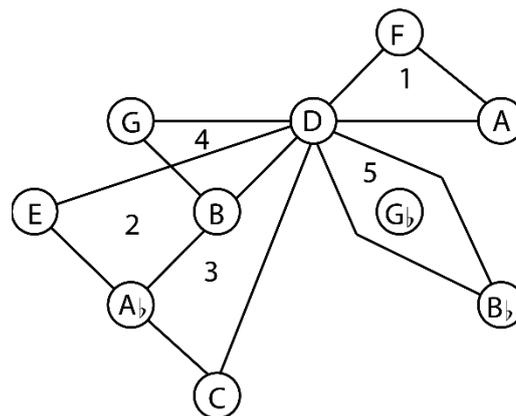
Neither Scottie, Madeleine, nor even Carlotta hear these obsessive reiterations; that is our privilege. As Carlotta's portrait gazes at Madeleine, and Madeleine gazes at Scottie, the obsessive music serves as a mark of the uncanny, gazing at us. It returns several times in the film, most disruptively in the mirror, when Scottie notices Carlotta's necklace around Judy's neck and his own anagnorisis dances to the same tune. Cooper asseverates that this insistent reiteration is an 'obsessional neurosis' (p. 36), but perhaps this is where the gaze of the necklace – the uncanny return of this *repressed* (both the necklace and the musical habanera rhythm had been forgotten) – yields the truth behind the portrait itself. There are times when the very pitch itself is *repressed*. For example, the final stretch of 'Farewell' seems to forcibly exclude D, with only the chromatic penultimate *Tristan* chord admitting it.<sup>13</sup> However, the subsequent cue sustains and *animates* the D throughout (see Fig. 9 from Cooper's *Handbook*). The repressed always returns.

**Example 6. Bernard Herrmann, 'Carlotta's Portrait', from *Vertigo*, bars 1-8**



© 1958 (Renewed 1986) by Famous Music Corporation. International Copyright Secured. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission.

**Figure 8. 'Carlotta's Portrait', Tonnetz Representation**



<sup>13</sup> Cooper gives the progression as: B<sup>7</sup>/F – A<sup>aug</sup> – C<sup>9</sup> – C<sup>7</sup> (German sixth in E) – C<sup>7-5</sup> (French sixth in E – D<sup>♭aug7</sup>/E<sup>♭</sup> – C<sup>♭7</sup> – E<sup>m6</sup> – C<sup>maj7</sup> – D<sup>07</sup> – B<sup>7</sup>/F (p. 117).

### Example 7 Themes from *The Trouble with Harry*



### Example 8 *Vertigo*'s Nightmare Sequence



Figure 9. Cooper's Harmonic Précis of 'Farewell', bars 24-59 (p. 117)



As well as near-symmetry of chord construction, another link between this level of reiterative, persistent gazing D (*gaze 2*), and the type of neo-Riemannian major-third relative *gaze 1* is the activation of the pitch as a binding note between tonal centricities on D and new ones on the major-third-related B $\flat$  (usually as a seventh chord, with the pitch D's tritone pole A $\flat$ ). The latter chord is thematised when Scottie tails Madeleine, with D serving as a persistent symbol of the subjectivity at the heart of his desiring fascination (and ours by extension). In this pursuit, the previous cue to 'Madeleine's car' ends on a sparse unison D which becomes the third of the B $\flat$ <sup>7</sup> that begins 'Madeline's car' (see Ex. 5). This cue itself deploys only B $\flat$ <sup>7</sup>, E<sup>aug</sup> and D<sup>aug</sup> chords which are well suited to an inner pedal point D.<sup>14</sup> As Scottie inspects Carlotta's tombstone, the cue picks up a B $\flat$ <sup>7</sup> chord and the prolonged D becomes the tonal centre of 'Carlotta's Portrait'. When the B $\flat$ <sup>7</sup> in the strings underpins Carlotta's theme, Cooper observes that 'Herrmann thus further accentuates the distinction between Scottie's pursuit music (which has hitherto been underpinned by the B $\flat$ <sup>7</sup> chord) and Madeleine / Carlotta's triadic D minor material' (2001, p. 103). Another of B $\flat$ <sup>7</sup>'s many returns occurs in 'The Fireside' when Scottie has undressed Madeleine and B $\flat$ <sup>7</sup> alternates with an almost full tonic of D. Thus reiteration at pitch level becomes repetition at thematic level. Like *gaze 1*, a distinct admixture of *repetition*, *repression* and *animation* provide an aural analogue to the scopic drives of the eye.

### Gaze 3: Uncanny Spirals of Repetition through Time: 'Scène d'amour' and 'The Return'

As outlined above, reiteration is not blind repetition. Repetition breaks out of itself into a spiral and the movement of history spirals towards self-consciousness.<sup>15</sup> The uncanny gaze animates this process, driving consciousness to reflect upon itself, leading to the point at which, as Lacan would say, '*I see myself seeing myself*' (1998, p. 80). I go on to show that this foundational

<sup>14</sup> The melodic line offers a symmetrical D–E–F–E–D melodic cell and also registers its tritone variant: A $\flat$ –B $\flat$ –C $\flat$ –B $\flat$ –A $\flat$ .

<sup>15</sup> This is perhaps more philosophically germane to Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1807) than Nietzsche's eternal return, though the spirals here are not necessary dialectical mechanisms.

metaphor of (the hope of) apperception in the gaze unites my four Freudian aspects of the uncanny and appears in the musical substrata of Bernard Herrmann's score. To best illustrate its workings, I make a holistic analysis of the particularly famous 'Scène d'amour' from the crucial scene in which Scottie 'makes over' Judy, kissing her as the newly *reanimated* Madeleine. Among others, Lindeman segments the film into 'three movements' (p. 53), and this scene marks the close of the second. Hitchcock called this, 'the recognition scene' (O' Sullivan, p. 4), reminding us perhaps of Strauss's *Elektra*, when Elektra realises that the visitor that reminds her of her dead brother in fact Orestes himself. In *Vertigo*, the camera pans 360° around their embrace as if we are on a whirling stage (which is in fact how Hitchcock made the shot possible). While kissing, Scottie suddenly has a vision that that he is in the stable of the Mission San Juan Bautista where Madeleine died, and we watch him *repress* this image so that he can continue his passion. Musically, the rising, repetitious *agitato* sequences that mount tension reiterate motives that need to be overcome via repression for him to continue his courtship unfettered; we need to move on from them and repeat in order to repress. In fact, when Scottie has his *vision*, he momentarily looks around as if he is being watched himself, a feeling that he also needs to *repress*. But Scottie is about to realise the truth of the Judy-Madeleine association, and this structure is based on *repetition*: as well as repeating to repress, he repeats to discover. Lindeman remarks that Judy is 'the figuration of Scottie's own disposition to repeat', while the give-away Spanish fan and necklace in the Empire Hotel are 'figurations of Judy's predisposition to repeat' (Lindeman, p. 57). Each time the repressed indicated by the uncanny gaze *animates* the next spiral of repetition. This is how Freud figured the uncanny, as Lindeman reminds us: 'What returns is something known, what is strange is only its return: the movement of repetition is at the same time motion of estrangement' (Lindeman, p. 58). This holds true of the scene's musical processes as we now address.

The score for *Scène d'amour* reminds of two other cues: (1) 'The Beach', and (2) the very ending of the film. Both end in C major with impressive cadences from A<sub>b</sub>-C. Cooper suggests that this A<sub>b</sub> functions 'as a substitute subdominant in a kind of plagal cadence' and I am minded to agree (2001, p. 37). Before I return to this C major cadence, I aim to show how it is the catalyst for much of the drama in the score, the crucial question being – 'how can we resolve the diatonic differences between the C and the A<sub>b</sub>?' Analysing the chord progressions and themes, this question lies the heart of the cues in question; it is almost as though the two chords were two lovers gazing at each other, both contributing to the music's own gaze at its listeners. What starts off as a Cohnian uncanny H-transformation at the head of this essay, spirals out of control into the form of a whole cue, the entire film, and ultimately our lives. The form of the cue is quite straightforward in Fig. 10, though my text, as well as the diagram of Fi. 11, brings out the nuances and overlaps. The tonal labels are only meant to indicate the vague key areas often quite obliquely represented. The different iterations of A and B across the cue (A<sup>2</sup>, B<sup>2</sup>, A<sup>3</sup>) can be conceptualised as a large spiral (see Fig. 11, beginning at 'A' in the centre), where the increasingly diffuse versions of each phrase reach outwards, as if a subject is passing through A and B phases. I now take each section in turn, to outline the repetitions, animations, repressions, and the (audio) visual aspects of the uncanny gaze that is the driving process.<sup>16</sup>

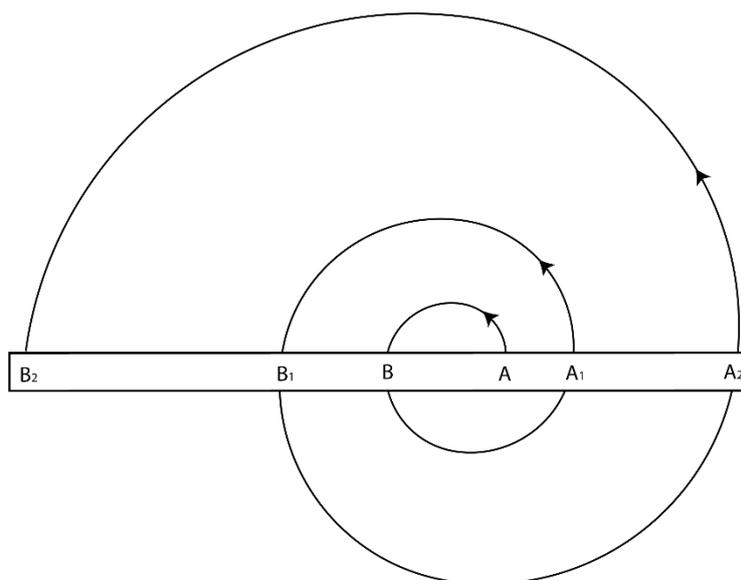
---

<sup>16</sup> A piano reduction of this cue is available in John, 2001, pp. 533-35.

**Figure 10. The form of ‘Scene d’amour’**

	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>A<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>B<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>A<sup>2</sup></b>
<i>Bar</i>	1	38	60	78	90
<i>Harmony</i>	A <sub>b</sub> /C	G	A <sub>b</sub> /C	G	A <sub>b</sub> /C
<i>Melody</i>	Descent	Ascent	Descent	Ascent	Descent

**Figure 11. Representation of the form of ‘Scene d’amour’ as a spiral**



A

In a diatonic-chromatic context, a constant injection of *repetition* lays bare the connections between A<sub>b</sub> and C chords in the love theme itself, but an equally strong influx of difference *animates* the chords into new coherent progressions. The uncanny twist afforded by the ‘obsession’ motive provides the equally uncanny sense of *déjà vu* (a reminder of something *repressed*) that is palpable in the music whose theme is clearly a reworking of the A minor theme associated with Madeleine (see Ex. 9). The opening chords in the obvious transformation in the *Scène d’amour* (see Fig. 12) are literally now (musically as well as visually/metaphorically) *unheimliche* – something unhomely. As mentioned already, they are H-related, suggesting that Scottie *repeats* and reconstructs his own desire using the ‘obsession’ motif. The environment is new at the beginning of the piece. The hexatonic interior, formed from a resolution chord that compresses A minor, C major and E minor triads, is not fully formed (the pitch G is absent and C is retained). The appoggiatura D falling to C inverts the *Vertigo* ‘Spirals theme’ from bars 1-2 of the Prelude, where minimal manipulations included a melodic C–D rise in the clarinets and second violins. The cadential gesture at the beginning of ‘*Scène d’amour*’ loosely forges classical syntactical units that begin the spiralling outwards of *repetition*. In *sentential* terms, after the *presentation* phase of bars 1-8 (basic idea + basic idea), we hear an additional variation of the basic idea (see Fig. 12). The continuation phrase features fragmentation although the basic idea itself is merely a cadence, barely a fragment itself. These are repeated at accelerated harmonic pace, spinning out a longer continuation, and winding

down until bar 24. Throughout, Herrmann contracts the interval span / range of the theme, ending with a depressed reversal of the initial cadential motion: E<sup>o</sup>–A<sub>b</sub>.

**Example 9: ‘Madeleine’ from *Vertigo*, bars 1-4**

© 1958 (Renewed 1986) by Famous Music Corporation. International Copyright Secured. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission.

**Figure 12: ‘Scène d’amour’ from *Vertigo*, bars 29-36**

A salient figure here is the minor chord with added ninth (associated with *Agatha Christie's 'Poirot'* in C minor); the persistent semitone jarring reminiscences through repetition of the opening clashing ‘Spirals’ motif. The clash is heightened in bar 24-29, where G<sup>#</sup> minor’s tritone-related pitch D is heard as our ‘gazing’ repeated pitch above, toggling its natural fifth D<sup>#</sup>. In bars 29–37 a miniature, compressed, rationalised version of the opening gargantuan sentence is given. This presents the feeling that the music is evolving or learning to travel more efficiently between the points that it initially explored. Bar 33 piques interest as the musical subject tries to make the appoggiatura D slot into place as D minor, and move sequentially to E<sup>7</sup> (spelled F<sub>b</sub><sup>7</sup>) and on to a tonic A minor. This diatonic stretch that humours the gazing D returns the ‘obsession’ motive to the A minor key of the ‘Madeleine’ theme. The ‘obsession’ motive is Scottie’s subjective desire, while the Madeleine theme embodies the object of his affections herself. Herrmann, or perhaps the musical subject itself, is constantly trying to reposition a rightful place for A<sub>b</sub> and tip the balance of symmetry back into diatonic space. The harmonic narrative here is of two chords that are not conventionally related, exploring the distance between themselves, trying to lose and regain each other – not through the conventional dialectics of the V<sup>7</sup>–I paradigm, but by exploring differences. A correlation emerges between this constant exploration of a harmonic relationship of two chords and the

film's narrative of two characters who *repeatedly* watch (*vision*) and thereby motivate (*animation*) each other in attempt to work out what each other is *repressing*. Each is uncanny to the other. This is also true of the alternating chords. With the formal alternation of sections A and B, this dialogue spirals outwards to a new level. The following analysis will now formally draw out the musical aspects of these uncanny interactions between A<sub>b</sub> and C, watching the scene spiral into the next level: 'the return' in the final scene.

**Example 10: 'Scène d'amour' from *Vertigo*, bars 29-36**

29 *p*  
 A<sub>b</sub> C<sup>maj7</sup> A<sub>b</sub> C<sup>maj7</sup> A<sub>b</sub> D<sub>m</sub> F<sub>b</sub><sup>+7</sup> A<sub>m</sub>

© 1958 (Renewed 1986) by Famous Music Corporation. International Copyright Secured.  
 All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission.

**B**

The first wave of dramatic alterity comes while Scottie paces Judy's room, waiting. The B theme is thus *her* space; her space with him in it. Bar 38's pedal G is marked as dominant with *sul ponticello* effects and other staples of dramatic tension. When the rising melody temporarily peaks at bar 50, a spicy diminished chord on F brings us downwards back to A<sub>b</sub>→C<sup>maj7</sup>, lifted wholesale as an un-transposed object still above the G pedal. The cadence explores new territory but always in the same key. Because the dominant is fixed as G, A<sub>b</sub> can be heard as a subdominant substitute. When the dominant suspense leads to the gigantic climax on A<sub>b</sub>, the A<sub>b</sub> pitch is retained as a suspension in a dominant minor ninth that spoils the purity of the C major V–I bassline beneath. The various dimensions of this cadence are broken down and slowly reconstructed in new ways.

**A<sup>1</sup>**

The climactic deluge spills over at bar 60 in A<sub>b</sub> first inversion, resolving straight to A minor (C's R-transformation) as a SLIDE-transformation. The continuation tries to place the D melodic appoggiatura over a C minor chord (C's P-transformation), and the bass subsequently descends chromatically from D to look for new chords. It arrives at A minor (bar 70), thus extending the discourse of the basic idea while referencing the 'Madeleine theme', now spiralled almost out of control. This new theme bursts through in a newly climactic A minor but lapses back into a repeated presentation phrase. The C is in different guises and substitutes (P and R) just as Judy and Scottie are to each other, uncanny in all four dimensions.

**B<sup>1</sup>**

From bar 83, this new theme relaxes down to another G pedal, now partly mobilised, leading up to a special moment at bar 91 when the A<sub>b</sub> is left hanging. Herrmann picks this A<sub>b</sub> up and plays with G, D, C, A minor variants over the newly returned bass G, which moves chromatically (omitting only A<sub>b</sub> itself) upwards to E<sup>07</sup> as dominant of the A minor, upon which we climax.

**A<sup>2</sup>**

The final upswing begins on the A minor variant, passing discursively through the A<sub>b</sub>–C

presentation at 110, but this is stretched into a full cadence: A<sub>b</sub>-C-E<sub>b</sub>-A<sub>b</sub>. The theme is fully orchestrated – cyclical but spiralling, and recreating (for itself) the pseudo-plagal cadence onto C. Both chords were displayed at the beginning of the cue but without the Romantic diatonic context that these three chromatic upsurges have now brought to life, just as Scottie has reanimated Madelaine in all her uncanny glory.

### *'The Return'*

These three upswings spiral out of themselves and into the tripartite structure of the film. Anthony John links the embrace on the beach with both the *Scène d'amour* and the final moments of the film: 'Herrmann largely avoids C major throughout the score, saving it for these three crucial moments' (John, p. 538). Each moment turns A<sub>b</sub>-C into a concluding cadence in which '[t]he seductive male gaze has been replaced by an empty stare ... the defiant close of C major'. Like Wagner's *Tristan*, which orientates the famous *Tristan* chord towards B major in the final bars, this repeated cadence is heard as progressively more plagal towards the end of the film.<sup>17</sup> In this final section, Cooper notes the dominant preparations of 'The Return', which begins in G minor (see Ex. 11).<sup>18</sup> G minor in fact links G with the flat side of C major's key spectrum. The most impressive feature – the colossal timpani roll on G as Scottie fights his way up the stairs and so combats his vertigo, rendered as bass tremolandi in my reduction – makes sense of the whole tonal mystery by *animating* C as tonic through *repetition*, while still *repressing* the object itself. The sensations are heightened in the visual realm, where upon looking down, Scottie's two attacks of Vertigo (bars 68 and 75) superimpose A<sub>b</sub> (trumpets) and D (wood winds), though Cooper notes that the orchestration makes this the softest 'vertigo chord' in the film:

a dominant minor ninth with sharp eleventh on D, a species that has a strong tonal function and resolves readily onto G minor – which indeed it does at the beginning of the next section. This functional voicing is perhaps suggestive that Scottie is gaining control over his fear, the chord no longer being disruptive or chaotic. (2001, p. 144)

Rather than pandiatonically dislocated arpeggios, the harps fill out complete major scales, making the bitonal flavour more intense. We wait for a third 'vertigo chord' on Scottie's third downwards glance, but the absence of the returned gaze from the orchestra indicates his cure. Scottie's spiral of repetition has won out. To my mind, however, the cue also crucially *represses* the chord A<sub>b</sub> except in (a) the bitonal 'vertigo' chords, and (b) the very final moment of the sequential run down to D, which then becomes more prominent as a V (locally) and V of V (globally). The real 'integration' of A<sub>b</sub> into C's universe lies not so much in the orienting G pedal, but in the key of C minor which occasionally erupts or is implied in this cue, in which A<sub>b</sub> is brought closer as chord VI. At bars 45–47 it becomes A<sub>b</sub> minor, and at 51–56 alternates with, and then starts to merge with, D major (A<sub>b</sub><sup>(#4)</sup>) before resolving down to G. This close integration of the two chords strengthens the shared 'pre-dominant' function of both. Although the last traces of the G pedal (bar 84 ff), preceded by the authentic cadence D–G, is completely inaudible in the film, we do not need to hear it to feel its place in the tonal hierarchy. After the nun appears from the shadows of the bell tower, and after Judy's fall, a quiet 'vertigo chord'

---

<sup>17</sup> For all of Herrmann's similarities to Wagner, the primary difference for me is that Herrmann's motivic repetition (rhythmic and intervallic) and themes are clearly fixed to their harmonic profile. One of the few equivalents in Wagner is the motive of 'renunciation of love', which returns in C minor in *The Ring*. In *Vertigo*, this associativity helps those of us without perfect pitch to retain a memory of tonal change throughout the film, oiling the mechanics I have described so far by.

<sup>18</sup> Ex. 11 is a piano transcription made from Herrmann's autograph score. Chords are labelled beneath.

hums low before the score closes A<sub>b</sub>–C, completing the final cycle of repetition. Cooper notes that the final lines spoken in Pierre Boileau & Thomas Narcejac’s original novella, *D’Entre les Morts* – ‘I will wait for you’ – predict a new cycle of repetition. In *Vertigo*, we hear only the tolling of the bells<sup>19</sup> and the cadence. But, although the score has tried its best, our A<sub>b</sub> is still far from completely integrated into the C major tonality; the relationship, even as a cadence, is still uncanny. The constant musing upon the two characters of A<sub>b</sub> and C has still failed to find itself a home, the piece ending in the major, rather than the (more obvious for a tragic ending) minor key. As part of an extended ‘uncanny’ string of chords, it seems as if Herrmann decided to purposefully leave us some scope to continue the spiralling process outside of the film by bringing us nearer to tonal integration, but not *much* nearer. In doing so, he allows the uncanny to gaze at us even after the film has ended, through the four-fold properties of the gaze, that have been found weaving their way through the foregoing analysis.

### The Tree of Life

The image of the circle is common in the film. Most poignant perhaps is the huge ancient tree in the forest, whose disconnected rings are on display to show its age, and about which Madeleine isolated her own year of birth (‘Somewhere in here I was born [...] and here I died [...] and it was only a moment for you. You took no notice’).<sup>20</sup> Madeleine chastises the tree for not noticing her, for not gazing back at her. The inanimate tree is used as a metaphor of cyclical repetition, but *Vertigo* is a film about spirals. Deborah Linderman claims that Scottie ‘tries to naturalize the spiral’ (1991, p. 59), but in fact his goal is to break the circle into a spiral, a productive spiral that tries to break through the cycles of repetition.<sup>21</sup> In order to deal with the repressed images, Scottie encourages Madeleine to break through her dream, to push through her fantasy and play out the cycle of repetition. When she describes her vision to him, he encourages her to ascend the bell tower, to repeat her uncanny dream in order to deal with it. Given that Hoffman’s ‘The Sandman’ ends when young Nathaniel nearly throws his beloved Olympia off a tower, there is an element in which *Vertigo* repeats the Freudian Uncanny in order to complete it.<sup>22</sup> This moment in *Vertigo* moves towards a centre of G<sub>b</sub>, a move that consolidates the constant oscillation between D and B<sub>b</sub> chords (not keys) that provide an uncanny tonal sub-plot to the main C major business of *Vertigo*. The major third ic-4 cycle is now completed at this focal point, where the fantasy is broken through. This forceful break with fantasy fails as it was always bound to. Scottie’s second attempt to see through the *gaze* succeeds and leads to Judy’s death, and his own symbolic death (if he was catatonic after the first loss, we can only imagine his state after the second). Thus the G<sub>b</sub> allure marks the false completion of one cycle, and is bypassed by the second.

Naturally the gaze lingers on after the film as we leave Scottie staring without fear down the abyss. The spiral is still spinning. Academically too. The countless articles and scholarly papers that question the status of the eye (or I) in *Vertigo* (and, by extension, cinema itself)

---

<sup>19</sup> As Sullivan notes, “bell sonorities continue ringing throughout the movie – tolling at Carlotta’s grave, clanging forlornly from the streetcar in the foggy San Francisco night, pealing from the tower at the end as Scottie looks fearlessly down into the final abyss.” (2006, p. 6)

<sup>20</sup> Žižek uses this very tree as his illustration of the phallus in his *Pervert’s Guide to the Cinema*.

<sup>21</sup> While Deleuze’s grand critique of metaphysics, *Difference and Repetition*, was a prolegomenon to the uploading of the materialist core of his philosophy into the language of psychoanalysis in *Anti-Oedipus* (his own difference in repetition), the movement of repetition already had its heart in the Freudian *Unheimlich* and the repressed which its return unleashes.

<sup>22</sup> This point is noted by Eva-Maria Simms: ‘Waking from delirium, he pushes the horrified Clara away, calling her “you lifeless accursed automaton.” Finally, in a har-binger of Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*, he nearly throws her to her death from a tower (p. 126).’

have continually tried to understand exactly who or what is exerting fascination over whom. To discuss the music in relation to this same issue is to complicate an already unresolved problem, though as Link claims, ‘We listen with reference to many of the same categories in which we see’ (Link, p. 83), broadening the uncanny’s aspect of *vision* into sound. This may be apt, but there are specialist music-analytical tools that we can use to explore the sonic situation as we have for the visual narrative. In unlocking the gaze from vision and turning it back to sound (and indeed to music) we are perhaps being more faithful to it, and in order to untangle the knotty relationships between subject and object that the gaze sets in motion, the vital details of the musical substructure of the film can only be brought to light via a two-way dialogue between broader conceptual theories and detailed music analysis.

### Example 11. Bernard Herrmann, ‘The Return’ from *Vertigo*

Moderato assai

The musical score for Bernard Herrmann's 'The Return' from *Vertigo* is presented in five systems. The first system (measures 1-10) begins with a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. Dynamics range from *pp* to *mp*. Chords include Gm, D°, and Gm7. The second system (measures 11-16) continues the bass line with chords Bm, Cm7, and Dm7. The third system (measures 17-22) features a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. Dynamics range from *p* to *mf*. Chords include Cm9, Fm7, and Gm9. The fourth system (measures 23-28) features a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. Dynamics range from *p* to *mf*. Chords include Bm, B, C, D7, Dm, and D°7. The fifth system (measures 29-34) features a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. Dynamics range from *p* to *mf*. Chords include Cm6, E7, D°7, Dm7, G°7, and E7.

35

A<sup>07</sup> F<sup>#7</sup> Am<sup>9</sup> F<sup>#07</sup> G D<sup>07</sup>

41

*f* *simile*

Cm<sup>9</sup> D<sup>0</sup> Gm<sup>7</sup> Fm<sup>9</sup> Abm Abm<sup>9</sup>

47

**Piu Animato**

*sf*

Am<sup>9</sup> D<sup>7</sup> G D<sup>07</sup> Ab(#4) D

53

*sf* *f*

Ab(#4) D A<sup>0</sup>(#4) G

58

*sf*

Cm G A<sup>07</sup>

64

*sf* *sf*

D<sup>0</sup> D Ab

Red and

**Molto Largamente**

69

*sf*

Gm Cm G A<sup>07</sup> F<sup>0</sup>

© 1958 (Renewed 1986) by Famous Music Corporation. International Copyright Secured. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission. Reduced for piano from Herrmann's score by the author.

## Bibliography

- Nicholas Abraham & Maria Torok (1994), 'Secrets and Posterity: The Theory of the Transgenerational Phantom' in Nicholas Rand (ed.) *The Shell and the Kernel* (London: University of Chicago) pp. 165-171.
- Barthes, Roland (1981), *Camera Lucida* (New York; Hill and Wang).
- Emanuel Berman (1997), 'Hitchcock's Vertigo: The Collapse of a Rescue Phantasy', *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 78, pp. 975–96.
- Pierre Boileau & Thomas Narcejac, *D'Entre les Morts* (trans. Geoffrey Sainsbury), (Bloomsbury Publishing), 1997
- Elisabeth Bronfen (2004), 'Uncanny Appropriations: Rebecca', Chapter 1 in *Home in Hollywood: The Imaginary Geography of Cinema* (Columbia: Columbia University Press), pp. 31-63.
- Royal S. Brown (1982), 'Herrmann, Hitchcock, and the Music of the Irrational', *Cinema Journal* 21, pp. 14–49.
- Tom Cohen (1995), 'Beyond "the Gaze": Žižek, Hitchcock, and the American Sublime', *American Literary History* 7, pp. 350–78.
- Richard Cohn (2004), 'Uncanny Resemblances: Tonal Signification in the Freudian Age', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 57, pp.285–324.
- Richard Cohn, 'Hexatonic Poles and the Uncanny in Parsifal', *Opera Quarterly*, 22 (2006), 230–48.
- David Cooper (2001), *Bernard Herrmann's Vertigo: A Film Score Handbook* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press).
- Gilles Deleuze (1986) Hugh Tomlinson (trans.), *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (Continuum; London and New York).
- Don Dombowsky, 'The Rhetoric of Legitimation: Nietzsche's "Doctrine" of Eternal Recurrence', *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 14: Eternal Recurrence (Autumn 1997), pp. 26-45
- Sigmund Freud (1955 [1919]), "The 'Uncanny' in an Infantile Neurosis and Other Works, vol. 17 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1955), pp. 217–52.
- Christopher H Gibbs (1995), "'Komm, Geh' Mit Mir': Schubert's Uncanny "Erlkönig"" *19th-Century Music* 19/2 pp. 115-35.

- Marianne Hirsch (1997), *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard UP)
- Karen Hollinger (1987), 'The Look, Narrativity, and the Female Spectator in *Vertigo*', *Journal of Film and Video* 39, pp. 18–27.
- Ernst Jentsch (1906), 'Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen', *Psychiatrisch-Neurologische Wochenschrift* 8.22 (25 Aug. 1906): 195-98 and 8.23 (1 Sept. 1906): 203-05
- Anthony John (2001), "'The Moment That I Dreaded and Hoped For": Ambivalence and Order in Bernard Herrmann's Score for *Vertigo*', *The Musical Quarterly* 85, pp. 516–44.
- Barbara Judson (2010), 'The Ventriloquial Uncanny in *Wieland* and *Prometheus Unbound*' *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 44/1 pp. 21-37.
- Michael L Klein (2005), *Intertextuality in Western Art Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press)
- Michael L Klein (2015), *Music and the Crises of the Modern Subject* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press)
- Keane, Marion E. (1986), 'A Closer Look at Scopophilia: Mulvey, Hitchcock, and *Vertigo*', in *A Hitchcock Reader*, ed. Marshall Deutelbaum & Leland Poague (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press), pp. 231–48.
- Joseph Kerman (2001), 'Beethoven's Opus 131 and the Uncanny' *19th-Century Music* 25/2 pp. 155-64.
- Lawrence Kramer (1990), Chapter 6: 'As If a Voice Were in Them": Music, Narrative, and Deconstruction' in *Music as Cultural Practice, 1800-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press). pp. 176-215.
- Jacques Lacan (1978), *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. trans. Jacques Alain Miller (London: Vintage).
- David Lewin (2007), *Generalized Musical Intervals and Transformations* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Deborah Linderman (1991), 'The *Mise-en-Abîme* in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*', *Cinema Journal* 30, pp. 51–74.
- Stan Link (2004), 'Nor the Eye Filled with Seeing: The Sound of Vision in Film', *American Music* 22, pp. 76–90.
- Modleski, Tania (1988), *The Women who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory* (London: Methuen).
- Laura Mulvey (1975), 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* 16, pp. 6–18.
- Scott Murphy, "Transformational Theory and the Analysis of Film Music," In *The Oxford Handbook of Film Music Studies*, edited by David Neumeyer (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 472–99.
- Palombo, Stanley (1987), 'Hitchcock's *Vertigo*: The Dream Function in Film' in *Images in Our Souls: Cavell, Psychoanalysis, and Cinema*, ed., J.H. Smith & W. Kerrigan (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), pp. 44-63.
- Paulina Palmer (2012), 'Secrets and Their Disclosure' In *The Queer Uncanny: New Perspectives on the Gothic* (University of Wales Press).
- Rose Pfeffer (1965), 'Eternal Recurrence in Nietzsche's Philosophy', *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 19/ii2, pp. 276-300
- Alex Ross, *Vertigo*, New York Times, October 6, 1996.
- Tom Schneller (2005), 'Death and Love: Bernard Herrmann's Score for *Vertigo*', *Cuadernos de Música, Artes Visuales y Artes Escénicas* 1, pp. 189-200.

- Eva-Maria Simms (1996), 'Images of Death in Rilke and Freud', *New Literary History* 27/4, pp. 663-77.
- Donald Spoto (1976), *The Art of Alfred Hitchcock* (London: W. H. Allen).
- Jack Sullivan (2006), *Hitchcock's Music* (New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press).
- Jane Marie Todd (1986), 'The Veiled Woman in Freud's "Das Unheimliche"' *Signs* 11/3 pp. 519-28.
- Virginia Wright Wexman (1986), 'The Critic as Consumer: Film Study at the University, *Vertigo*, and the Film Canon', *Film Quarterly* 39, pp. 32-41.
- Susan White (1991), 'Allegory and Referentiality: *Vertigo* and Feminist Criticism', *Comparative Literature* 106, pp. 910-32.
- Robin Wood (1977 [1965]), *Hitchcock's Films* (South Brunswick: Barnes).
- (1989). *Hitchcock's Films Revisited* (New York: Columbia University Press).
- Slavoj Žižek (1991), *Looking Awry* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press).