THE PHILOSOPHICAL HITCHCOCK: VERTIGO AND THE ANXIETIES OF UNKNOWINGNESS

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Well known, among other reasons, for his work on Hegel and Nietzsche, Robert Pippin has written extensively on art, literature and cinema. *The Philosophical Hitchcock* is his third book on cinema, the previous two being *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth: The Importance of Howard Hawks and John Ford for Political Philosophy* (Yale University Press, 2010) and *Fatalism in American Film Noir: Some Cinematic Philosophy* (University of Virginia Press, 2012). In this book, Pippin proposes a fine-grained philosophical reading of one of Hitchcock's most important works (if not his masterpiece): *Vertigo* (1958).

As Noël Carroll points out, on a second viewing of *Vertigo*, "most viewers should be emotionally sober enough to find almost laughable the frictionless clicking into place of the various parts of this Rube Goldberg plot. And yet we don't."[1] By bringing to light the many complexities, nuances, allusions, and cross-references in the film, Pippin's book precisely explains why we do not.

Pippin's main goal is to show how *Vertigo* can be said to bear on a specific philosophical problem: the state of profound unknowingness that we all experience in interpersonal relations, an unknowingness caused by the difficulty of understanding and interpreting ourselves and each other. Pippin is well aware that his proposal involves two enormous questions, namely (i) what philosophy is and (ii) how a film can be said to bear on philosophical problems (or, put differently, the extent to which (and why) film can be understood as a form of philosophical thought). The *Prologue* is dedicated to these two vexing issues.

Although Pippin acknowledges that he makes no pretension to address such questions in an introductory section, he briefly offers a statement of principles. Besides pointing out that the use of art to shed light on philosophical subjects is not a novelty in the history of philosophy (Hegel, Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Heidegger are considered paradigmatic examples), Pippin focuses in particular on the question of how a

specific film (with *particular* fictional persons and events) can have any *general* significance. Here, we are reminded of Aristotle's famous claim in the *Poetics* (51b) that "poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history. Poetry tends to express universals, and history particulars."[2] Still, Pippin asks, what could be more idiosyncratically unique than *Vertigo*'s plot?

According to Pippin, the universality of *Vertigo* (to use Aristotle's terminology) lies in its attempt to show the viewers the nature of what he defines as the "general, common struggle for *mutual interpretability*" (10), made difficult by mutual misunderstanding, self-opacity and the dynamics of self-deceit. Among others, these aspects cause a state of profound unknowingness (considered, in its various forms, as "something like a necessary condition of possibility of Hitchcock's cinematic world" (p. 14)), which in turn provokes anxiety. In other words, Hitchcock's *Vertigo* calls into question "settled, commonsense views about what it is to understand another person or be understood by him or her, or about how we present ourselves to others in our public personae" (p. 6). By so doing, it renders a specific feature of human life more intelligible to viewers than it otherwise would have been.

Having thus explained how a film like *Vertigo* has general significance for the issue of unknowingness, and having clarified the issue itself (see the *Introduction*), Pippin analyses the film in detail, starting with the opening credits (the first part of which appears on an unknown woman's face, which is not shown in its entirety). Each sequence or narrative unit—from the opening chase to the final scene, Judy's death—is carefully scrutinized. Pippin's close reading is so attentive and scrupulous that one is reminded of Nietzsche's praise of slow reading ("to read *well*, that is to say, to read slowly, deeply", as he writes in the *Preface* to *Daybreak*[3]). Particular attention is given to the cinematic aspects: Pippin often closely examines the shots (as well as the way in which Hitchcock uses light), and thirty-six black and white figures and twenty-four colour plates accompany the text.

As already mentioned, Pippin's interpretative reading mainly focuses on what he considers one of the key themes, if not the key theme, of Hitchcock's film: the common struggle for mutual intelligibility and its failure. The main characters in the film fail to understand each other and themselves. We are given several hints of this failure at the beginning of the film, in the sequence in which Midge (Barbara Bel Geddes), a long-time friend of Scottie's (James Stewart), is introduced. Both Midge and Scottie fail to under-

stand each other: Scottie is insensitive about Midge's feelings towards him (for instance, he pretends to have trouble remembering whether they were ever engaged), whereas Midge is unable to recognize that her motherly attitude may be infantilizing, even emasculating for Scottie, who, having resigned from his job as detective because of his vertigo, feels particularly vulnerable and powerless. Furthermore, as the stepladder scene clearly shows, Scottie also fails to understand himself: he is unable to acknowledge the extent of his vertigo and deludes himself about the possibility of curing himself by simply getting used to heights step by step ("a pathetic, deluded assertion of control over elements Hitchcock regularly treats as not controllable" (p. 40-1), Pippin argues).

Mutual misunderstanding and the dynamics of (self-)deceit concern not only the private, intimate sphere, but also the public, social sphere. Among other aspects, distortions of perception are caused by the desire to appear and to be seen in a certain way. This theatricality, characteristic of modern social life (a typically Rousseauian theme, as Pippin points out), is symbolized in *Vertigo* by the duality Judy/Madeleine, the two women played by Kim Novak. Judy, a working-class girl, garishly dressed and somewhat vulgar, transforms herself into Madeleine, the wife of a rich man (Gavin Elster, played by Tom Helmore), who is spectacularly well dressed and elegant. In other words, she stages herself as the woman she knows she is not and cannot be. According to Pippin, this situation is paradigmatically representative of the duality in everyone: "everyone has a to-be-repressed 'Judy' and a crafted, public 'Madeleine'" (p. 99).[4]

Misrepresentations occur often in the film: Judy misrepresents herself to Scottie as Madeleine; Scottie misrepresents himself to Madeleine as a wanderer who just happened to come across her; Elster misrepresents himself to Scottie as a husband who is worried about his wife. Distortions of perception, however, are caused not only by the desire to be seen in a certain way, but also by the desire to see the other in a certain way. Here, Scottie's desire to re-create Madeleine in Judy obviously comes to mind. Despite Judy's entreaty to be loved for who she really is, and notwithstanding Scottie's awareness that Judy's metamorphosis will do no good for either of them, Scottie turns Judy into a simulacrum (as Pippin points out, "the whole sequence is as brutal and unadorned a view of the projection of the fantasies of male desire onto a woman treated as mere object, screen, occasion for his projection, as there exists in cinema", p. 110). In this re-enacting of the Pygmalion myth, Scottie reveals the ambiguity of his position; if on the one hand he is the

victim of the staged suicide, on the other hand he—like Elster—is imposing a fake identity on Judy and staging an illusory Madeleine.

Although the common struggle for mutual intelligibility and its failure is Pippin's main focus, his analysis of *Vertigo* is not restricted to this subject. Several themes are explored, from vertigo itself and its many symbolic meanings (among others, the desire to fall in love and the fear of falling in love) to the critique of romantic conventions and the role of fantasy, deceit, irrationality and even obsession in romantic relationships. Particularly interesting is Pippin's reading of the general theme of heights and depths as touching on class and gender hierarchies—a theme that is directly connected to the colonization of the West and imperial power (the source of the Carlotta Valdez story, Madeleine's great-grandmother), as well as to the power that men have on women (precisely that which is exercised by Scottie on Judy). Special attention is also given to the role played by truth (particularly in the last part of the film) and the relation between what we need to believe and what we actually believe, especially when it comes to romantic love.

Pippin concludes his analysis of *Vertigo* by pointing out a peculiarity of the film: the suspension of moral judgment. According to Pippin, many elements in the film clearly indicate that moral judgement is suspended: Scottie seems not to be overly concerned with betraying his acquaintance, Elster, by seducing and sleeping with his wife Madelaine (who is supposed to have been entrusted to his professional care); the coroner, who is characterized as having a moralistic and self-satisfied attitude, misses everything about the Elster plot and is depicted by Hitchcock in a somewhat ironic and mocking way; Scottie seems more concerned with having been betrayed by a lover than with the murder of Elster's wife; Elster, the chief villain, is not caught (a rarity among Hitchcock's films).[5] According to Pippin, this suspension of moral judgment has to do with the main topic of the book: opacity in self- and other-knowledge. Indeed, it is the "awareness of the fragile and uncertain self- and other-knowledge" (p. 125)—knowledge that is precisely the necessary precondition of moral judgment—that leads us to reduce our confidence in the appropriateness of moral judgment.

In conclusion, Pippin's reading of *Vertigo* shows that Hitchcock's film is more than an entertaining story of fantasy and betrayal: it is a profound examination of the mutual struggle to understand ourselves and each other in a condition of general unknowingness, unique to modern societies. It is surely legitimate to ask whether Pippin accords too much

importance to the theme of self- and other-knowledge and its failure in his reading of *Vertigo*. Nonetheless, Pippin's reading is convincing, and in addition to helping the reader understand the many complexities and meanings of Hitchcock's film, his book is a perfect demonstration of how a film can enhance our understanding of a specific philosophical problem.

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1. Noël Carroll, "*Vertigo* and the Pathologies of Romantic Love", in *Hitchcock and Philosophy. Dial M for Metaphysics*, ed. David Baggett and William A. Drumin (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, 2007), 102.

2. Aristotle, *Poetics* (London: Penguin, 1996), 16.

3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 5.

4. As Pippin points out in a typically Pirandellian way, however, our self is not only dual (the "genuine" *vs* the public one), but also multiple. In romantic relationships, for instance, several persons are involved: the two persons as they actually are, the two as they see themselves, the two as they are each seen by the other, the two as they aspire to be seen by the other, the two as they take themselves to be seen by the other, etc. (see p. 12). The theme of the multiplicity of the self appears often in the book.

5. As Pippin mentions, "Hitchcock resisted pressure to change the ending and did not use the alternate ending he in fact filmed, in which Midge hears on the radio that Elster has been apprehended by the authorities and is being extradited back to the States" (p. 124).