

Penelope Osegura

### The Pathology of Obsession in *Vertigo* and *Kiss Me Deadly*

Alfred Hitchcock's 1958 film noir masterpiece, *Vertigo*, is an incredibly well-made film with a thrilling plot at its core. Scottie Ferguson (James Stewart), a detective who discovers that to follow Madeleine (Kim Novak), his wife. This man, Gavin Elster (Tom Helmore), claims that she is being possessed by the spirit of her great-grandmother, Carlotta Valdes, which he fears will push her to commit suicide. When Scottie accepts, he is unable to stop himself from quickly becoming "too close" to Madeleine and falling in love with her, or from losing his grip on reality when she apparently jumps to her death from the tower of Mission San Juan Bautista. It is clear that Scottie quickly becomes obsessed with Madeleine, who remains an absent presence throughout the rest of the film as she haunts Scottie's thoughts. This haunting pushes Scottie to engage in psychologically questionable activities, which he justifies in saying that he is attempting to move on from the past. However, it is easy to see that what Scottie is really looking for is greater proximity to the woman who haunts him. The fact that this is impossible seems to be lost on him, as he spirals self-destructively with dizzying speed. This inability to accept reality, to accept loss and to move on, thus becomes an acute mental disorder for Scottie and ultimately brings about his downfall.

Mike Hammer's (Ralph Meeker) similar behavior in Robert Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly*, a film noir made three years prior to *Vertigo*, enriches our understanding of Scottie's disorder. Much like Scottie, Mike develops an obsession with a woman in his life that dies, although in this case the fatal occurrence is at the beginning of the film. Mike then spends its remainder developing an unhealthy attachment to this woman, Christina (Chloris Leachman), whom he

barely knew, and searching for clues as to why she was murdered. Mike justifies this obsession by conflating his search with a quest for truth and justice for Christina, and rationalizes his behavior by telling himself that these two searches are one and the same.

This mental imbalance that both men share can be seen through a look at the way in which they treat the other women in their lives. These other women—Midge (Barbara Bel Geddes) and Judy in Scottie's case and Velda (Maxine Cooper) in Mike's—function almost as foils for the women that Scottie and Mike are obsessed with on the level of the significance that the men place on one over the other. Thus, a look at the inattentiveness and apathy that characterize the relationships that Scottie has with the “other” women in his life and finding parallels in Mike and Velda's relationship highlights the mental instability that the men share, and the obsession at its root.

Once Scottie's attention is arrested by Madeleine, it becomes impossible to divert. The way that he treats the other women around him especially shows this. After Scottie loses Madeleine, he is plunged into a deep depression that leaves him almost catatonic for an extended period of time. When Midge goes to visit him in the hospital he is staying in, her visit is characterized by his helpless silence (1:21:56). Though this is clearly a physical symptom of his melancholia, it is one that is also highly symbolic. Throughout the first half of the film, Madeleine's brilliance prevents him from seeing Midge's goodness, which seems plain by comparison. But even after Madeleine dies, he cannot distance himself from her enough to pull himself out of the self-destructive path he has stepped onto. In fact, he spirals further, and is now incapable of even noticing Midge when she's in the room, let alone thinking of the healing power that her friendship or even love could have.

Even after he is released from the hospital, it quickly becomes apparent that Scottie's unhealthy obsession with Madeleine has not been alleviated. He sees her everywhere, purposely seeking out all her old haunts and seeing look-alikes in each place (1:26:02). This would be indication enough of his continuing fixation with Madeleine, but then he finds Judy, the woman who had been impersonating Madeleine all along in a complicated plot made by Gavin Elster against his real wife's life. Scottie is immediately drawn to her, and even follows her into the hotel where she is staying, seemingly believing that one of these look-alikes had finally transformed herself into the real Madeleine. He invites her to dinner, and Judy asks, "Why? Because I remind you of her?" (1:33:40), a question that she will repeat with increasing frequency as she come to realize that Scottie cannot love her simply as Judy because he is still in love with Madeleine. At this point, Scottie answers, "Because I'd like to have dinner with you" (1:33:41), and at first it seems as though she may be the one who will help him to move on.

However, as the film progresses, Scottie obsessively uses more and more thinly-veiled attempts to change Judy back into Madeleine. He treats Judy terribly, especially considering that at this point he does not know her part in what has happened to him. He does not see her even as a person, but rather as a canvas onto which he can project his fantasies of the Madeleine. He cannot even stand touching her (1:45:46) until he has made her look and act like the woman who haunts him (1:50:51). This is the moment in which Judy truly becomes the *object* of his desire, not even the subject. He has turned her into a *thing* created solely for his pleasure, a living shell of a woman who never existed in the first place. He clearly is not able to appreciate Judy for the woman she really is. His obsession with Madeleine pushes him to slight the woman who loves him, who wants to help him move on. The fact that she is intimately linked to the horrible event that began this is circumstantial in this case; Judy's desire to steer Scottie away from his fixation

and towards peace is clear, and her anguish is sincere. Scottie's refusal to accept the reality of his loss is the pathology of his mental instability, and becomes more and more clear as he transforms Judy completely into Madeleine, French twist and all. The moment in which he and Judy finally kiss (1:51:29) reflects his volatile psychological state – he no longer knows past from present, but he is heading speedily towards a toxic end. As Emanuel Berman states in his essay “Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*: The Collapse of a Rescue Fantasy”, “Scottie feels he has succeeded in defying death, in bringing Eurydice back from Hades” (36). Berman’s allusion to this impossible mythical quest—and to the “rescue fantasy” (31) that Scottie develops from it—supports the idea that Scottie is unstable. He is attempting the impossible, to bring a dead woman back to life, indulging in a fantasy that separates him from reality and digs him into a hole. And in the process of his indulgence, he brings Judy down with him. Not only does she surprisingly agree to martyrize herself by suppressing who she really is, but when Scottie finally discovers the truth and confronts her, he brutally takes her back to the tower from which “Madeleine” fell, resulting in Judy’s own fall and death. Berman observes that at this point Scottie “has sunk into a deceptive delusion of his own, and gradually turns into the villain” (38). His callous treatment of Judy results in his downfall; he is left bereft again because of his neglect of “his flesh-and-blood beloved” (39) and of her very real feelings of love for him.

Mike’s treatment of Velda, his assistant and lover, in *Kiss Me Deadly* is astonishingly comparable to the treatment that Midge and especially Judy receive from Scottie, and serves to help diagnose both his and Scottie’s shared mental disorder. There are even several physical displays of his neglect in which Velda touches him, trying to remind him that she is there with him and to draw him back to her and away from his destructive quest, which Mike simply brushes off. For example, when Pat knocks at Mike’s door and Velda entreats him not to answer

it so they can continue in their embrace (20:51), he ignores her and goes to open the door anyways. He is not emotionally present in this intimate scene with Velda because he is possessed with thoughts of Christina's fate, and thus he does not hesitate to open the door for Pat, who could have more information. There are parallels of this mentality in the scene in *Vertigo* in which Scottie and Judy have dinner for the first time. Judy attempts to draw Scottie away from his thoughts of Madeleine with her conversation, but since her clothing is gaudy and her style is less refined than Madeleine's was, she cannot hold his attention. When a woman in a smart grey suit (like the one Madeleine wore) walks past, Scottie is unable to stop himself from following her with his gaze, which Judy notices and gets pained at (1:38:43). Judy, like Velda, is unsuccessfully attempting to draw the man that she loves into a moment of intimacy. And Scottie, like Mike, is easily distracted by an outsider because they are both unable to engage in real emotional intimacy with another woman as a result of their unhealthy fixations with the one who haunts each of them.

Further, when Velda asks Mike why he is going to so much trouble investigating the death of a woman he barely knew, Mike says, "She told me if I dropped her off at the bus station, I could forget her. But if she didn't make it, she said, 'Remember me'" (23:33). Velda answers, "So remember her. She's dead, but I'm not dead. Hey, remember me?" (23:46). Mike's response is to tell her that he remembers telling her to contact "Mr. Friendly," a man who could possibly lead to more clues to Christina's murder but who has made unwelcome advances on Velda. He puts Velda in a vulnerable position, blatantly using her body in conjunction with the desire that another man has for her to further his own selfish quest. He is unable to "remember" her or to even think of her in the wake of Christina's present absence. In a parallel thought process, all

that Scottie can remember or think about when he sees Judy is Madeleine, which Judy intuits and points out to him, as discussed earlier in this essay.

Frustratingly, Mike's obsession leads him to neglect Velda even in the moments in which she functions as the voice of reason. When he reveals to her that his quest has resulted in Nick's death, Velda asks, "What is it you're after, Mike?" (1:06:54). Mike vaguely answers, "Something very valuable" (1:07:05), which leads Velda eventually to ask, "Does it exist? Who cares" (1:07:22). The logic behind Velda's words is evident; in the face of Nick's death and of the numerous threats against Mike's life and against the lives of those he can be said to care about, Mike's behavior is incredibly irrational. He chases clues to a woman's death obsessively, without thinking about how he is thereby jeopardizing those who are important to him who are still living. This reasonable questioning is mirrored in *Vertigo* when Scottie reveals his desire to have Judy turn back into Madeleine and she asks, "Why are you doing this? What good will it do?" (1:44:55). Scottie answers vaguely, just like Mike, saying, "I don't know, no good I guess, I don't know" (1:44:58). Even though the words he speaks can be seen as a prophecy of the remainder of the film, he does not really believe in the veracity of what he is saying. The fact that the obvious—and correct—answer to Judy's question is "no good" seems to matter little to Scottie; he is impossible to deter from his obsession and instead sees it (and Judy) to its destructive end. *Kiss Me Deadly*'s ending is suitably destructive as well, and in another parallel, sees Mike occasioning Velda's destruction. Because of Mike's meddling detective activities, Velda is kidnapped and taken to the beach house, where Gabrielle eventually opens the "great whatsit," which turns out to be an atomic bomb. Though Mike and Velda escape the beach house (1:45:02), the implication is that they have been exposed to large amounts of radiation that will kill them. The fact that Velda must share in this fate simply because of her devotion to a man

whose neglect causes her to be in this situation in the first place is incredibly unfair. Mike's obsession has brought about not only his own downfall, but Velda's as well, even though she was innocent of any crime. The parallels between Velda and Judy in the ends that they meet are undeniable. Even though Judy was involved in the crime committed against Scottie, her subsequent reform and the sincere love that she professes for him merit more than what she receives from him, just like Velda deserves more than what Mike gives her. The men's obsessions, however, prevent them from really taking notice of the women who are still alive around them and who love them until it is too late.

Both *Vertigo* and *Kiss Me Deadly* can thus be read as expositions of what happens when a man indulges his obsessions and does not allow himself to move on from the past. Clearly, the belief held in common by the makers of these films is that such an unhealthy indulgence can only have devastating results. Their refusals to come to terms with the realities of their situations push Scottie and Mike to increasingly isolate themselves from the other women around them. Further, the carelessness with which they approach these women's lives stands in stark contrast to the importance that they place on the women who continue to haunt their thoughts, who become present absences. This carelessness eventually leads to the deaths of Judy and Velda, the living, breathing women who loved Scottie and Mike, respectively. The mental disease characterized alternately by obsession and neglect that the men share thus is not only self-destructive, but destructive in general. Eventually, this illness comes to consume both men completely and then moves on to those around them, destroying everyone who is foolish enough to come within its poisonous embrace.

#### Works Cited

1. *Vertigo*. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. By Alec Coppel. Perf. James Stewart and Kim Novak. Paramount, 1958. DVD.
2. *Kiss Me Deadly*. Dir. Robert Aldrich. By A.I. Bezzerides. Perf. Ralph Meeker and Maxine Cooper. MGM, 1955. DVD.
3. Berman, Emanuel. "Hitchcock's *Vertigo*: The Collapse of a Rescue Fantasy." *Psychoanalysis and Film*. Ed. Glen O. Gabbard. London: Karnac, 2001. 29-62. Print.