

21M.284 Essay 3-1

In this essay, I discuss the fusion of music, images and narrative in the segment “Carlotta’s Portrait” of the movie *Vertigo* by Hitchcock with music by Hermann.

Scottie follows Madeleine in her wanderings in San Francisco. He enters a museum after her. The music starts on a cut of an entrance to a painting room. Madeleine is sitting on a bench, facing a portrait of Carlotta Valdès. Scottie enters the room, slowly walking around. The camera rhythmically cuts from Scottie to various points that catch his interest. The camera’s movement highlights the unsettling detailed similarities between Madeleine and Carlotta: the bouquet, the hair style.

The music is obsessive, mimicking Scottie’s obsession with Madeleine and Madeleine’s obsession with Carlotta. The music has a Spanish habanera rhythm played by a harp, hinting at the exotic origin of Carlotta. The first chord of each bar is accentuated by a vibraphone and the outline of a simple melody, D - E - F - E, repeated in an obsessive loop. The orchestration gives a “ghostly” impression by avoiding the convention of expressivity: the flutes are non-vibrato, the clarinets quasi sub-tone, the violins muted and *sur la touche*. The music has no sense of forward movement towards a climax – instead, it feels static in its continual repetition. Compared to earlier cues, this cue has an unemotional regularity.

The images and the music hint at the possibility that Madeleine is spiritually possessed by Carlotta. The rhythm of the cuts follows the rhythm of the music, so that the two appear synchronize, leading to one narrative: Is Scottie – and the audience with him – starting to believe Madeleine’s husband’s suggestion that she is possessed?

After the museum scene, when Madeleine walks to the hotel, the “Carlotta’s Portrait” music comes back forcefully, suggesting, from Scottie’s point of view, that Carlotta’s spirit still is in Madeleine.

The same music comes back later, deformed, in Scottie's nightmare, adding to his confusion over the events.

Bernard Hermann's score for Hitchcock *Vertigo* is so rich, that most sequences with music could be fruitfully analyzed in detail. In the segment "Carlotta's Portrait", the music, in conjunction with the images, significantly contributes to the narrative: without a word, it leads us – and Scottie – to fall for Madeleine's husband's Machiavellian plan.