

Circles, Movement, and Temporality: (Re)Animating the Past in Hitchcock's *Vertigo* and Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*

Liana Cohen

In a Tortoiseshell: *In her Junior Paper for the English Department, Liana Cohen interweaves **analysis** and **evidence** in her writing through the utilization of **eloquent close reading** of the films *Vertigo* and *Spirited Away*. Indeed, placing her exercises of close-reading alongside richly contextualized analysis of film theorists and Freudian psychoanalysis, Liana crafts a compelling prose that explores how both films attempt to reanimate the past.*

Excerpt

Therefore, while these films are organized in circular fashion, their respective turns back in time are not both successful or completely alike. Indeed, one could argue that the reanimation of history in *Vertigo*, encapsulated by Scottie's effort to recreate Madeleine, is markedly *less* successful than Chihiro's journey to the past in *Spirited Away*. After all, Scottie recreates Madeleine's image, but the fact that Judy is a real human being gets in the way of his plans—her error of keeping Carlotta's necklace unravels Scottie's carefully-constructed present that simulates the past. In the climactic ending scene in which Scottie attempts to relive history with Judy in place of Madeleine, he says that it is "too late," repeating the ominous words Madeleine cried multiple times before apparently leaping to her death (Hitchcock 2:02:04, 1:14:38 and 1:15:16). Although it is not too late for Scottie to retrace his steps, it is still, in a sense, too late. After all, the past mercilessly recreates itself in the end—at the top of the bell tower, a nun, shrouded in darkness, arrives to investigate the noise and Judy, terrified, steps backward and falls to her death in a gruesome repetition of Madeleine's suicide. Thus, attempting to replicate the past is dangerous, a consequence of the death-drive—the lethal moment at the end of *Vertigo* insists on the fatal consequences of trying.

The film's unsuccessful turn back in time, triggered by repetition compulsion and ending in death and the conclusion of the narrative, evokes the inner-workings of its live-action medium. Consider the underlying problem of live-action cinema as a form: although it is pure motion, a "movement-image" projected against the "screen" of the viewer's brain to use the terminology of Deleuze, when it is recorded by the camera, it inevitably becomes a type of mimesis or representation of reality upon subsequent viewings, a "set[ting] in motion, or animat[ion]" of "images from the past," as noted by Hye Jean Chung in "The Reanimation of the Digital

(Un)Dead” (55). Put simply, there is no such thing as true live-action; by the time it reaches the audience, its motions are historical, its action dead. The same is true of Scottie’s attempt to reanimate the past in *Vertigo*; although he successfully creates the “living painting” of Madeleine, to use Richard E. Goodkin’s expression, she is merely an image and must return to stasis and death at the end (1174). Indeed, the fact that annihilation is the only possible outcome after an attempt “to control and freeze the passage of time” reflects Laura Mulvey’s connection between live-action and the end of narration: “just as the cinema offers a literal representation of narrative’s movement out of an initial inertia, with its return to stasis narrative offers the cinema a means through which its secret stillness can emerge in a medium-specific form” (Goodkin 1174 and Mulvey 79). Here, Mulvey indicates that the point at which the story must conclude parallels the eventual return to stillness of the live-action image, the moving pictures of the past. Like the repetition compulsion that motivates Scottie, which “arise[s] from the coming to life of inanimate matter and seek[s] to restore the inanimate state,” the live-action film temporarily animates dead pictures and later reinstates their stasis (Freud 184-185). Thus, Scottie’s doomed attempt to resurrect a figure from the past through repetition reflects the movie’s live-action medium, which is itself a series of defunct movement-images that must end with the completion of the filmic narrative.

Furthermore, even the way viewers temporally experience *Vertigo* reflects the dizzying quality of its highly apt title; a circle set in motion, the film does not stop and allow us to catch our breath until the final plunge towards death ceases the narrative motion entirely. The sensation of moving through Hitchcock’s film is akin to the cinematic technique he uses: specifically, the dolly-zoom or “reverse-tracking shot.” Marilyn Fabe explains the mechanics of the shot in her essay, “Mourning *Vertigo*”: “even as Hitchcock pulls the camera back away from the pavement below (dollies out or tracks backward with the camera), he simultaneously zooms in (uses a zoom lens to magnify the pavement), seemingly bringing it closer” (350). Indeed, as we witness Scottie draw closer to recreating the past by transforming Judy into Madeleine, the sense of impending doom increases, for we cannot forget how the other half of the film ended in death. One moment that encapsulates this dizziness as we hurtle towards the end is when Scottie tries to prove to Midge that he has overcome his acrophobia. Standing on a step ladder by the window as he gazes down to the street below, he confidently repeats the refrain, “I look up, I look down,” before triggering his vertigo by elevating himself too much (Hitchcock 00:4:00). To visually depict Scottie’s disorientation, Hitchcock uses the dolly-zoom; watching it feels like staring into the spinning mouth of a tunnel, as the ground seems to grow smaller, shifting into a further plane, while the buildings along the side rush closer (00:4:33). Thus, just as the reverse-tracking shot generates a

whirling sensation through movement in opposite directions, Hitchcock's film produces a vertigo effect in viewers through its corresponding halves, advancing both the successful reanimation of the past and the inevitability of a final fall to death.

Just like the fatal attempt at resurrection in *Vertigo* contains the same problems as its live-action medium, Chihiro's successful rebirth in *Spirited Away* parallels its animated form. When the film begins, Chihiro is depicted as an inactive, unhappy child. Indeed, the very first shot shows her lying on her back in the car with her feet up, clutching a farewell bouquet of flowers from a friend (Miyazaki 00:00:21). The dead look in her eyes and slow, dejected movements of her limbs, combined with the rapid forward motion of the vehicle driven by her father, indicate that she is being pulled along against her will (00:00:42). Over the course of her journey in the spirit realm, Chihiro transforms from a passive girl to a mature woman who possesses the Shinto-inspired characteristics of selflessness and purity of heart. Despite the film's circular plot structure, it is not about a return to the past, but rather about the discovery of new life—indeed, the last words Haku speaks to Chihiro are “Now go, and don't look back,” signaling an emphasis on forward momentum into the future rather than the stasis of obsession with the past (1:58:38). Just as narratively Miyazaki's film is about rebirth, anime itself is about the coming-to-life of dead and motionless things. Like the images that compose the film, Chihiro is born through her transition from stillness to movement. Similarly, just as the animated figures in the foreground must mobilize in relation to the background, Chihiro is forced to adapt and undergo her coming-of-age transformation because she is placed in the strange and new context of the spirit world. Therefore, the thematic and structural aim of rebirth in *Spirited Away* powerfully reflects the technical principles of its animated medium.

Author Commentary

Liana Cohen

The moment that my junior paper for the English Department went from “DAUNTING, IMPOSSIBLE, TORTUROUS” academic task to “FUN, FASCINATING, PERSONALLY REWARDING” project was when I realized I could write about movies. From there, I selected two films that never fail to reach out an invisible hand and pull me into their world: Hayao Miyazaki’s *Spirited Away* and Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*. My love for both these movies did not sour with the hours I spent watching and re-watching, prodding and analyzing; in fact, my appreciation only grew, fed by the lush images, the narrative twists, and, above all, the details that divulged new secrets upon every viewing.

With the support and insights of my adviser, Sarah Anderson, I dove into Princeton’s library database, emerging with film and anime theory, psychoanalytic writings, and philosophical texts ruminating on the nature of cinema. As I explored the scholarly conversation, I noticed a binary between discussions of the technical and physical aspects of a film and its narrative and thematic content. I wondered if I could bridge the two and, much to my excitement, a closer look revealed that the *form* of both films I had chosen beautifully reflected their *content*. Indeed, constructed with a medium that breathes life into static images, the anime hit *Spirited Away* is ultimately a story about rebirth; by contrast, live-action cinema inherently consists of the replaying or reanimation of formerly-living (currently dead) images, and *Vertigo* is about the protagonist’s failure to revitalize the past.

After deciding how my work would contribute to the pre-existing academic conversation, I continued to try to bring together unexpected points of analysis within the overarching frame of technical form and narrative content. For example, drawing from Freud’s writings on the repetition-compulsion, I established a link between the numerous profile shots of the Madeleine/Judy character to the apparent desire of the camera, like Scottie, to return to the past and recreate it in the present. Similarly, I found a parallel between the multiplane image of anime—quite literally, images are constructed by stacking celluloid slides on top of each other—and the multi-layered world of the film, split between the human and spirit realms. These types of connections were myriad, thanks to the depth and nuance of both films and the utility of turning my scholarly lens on medium and content together.

Editor Commentary

Doruntina Fida

Close reading assignments are understandably daunting. Throughout my time working at the Writing Center, a plethora of students have time and time again expressed the task as indubitably tedious, as they often struggle to effectively motivate and articulate an intricate argument in papers requiring a close reading exercise of some capacity. Students usually conceptualize close reading as a task that is composed of deeply analyzing a specific body of text by unraveling it word by word; by doing so, one can consequently efficiently engage with not only the content of the sentences but also the form in which it was written, revealing nuances and intricacies that could then potentially motivate an excellent paper.

What Liana Cohen does so expertly in her Junior Paper is extend this conceptualization to challenge our perception of how close reading can manifest in an academic paper. More specifically, Liana's JP illustrates how close reading is not only limited to the analysis of written text, but is a term that can also be applied to film. Film, which is at its core a cascade of moving images, can be paralleled to writing, which is itself a compilation of words. Both are built upon and informed by content *and* form, which as Liana notes in her commentary above, was a revelation made evident to her once she took a "closer look" at Hitchcock's *Vertigo* and Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*. Notably, the fact that Liana analyzed two films for her Junior Paper for the English Department demonstrates the continual relevance of close reading exercises across all mediums and disciplines.

The excerpt above indicates how Liana interweaves instances of close reading of the two films with other modes of analysis to generate an eloquent prose that captures how the two films attempt to reanimate the past. Interpreting scenes from the film just as one would lines of poetry, Liana not only navigates the content and imagery of the frames of film, but also considers the technical feats each director employed (evident in her invocation of Hitchcock's reverse-tracking shot), which serves to ultimately enrich her close reading and analysis. Importantly, this excerpt additionally points towards the significance of contextualizing close reading with the pre-existing scholarly conversation, which Liana does here through the incorporation of film theorists and Freudian psychoanalysis.

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Bios

Liana Cohen '20 is an English major from New York City with certificates in Creative Writing and Spanish. She loves to write about film because it's the closest thing to both time travel and teleportation. On campus, she is the Head Writer of *All-Nighter* and a member of the Edwards Collective. She wrote this paper as a junior.

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