Film scholars have argued that ***Vertigo*** is a film about cinema and about spectatorship. How far do you think this is true?

Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958) is a film that has attracted a huge amount of criticism concerning its themes: a psychoanalytic approach might point to the Hitchcock fascination with the recurring motif of possessive mother figures; a structuralist might add that the film is based around the binary opposites of attraction and repulsion; a feminist would focus on the representation of the male construction of the idealised blonde.

However, what all the above approaches would have to agree on as the film’s primary concern is with the act of looking, which underlines almost everything that one could state about the film. This concerns not only the act of spectatorship within the film itself, but the very nature of spectatorship beyond *Vertigo*’s diegesis. Hitchcock holds a mirror up to the very nature of cinema and spectatorship itself.

Structurally, the film presents a series of visual clues that on the one hand draw in the spectator to the onscreen events; on the other, Hitchcock deliberately reminds us of the artificiality of proceedings. To draw us in, Hitchcock takes us on a circular journey (the spirals of the opening credits effectively mirror the movement that Scottie takes throughout the film, leading round and round San Francisco, the past and present and ending where he began: staring down into the abyss). Also, we are for the first two thirds of the film almost entirely restricted to Scottie’s perspective, thus drawing in the spectator just as he is, into events that are out of his control.

In addition, Bernard Herrmann’s title music is a series of rising and falling notes in search of a resolution that never quite comes, reflecting how Scottie finds himself throughout, drawing us in to his futile fantasy. Hitchcock deliberately keeps the pace of the film dreamlike through heavy use of dissolves and long periods of silence. All these techniques seem designed to use the medium of cinema to ensnare the audience into cinematic submission.

However, just as the veil is lifted from Scottie’s eyes over Judy’s deceit, Hitchcock toys with his spectator enough to frequently distance the action from reality and highlight the technique he is using to reel us in. The obligatory Hitchcock cameo, for example reminds the audience of the artifice, as do moments such as the heavily stylised shot of crashing waves synchronised with the passionate embrace of the two lead characters.

Similarly, Scottie’s dream sequence and its use of animation takes a step back from the illusion of cinematic ‘reality’ to point itself out as a highly illusory medium. All these seem designed to create an alienation effect, reminding the audience that all here is not to be taken as real. If that were not enough, the lurch of perspective from Scottie to Judy significantly unmasks not only *Vertigo*’s plot but also its structure, shifting our main concern from ‘what will happen’ to ‘when will Scottie realise?’ The spectator is quite deliberately manipulated and also, made to realise that that is what is happening. The red/green stop/go colour scheme that saturates the film only adds to this sensation, warning us along with Scottie to stop looking, yet urging us on.

In addition, Scottie’s increasing mania during the film’s final events also suggests a device that Hitchcock will utilise to further devastating effect in *Psycho* (1960): forcing the spectator to realise that his/her sympathies are aligned with a madman. The spectator becomes like Scottie, first conned and then made to realise the con by the trickster (i.e. Hitchcock) himself.

This perhaps, accounts for the amount of stylised positioning that Hitchcock indulges in throughout: Madeleine/Judy is consistently ‘framed’, usually by doorways, corridors or arches when she appears, just as the image of Carlotta (and the spoof painting by Midge) frame a simulation of idealised woman; the mirror in Judy’s hotel room reflects her duality and it is ultimately *in the mirror* that Scottie spies the necklace that reveals all (prompted by Judy’s line, ‘can’t you see?’); with so many examples of straight shot-reverse shot showing Scottie’s point of view, we are easily pulled up when we are given a shot that breaks this, such as the first example of the recurring profile shot in Ernie’s restaurant or the astonishing image in the flower shop of Madeleine’s reflection broken by the peeping eye of Scottie looking through the mirrored door.

This is all crucial to the film’s concerns with cinema and spectatorship. The point is that everything that takes place in the first two thirds of the running time is an illusion. Elster is unmasked in his absence as the mastermind manipulating events from behind the scenes, though on later reflection, we are aware that the true puppeteer is Hitchcock hiding behind the camera.

Just like Scottie’s trailing of Madeleine, we had imagined ourselves to be observing unnoticed. However, it is revealed that it is we who have been the victim: like Scottie, we are tricked into thinking that Madeleine was not performing for our hidden benefit – an idea as ludicrous as imagining that Kim Novak had been filmed unwittingly. Significantly, during the first long, near silent observation scene, Scottie spends much of his time watching her through a screen (his windscreen – a metaphor for the cinema screen?) as he is led around various locations by her performance. In the museum, we watch Scottie observe Madeleine staring at the painting of Carlotta. Who in this sequence is the most deceived? Bernard Herrmann’s haunting score draws us, like Scottie into the illusion. This reminds us of James Stewart’s other performance as a Hitchcock scopophiliac in *Rear Window* (1954).

Hitchcock even takes this motif further: for a brief moment during the first half, he steps back from the near-exclusivity of Scottie’s perspective and gives us Midge observing him, inevitably through the windscreen of her car. Similarly, Elster’s two phone calls to Scottie that ‘wake’ Madeleine and then give her a chance to slip out suggest godlike powers of timing or further hidden observation. Elster stays mostly behind the scene, the master manipulator. Behind him, stands Hitchcock, the real mastermind.

In her essay ‘narrative and Visual Pleasure’, Laura Mulvey considered feminist perspective of the film, arguing that through the construction of the male gaze, Hitchcock idealises and fetishises Madeleine, which essentially masculinises his audience, forcing them to confront the act of voyeurism itself. This can be seen throughout, particularly in the montage of Judy’s body as she is recreated as Madeleine. (This ‘cutting up’ of the female form is foreshadowed in the film’s title sequence and taken to its grisly conclusion in *Psycho.*) However, Tania Modleski in *The Women Who Knew Too Much* considers the film’s spectacle to be more centred on the male’s search to regain his challenged masculinity. The act of spectatorship is thus a search for the self and in seeing; we learn more about ourselves than about fictional others. Either way, spectatorship is at the heart of Hitchcock’s concerns as a director and particularly in *Vertigo*.

Finally, to touch on an auteuristic approach, it is notable how often the Hitchcock lead character has to engage in pretence and deceit in order to uncover truth, such as Thornhill’s many improvisations to affect escape in *North by Northwest* (1959). This is perhaps an investigation into the unreality of the medium of film. In *Vertigo* we note both Scottie and Madeleine engaged in several layers of pretence to each other. Also, the opening sequence of Hitchcock’s first film as a director, *The Pleasure Garden* (1925) is concerned with the act of spectatorship as a point of view shot fixes the spectator into the front row of a burlesque club. 35 years later, *Psycho* also implicates the spectator in the guilty act of voyeurism. This concern is central to understanding *Vertigo*, with its multiple layers of pretence and observation*.*

Overall, *Vertigo* is ‘about’ many things beyond the scope of this essay. It is clear though, that chief among its concerns is with the artificiality and power of cinema as an attraction and a means to create suspense, along with an exploration of the very nature of spectatorship itself.