A Post-Jungian Approach to *Vertigo* by Tony Cryer

Madeleine: "I just thought that I'd wander."
Scottie: "Oh, that's what I was going to do."
Madeleine: "Oh yes, that's right, I forgot, it's - your occupation, isn't it?"

In his 1977 "Retrospective" essay Robin Wood comments: "The Hitchcock films I most admire are centred on a movement toward health via therapy and catharsis" (Wood, 1977, p.218). In the case of *Vertigo*, I too perceive a therapeutic impulse ("toward health"), although on a number of occasions my perception has been countered by others who read the film as ultimately pessimistic, thus hardly therapeutic. I hope to illuminate here a symbolic attitude in which there is no necessary equation between optimism and therapy, or between pessimism and therapeutic failure.

A number of commentators have certainly written of the film as pessimistic, despite each approaching it from a very different angle (e.g. Brill, 1988; Freedman, 1999; Trumpener, 1991).[1] Jonathan Freedman, for example, sees *Vertigo* as a savage critique of "therapeutic culture" in America (Freedman, 1999, pp.79-80) and "the tame Freudianism of the American psychological establishment", accomplished nevertheless by a complex return to the "late Freud: the Freud of the metapsychological and culturally despairing writings like *Civilization and its Discontents, Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* and *Analysis Terminable and Interminable*", in which the repetition compulsion is depicted as "irresistible, infecting even, and indeed quite precisely, the efforts to escape it; the death drive as so potent as to be

irreversible" (ibid., pp. 94-95). There are two problems, I feel, with this position: firstly, it somewhat uncritically follows Adorno's cultural pessimism (fully acknowledged by Freedman; e.g. Adorno & Horkheimer, 1947/1979; Adorno, 1963/1975) in collapsing any distinction between different analytical therapies under the monolithic term of "therapeutic culture"; secondly, it nevertheless falls back into the trap of the Freudian reductive tendency.

I therefore continue to find a therapeutic impulse in *Vertigo* and I want to argue that this is most profitably examined through the application of some of the insights offered by (post-)Jungian analytical psychology, with its close wedding of theory and practical analysis/therapy. Principal among these insights is the notion of a symbolic attitude (which we will come to). Such an analytical/therapeutic approach has significant implications for moving image/sound analysis, in that it offers a potential analysis of a film narrative as a landscape of the psyche, and the different characters not as individuals *per se*, but as different complexes interacting with one another.

The notion of the complex is of central importance to Jungian psychology. It was Jung himself who introduced the term complex to Freudian psychoanalysis and Adlerian psychology. After the split with Freud, Jung at first considered applying the label Complex Psychology to his own approach, before settling on *Analytical Psychology* (Bennet 1967, p.27). In contrast to the dream for Freud, the "*via regia* to the unconscious" for Jung is the complex (Jung 1934/1969, para. 210; see also Jacobi 1959, p.6). He arrived at this theoretical construct only after he and his co-workers at the Burghölzi psychiatric clinic had conducted a series of "association experiments" (see Jung 1904-10/1971; 1934/1969).[2]

Despite being constructed - in the spirit of most of the psychological research of the time (i.e. the 1910s) - as intellectual tests directed towards consciousness, the association experiments proved more fruitful as indicators of *unconscious* disturbances (Bennet 1967, pp.26-27). Drawing also on evidence from other contemporary research into psycho-galvanic phenomena

(e.g. lie-detectors) - rise in blood pressure and pulse rate, and change in skin temperature, accompanying a verbal response - Jung added a galvanometer to his association experiments, to record such phenomena. Always remaining aware of the limitations of the experiments, Jung nevertheless came to account for these affect-reactions, and the disturbances in response and "reproduction", with the notion of the complex - a thoroughly psychosomatic implication.

Jung defines a complex as "a conglomeration of psychic contents characterized by a peculiar or perhaps painful feeling-tone" (Jung 1935/1977, para. 99). It is this quality of feeling which, he speculates, causes the delayed reaction times and the various other manifestations of the association researches. The tests point to the influence of unconscious emotion on the subject, such that the complex is theorized as behaving "like an animated foreign body in the sphere of consciousness" (Jung 1934/1969, para. 201).

> The complex can usually be suppressed with an effort of will, but not argued out of existence, and at the first suitable opportunity it reappears in all its original strength… Even the soberest formulation of the phenomenology of complexes cannot get round the impressive fact of their autonomy, and the deeper one penetrates into their nature -I might also say into their biology- the more clearly do they reveal their character as splinter *psyches*. Dream psychology shows us as plainly as could be wished how complexes appear in personified form when there is no inhibiting consciousness to suppress them. (Jung 1934/1969, paras 201-203)

An important emphasis is thus on attempting some understanding of the nature and operation of our complexes as they relate (or not) to one another. This has, therefore, two important consequences for film analysis.

Firstly, (as noted above) it would thus seem more fruitful to regard each film as a 'landscape of the psyche' and the different characters not as individuals *per se*, but as different complexes

interacting with one another; and each character with the capacity to personify more than one complex, dependent on its relative position to others in the same sequence (or even in the same shot).[3] Secondly, classical Jungian psychotherapy involves both *association* to establish the personal context of complexes (as they appear in dream imagery, for example) and *amplification* to establish cultural, historical and mythological parallels, thus forging a link between the personal and the archetypal. Such methods of analysis are (in brief) characterized by a 'circling' movement - *circumambulation* - as the analyst and analysand gather together the various images and ideas in their respective clusters, circling a central core. As their archetypal nodal point is revealed, the complexes begin gradual integration. This approach interprets psychic life as a continual circling process, whereby many of the same complexes repeatedly encounter the ego, each time in slightly modified form; and each time (with hope and greater empathy) more effectively accommodated by consciousness.

Jung and many other commentators note the repeated (and both historically and geographically widespread) manifestation of cultural symbols of various kinds of 'circumambulation', for example, the wealth of *mandala* forms appearing not only in worldwide ritual, but also in the more personal realm of dream and artwork. 'Mandala' is a Sanskrit term for a (magic) circle:

> All are different because each is a projected image of the psychic condition of its author, or in other words, an expression of the modification brought by this psychic content to the traditional idea of the mandala. Thus, the mandala is a synthesis of a traditional structure plus free interpretation. Its basic components are geometric figures, counterbalanced and concentric. Hence it has been said that "the mandala is always a squaring of the circle". (Cirlot, 1971, p.200)

Jung variously hypothesizes a notion of the *Self*: "an archetypal image of man's fullest potential and the unity of the personality as a whole … At times Jung speaks of the Self as

initiatory of psychic life; at other times he refers to its realization as the goal (Samuels, Shorter & Plaut 1991, p.135). He proposes that the Self, the archetypal symbol of wholeness - and the circumambulation that is both by and of the Self - finds potent, symbolic expression in the manifold form of the mandala.[4]

The mandala form appears several times in *Vertigo*, most notably in the famous shots of the tower stair-well, around which the characters ascend the steps in an anti-clockwise movement. A simultaneous lens/camera track effect - a zoom in/track out - is combined with an apparently vertical camera placement directly over the stair-well. I say "apparently vertical", because the shots were actually achieved using a model of the stair-well placed on its side: in other words, the vertical is an effect of horizontal placement (e.g. see Auiler, 1999, p.156). This technological accomplishment seems to me an apt expression of the multi-dimensionality of psychic circumambulation: a continuous circling around a mid-point which is vertical, horizontal, temporal, has spatial depth - as well as a symbolic dimension. This movement also appears in the spiral forms of the credit sequence; the 360 degree circling of the camera around Scottie and Madeleine; the circular pursuit of one car by another; the rings of the section of sequoia tree; and so on.

Several commentators note this kind of movement in *Vertigo*, but fall short of a symbolic interpretation.[5] Eric Rohmer, however, comes closer than most:

> We know how much this film owed, not just in severity, but in lyricism, to the obsessive presence of a double geometrical motif, that of the straight line and the circle. In this case, the figure - Saul Bass draws it for us in the credits - is that of the spiral, or more specifically, the helix. The straight line and the circle are married by the intermediary of a third dimension: depth ... Everything forms a circle, but the loop never closes, the revolution carries us ever deeper into reminiscence. (Rohmer, 1989, pp.171-172)

But I want to propose (following Jung) that this circumambulation symbolizes the Self; it has a compensatory function, seeking integration between conscious and unconscious aspects. The recurrence of the various circle/spiral motifs, not least the repeated ascent of the tower, carries with it, I have suggested, a suggestive resemblance to the mandala form. This recurrence, I would also suggest, may thus also be symbolically interpreted as performing the circumambulatory function of the mandala. When we consider the circling movement of the different complexes in the film, I propose that it is only a symbolic interpretation which can uncover their integrative capacity, by hinting at their archetypal core: "Only an interpretation on the symbolic level can strip the nucleus of the complex from its pathological covering and free it from the impediment of its personalistic garb" (Jacobi, 1959, p.26). To be specific, only a symbolic interpretation will "free" us from "the impediment" of a purely "personalistic" reading of the narrative and characters in *Vertigo*: for example, that the ending imposes a tragic finality to the narrative, leaving the characters of Scottie and Judy/Madeleine as tragic victims.

Let us now return to the notion of *Vertigo* as a 'landscape' of the psyche. Several critics have noted that Scottie is introduced to us in his professional capacity as 'lawman'; furthermore, that he is shown to fail in this capacity; and that, in some sense, much of the film is taken up with his attempts to regain control of the capacity.[6] We are thus presented with his external attitude, his worldly 'mask'; with its beginning to 'slip'; and with the ramifications of its precarious 'suspension' throughout the film. As Robin Wood has noted: "There seems no possible way he *could* have got down. The effect is of having him, throughout the film, metaphorically suspended over a great abyss" (Wood, 1965, p.111).

Jung also names (personifies) this outer manifestation, this 'mask': the *persona* (e.g. Jung 1923/1971, paras 797-808; 1928/1970, paras 243-295). These opening sequences are, in effect, such a manifestation or constellation: a persona being a functional complex necessary for adaptation to the outer world of social behaviour; its rooftop manifestation also confirms its function on the surface, facing out into the world. But, in this case, its particular constellation

is such as to reveal the precarious condition of its relation toward an *ego-complex*, as it were, beneath. In other words, it is a question of identification with the persona: the stability of the ego-complex is diminished if it becomes over-identified with the persona. As Jung writes:

> Identity with the persona automatically leads to an unconscious identity with the anima because, when the ego is not differentiated from the persona, it can have no conscious relation to the unconscious processes. Consequently, it *is* these processes, it is identical with them. (Jung 1923/1971, para. 807)

In consequence, from the moment that the ego-complex is manifested - 'in suspension' - *Vertigo* becomes in part a history of the processes ensuing from the ego's over-identification with the persona complex. Jung's teleological proposition is suggestive: both despite and because of its identification with the persona, the ego-complex continues to seek integration in compensatory relation to other complexes. Following Jung's observation above, therefore, the ego immediately encounters a contrasexual figure, the first personification of an *anima* complex (e.g. Jung 1923/1971, paras 803-811; 1928/1970, paras 296-373): there is a straight cut - from Scottie suspended - to his first dialogue with Midge (Barbara Bel Geddes).

In this dialogue sequence, however, the interaction between the complexes is very restricted, since the ego is at this stage unconscious of its lack of differentiation from the persona. It can only relate to the anima in its maternal aspect and, although this nurturing function is essential for the ego's well-being, the relation seems at first largely negative ("Don't be so motherly, Midge") because the persona still holds sway and the ego-complex continues to assert its autonomy ("I'm a man of independent means, as the saying goes"). But the crucial importance of this first encounter with the anima is, in turn, to introduce the ego to the persona's counterpart in the unconscious. Jung states: "the animus and the anima should function as a bridge, or a door, leading to the images of the collective unconscious, as the persona should be a sort of bridge into the world" (Jung 1963/1983, p.411). In relation to the ego, the anima

thus acts as a *psychopomp:* "The figure which guides the soul at times of initiation and transition; a function traditionally ascribed to Hermes in Greek myth for he accompanied the souls of the dead and was able to pass between polarities" (Samuels, Shorter & Plaut, 1991, p.122).

The persona's counterpart in the unconscious is the *shadow*, a contradistinctive complex formed from repressed qualities, undesirable to the persona and thus possessing opposite qualities. Put simply, "the shadow personifies everything that the subject refuses to acknowledge about himself and yet is always thrusting itself upon him directly or indirectly" (Jung 1939/1968, p.513). Jung proposes that the "door" of the anima thus brings the ego-complex into preliminary contact with a shadow complex: out of the past comes Scottie's old college friend, Gavin Elster (Tom Helmore), persuading him to return to detective work, but this time of an unofficial, shadowy nature; indeed, this private task is to shadow his wife. So it is that an anima figure affords the ego-complex a first contact with a shadow complex in the form of Elster: it is Midge who identifies the shadow via its negative aspect when she warns Scottie that Elster may be "on the bum".

But, as Jung proposes, the "door" of the anima leads to the collective unconscious, the shadow has its archetypal core and - as we have already observed - nothing of archetypal origin is necessarily pathological: the shadow complex also has a positive, compensatory function vis-à-vis the persona. It is precisely *through* Elster - via the anima figures of Madeleine, Judy and Midge - that Scottie later comes to identify the positive/negative polarity of his persona: after the coroner's inquest into the death of 'Madeleine', Elster says, "It was my responsibility"; with its 'antisocial' propensities, the shadow thus compensates for the persona's inflations and pretensions. But Jung has observed that an individual is often unconscious of many aspects of his/her own shadow personality, tending rather to experience these aspects as projections onto other people:

> No matter how obvious it may be to the neutral observer that it is a matter of projections, there is little hope that the subject will perceive this himself. He must be convinced that he throws a very long shadow before he is willing to withdraw his emotionally-toned projections from their object ... As we know, it is not the conscious subject but the unconscious which does the projecting. Hence one meets with projections, one does not make them. (Jung 1948/1968, paras 16-17)

So it is with the behaviour of the complexes themselves, of course. It is only after several cycles (the process of circumambulation throughout the film) that the ego-complex begins to relate in any way to a constellated shadow complex, only becoming more fully constellated towards the end of the film. After the coroner's report, Scottie is so numbed by grief and by the legal (i.e. external) authority's intimation of his own criminal negligence, that he hardly registers Elster's sympathetic words at the window of the inquest room. That night, though, Scottie dreams of Elster and Carlotta (the suicidal ancestor with whom 'Madeleine' is obsessed) in a sinister, conspiratorial pose by a similar window. Through the symbolic logic of the dream these two apparently discrete elements - Elster and Carlotta - are thus brought together, linking Elster to the "old Bohemian days" that Scottie and Midge had earlier discovered in their visit to Pop Liebl's bookshop: Carlotta had apparently been "thrown away" by her lover, who had retained custody of their daughter (Pop Liebl: "A man could do that in those days.")

In this dawning awareness of Elster's role in a deception, the ego nevertheless continues to privilege the persona in its conscious aspect; and thus to project all negative qualities onto the shadow. There is no recognition yet of the complementary relationship between persona and shadow, as hypothesized by Jung. By the end of the film, however, through the mediation of the ego-complex this complementary relationship is slowly, hesitantly, painfully brought to consciousness. This, I believe, is the heart of the therapeutic impulse in the film. As Anthony Stevens observes:

> An essential stage in Jungian treatment consists of bringing the shadow personality to consciousness in order to establish a *rapprochement* with the persona, thus promoting integration of both complexes within the personality as a whole. (Stevens 1990, p.44)

Elster - the shadow - has been abroad, inhabits the shipyard (on the coast), goes away after the coroner's sequence and later returns again. The shadow thus crosses the border between the land and the sea, with all its symbolic relation to the border between the conscious and the unconscious.[7] Following a number of this film's commentators, we might recall various myths which amplify the functional relations between the persona, the anima and the shadow: Faust, Helen and Mephistopheles; Adam and his two wives, Lilith and Eve; Pygmalion and Galatea; Tristan and Isolde (e.g. Durgnat 1974, pp.280-288; Spoto 1979, p.299). It might be said that all these myths function to identify the anima in its capacity as guide (psychopomp) to the ego-complex, directing it towards the shadow.

We have already seen that Scottie has earlier related to the figure of Midge in only a one-sided sense - an exclusively maternal aspect. This is nevertheless a first, if brief, anima constellation. It seems clear, however, that the process of integration is initiated when the ego begins to mediate between (finally irreconcilable) polar opposites in a complex. Scottie is now presented with two 'faces' of the anima - Madeleine and Judy - in the course of their circumambulation, their wandering. The task of all symbolic activity is likewise to promote integration by mediating opposites: the destination for the symbolic wandering of the two complexes is (twice) the tower, the mandala of our earlier discussion - symbol of the Self, the unifying principle of the psyche. Jung speculates that in a great many mandalas anti-clockwise movement tends to indicate a spiral toward the unconscious: Scottie and Madeleine move anti-clockwise up the tower. Through their circling this ground, the ego-complex clearly seeks to mediate integration of the anima.[8]

In approaching and circling the tower, this symbol of the Self, they now begin (only begin) to enact an important psychological transition: what Jung describes as a transition from personified archetypes to "archetypes of transformation" (Jung 1954/1968, para. 80); and the Self is, for the classical Jungian, the principal of these archetypes of transformation. Twice they circle the symbolic ground but, in the course of the first movement, the ego-complex still privileges identification with the persona - the rationality of the detective - over the shadow: Scottie tells Madeleine, "If I could just find the key, the beginning and ... and ... and put it together". But, as Eugene Pascal notes, the attempt to subjugate one complex with another is ultimately counter-productive:

> Ultimately this type of tactic to control one's complex does not work since putting one polar opposite against another simply energizes the opposite that is suppressed. It will in the end surface with a vengeance. (Pascal, 1994, p.72)

To recall the last stages of the film: realizing he has been deceived, Scottie forces Judy to climb the tower for a second time (again dressed as 'Madeleine') and at the top angrily confronts her with her and Elster's treachery. Thus, the key to the second circumambulation of the symbolic tower is in the ego's final acknowledgement of the anima's polar opposites - both Madeleine and Judy. This recognition in turn leads to the ego's painful but necessary acknowledgement of the intimate correspondence that is persona and shadow. We have witnessed Scottie's compulsive moulding and manhandling of Judy in the latter stages of the film, his obsession to recover Madeleine through her but without acknowledgement of her own identity: a correspondence between Scottie's behaviour and Elster's manipulations is now apparent. His anguished "Why me?" in the last scene at the top of the belltower serves only to brings this into greater relief.

The opposites of the persona complex itself are finally unclothed:

> When a complex surfaces, so do the conflictual opposites that compose it ... We usually discover that one of the polar opposites had been repressed and now resurfaces tormentingly. When the complex was still in a repressed state, we did not feel as if stretched out on a cross of conflicted opposites. (ibid., p.71)

This is an unavoidably painful stage in the ongoing integration of a complex - what Pascal also terms "psychic crucifixion" (ibid., p.69). It finds apt symbolic expression in the 'cross' of Scottie's stance, arms outstretched, in the last shot. The predominant symbolic associations of the cross are with *conjunction*: "it stands for the conjunction of opposites, wedding the spiritual (or vertical) principle with the principle of the world of phenomena. Hence its significance as a symbol for agony, struggle and martyrdom" (Cirlot, 1971, p.69). So, we are left with this image of psychic crucifixion, but I hope the foregoing symbolic analysis has approached it as a synthetic image of the ongoing struggle of integration, rather than of causal closure.

Here I want to draw to a close, noting that this kind of symbolic interpretation serves to amplify Robin Wood's assessment both that "the last third of *Vertigo* is among the most disturbing and painful experiences the cinema has to offer" (Wood, 1989, p.387) and that the film shows "a movement toward health via therapy and catharsis" (Wood, 1977, p.218). To my mind, the two conditions are indivisible.

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N.B. Jung, C.G.: The abbreviation *CW* refers to *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung,* 2nd edn, ed. Herbert Read, Michael Fordham and Gerhard Adler, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. In each case, the first year referred to is that of the most recent, substantially revised version of the text in English translation; the second year refers to the earliest publication of the above Routledge edition. All quotations from *The Collected Works* are identified in the text by *paragraph* (not page) number/s.

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Notes:

1. I am grateful to Dr Mike Cormack for drawing my attention to these sources.

2. One hundred words (nouns, adjectives and verbs) are read out, one at a time, to a subject who is asked to respond as soon as possible with the first word that springs to mind. Having noted each association word and each reaction time (in fifths of a second), the researcher repeats the initial list of one hundred stimulus-words, asking the subject to repeat his/her first response (what Jung calls the "reproduction method"). The complete results are analyzed (taking due account also of the grammatical form of the original stimulus-words) according to established protocols: e.g. disparity between the first and second round of response words, repetition of response, or lack of response in either or both; repetition of the stimulus-word before response; short or delayed reaction times, and any disparity in (or repetition of) these times between the corresponding responses; response with supplementary words; bizarre response; rhyming response; affective response. The researcher then looks for overall patterns in these various disturbances (see Hillman 1975, pp.189-190; Bennet 1967, pp.25-36; Whitmont 1969, pp.63-66).

3. A great deal of theoretical film writing tends to treat characters as if they were rounded, individual personalities. From the most naive assumptions about 'real' people encountering 'real' situations in a filmic narrative, to the most sophisticated Lacanian reading of split subjectivity - where they are more usually acknowledged as representations - characters are nevertheless for the most part discussed as if they represented complete individuals. In an early analysis of *Vertigo*, for example, Robin Wood writes repeatedly of certain characters as both psychological and physical individuals: "To live, he [Scottie] must hold on desperately to the gutter, his arms and body agonizingly stretched, his fingers strained, his mind gripped by unendurable tension; to die, he has only to let go" (Wood 1965: 110); or elsewhere, he notes Gavin Elster's thematic significance, "besides being a clearly defined character in his own right" (ibid.: 112). Classical Jungian theory, however, posits that outer and inner worlds intersect in the psychic image.

> Living reality is the product neither of the actual, objective behaviour of things nor of the formulated idea exclusively, but rather of the combination of both in the living psychological

process, through *esse in anima*. Only through the specific vital activity of the psyche does the sense-impression attain that intensity, and the idea that effective force, which are the two indispensable constituents of living reality.

This autonomous activity of the psyche, which can be explained neither as a reflex action to sensory stimuli nor as the executive organ of eternal ideas, is, like every vital process, a continually creative act. The psyche creates reality every day. (Jung 1923/1971, paras 77-78)

4. This is in turn related to the concept of *temenos* (Gk: "sacred precinct"): an enclosed area in which order can be experienced and in which overwhelming feelings can be 'placed'. I want to propose that *Vertigo*'s central image of the tower constitutes such an ordering *temenos*, within which a circumambulation of a number of interrelated complexes takes place. We shall come to this.

5. "When Scottie starts to follow Madeleine in her car, she leads him in a downward spiral - a typical trajectory of Hitchcock heroines" (Modleski 1988, p.92); "the dominant geometric figure of *Vertigo*, the spiral, expresses the tendency to fall apart emotionally. The spiral is an unstable alternative to the circle" (Brill 1988, p.205).

6. Scottie is "exemplary of the symbolic order and the law - a policeman" (Mulvey 1975/1985, p.813); "the rest of the film traces the vicissitudes of Scottie's attempts to reassert a masculinity lost when he failed in his performance of the law" (Modleski 1988, p.4).

7. "*The sea:* The symbolic significance of the sea corresponds to that of the 'Lower Ocean' - the waters in flux, the transitional and mediating agent between the non- formal (air and gases) and the formal (earth and solids) and, by analogy, between life and death. The waters are thus seen not only as the source of life but also as its goal" (Cirlot 1971, p.281).

8. Scottie's attraction to Judy is fired by her resemblance to 'Madeleine', which Judy describes as "not very complimentary". This is a useful Jungian pun: Scottie's unifying desire for Madeleine/Judy is precisely "compl-e-mentary".