"The Moment That I Dreaded and Hoped For": Ambivalence and Order in Bernard Herrmann's Score for Vertigo

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Slighted by critics on its original release,1 Vertigo has subsequently been hailed as the apotheosis of the collaboration between Alfred Hitchcock and Bernard Herrmann, indeed of Hitchcock's entire oeuvre.2 Moreover, it has become one of the most widely analyzed films in history, proving a consistently fertile ground for film scholars. Yet, while the central themes of voyeurism and obsession, and of love and death, have been thoroughly illuminated through the examination of filmic images and dialogue, Herrmann's score for Vertigo has, by comparison, been somewhat overlooked.3 This neglect is surprising, since the same themes that resonate throughout Vertigo criticism are often prefigured or reconfigured musically; Herrmann's score maintains an active role in Hitchcock's complex narrative. This article explores that role, focusing initially on the means by which Herrmann's music fosters identification with the male protagonist (Scottie, played by James Stewart) and then on the musical gestures and techniques that sustain, yet complicate this identification. In order to facilitate analysis, the sections of this essay reflect the tripartite musical form underlying Vertigo: a prelude (the opening credits), three narrative movements (of almost equal length), and a coda.4

Prologue: Music and the Male Gaze

Writers on cinematic identification are at pains to expound the complexity of the spectator-film relationship. John Ellis explains the duality of the process thus: "[I]dentification involves both the recognition of self in the image on the screen, a narcissistic identification, and the identification of self with the various positions that are involved in the fictional narration: those of hero and heroine, villain, bit-part player, active and passive character."5 In other words, the process of identification does not exclusively imply connection with a central character any more than it implies same-sex recognition (men identifying with male characters, women with female characters). As Laura Mulvey has shown, however, classical Hollywood cinema has predicated a system in which the male
point of view is privileged and forges a connection between male and active on one hand, and female and passive on the other. Men are “bearers” of the look, women “objects” of the look, with the camera acting as a surrogate for the “male gaze.” This practice has been interpreted as a ramification of the male desire to objectify woman, to shape and control her.

The influence of the male gaze may be discerned throughout Vertigo, including the scene in which Madeleine (played by Kim Novak) is introduced—not glimpsed, or seen, but specifically introduced—both by Hitchcock (to the spectator) and by Elster (played by Tom Helmore) (to Scottie). As Scottie, seated at the bar in Ernie’s restaurant, looks over his shoulder, the camera follows his gaze. Tracking smoothly across the restaurant, the camera reveals a dining room decorated almost entirely in a deep shade of red and populated on the whole by people in dark clothing. The pictorial composition of the scene is designed to draw the spectator toward Madeleine’s complementary black dress with green stole, and thereby to Madeleine herself. As the camera zooms in on Madeleine, we hear her theme for the first time. “Madeline” (see Ex. 1) commands attention for a number of reasons: it is recognizable as a theme (even beginning with a standard four-measure phrase), a rarity in Herrmann’s score; it is scored only for muted strings and is thereby separated timbrally from the preceding cues; and an emphasis on suspensions at the beginning of measures lends the cue a melancholy air. In short, the theme establishes a mood of poise and grace, and yet also of vulnerability, which, in the context of the scene, are characteristics we attribute to Madeleine herself. When she leaves the table she advances toward and stands in profile before the camera, lingering while the music soars to a climax. The whole scene is a stereotype of the very male gaze in Hollywood film that Mulvey critiques: “In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.” Herrmann’s musical composition proves no less seductive than Hitchcock’s visual composition, adding an aural dimension to Mulvey’s exclusively ocular critique. Through the combination of music and image, we are (with Scottie) invited to objectify Madeleine from the moment we first see her.

Film privileges the male perspective by bestowing narrative agency upon the male. Since as spectators we share a similar desire to control narrative, we are predisposed (willingly or otherwise) toward identification with a male protagonist, as the active “looker” in film. In Vertigo Hitchcock deliberately expedites this process by means of various narrative and cinematic techniques. The casting of the sexually and morally
assured Jimmy Stewart, for example, would have convinced contemporary audiences that the character of Scottie represented the irreproachable good guy, thereby facilitating identification.\(^{11}\) The point-of-view shots that dominate the early part of the film always place us firmly in the position occupied by Scottie. As he drives along the maze of streets, we see those streets as though through his eyes; we share his sense of confusion and thereby experience with him the pursuit of Madeleine. Crucially, however, the pursuit is problematic, for (or so we think) Madeleine is unaware that she is being followed. The act is thus rendered inherently voyeuristic, and Madeleine herself is objectified. Also problematically, she remains, throughout the first movement of the film, a ghostly figure, fleshed out only by the spectator's desire of what she could represent, since there is no on-screen interaction by which she may develop as a character in her own right. In other words, as spectators we are in the territory of fantasy, a fantasy that Hitchcock nightmarishly exposes in the final part of the film.

If the foregoing discussion leaves us feeling as though we are in freefall, this should come as no surprise, nor should the ambivalent desirability of this sensation. The very title \textit{Vertigo} refers to the feeling of freefall and prefigures Scottie's acrophobia, a sensation “explained . . . by psychologists as arising from the tension between the desire to fall and the dread of falling.”\(^{12}\) Objectifying Madeleine, controlling her, becomes for Scottie (and, by implication, for us) a highly desirable obsession, but the futility inherent in such an obsession (neither he nor we can control everything) constitutes an alienating and debilitating force. Hence Scottie's descent throughout the film may be considered, retrospectively, as an inevitable process that, as we shall see, began before the film commenced.

Prelude: Objectifying Woman

Vertigo’s opening credits are perplexing, an elaborate graphic sequence that ostensibly has little relationship to the film that follows. We may wonder, for instance, whose face we see framed feature by feature, but to do so misses the point. It is the face of female anonymity, a dislocated face, the dismantling of which invites us to (re)construct the woman, much in the manner that we will, through Scottie, construct our own “Madeleine.” From the eye emerges a crudely animated spiral, a graphic realization of the endless descent engendered by vertigo and an analog to the zoom-in and track-out camera effect designed to recreate the sensation of vertigo. Thus, the prelude visually foreshadows two abiding themes of the film: the shattering of female identity and the debilitating force of vertigo.

The musical prelude that accompanies this opening sequence is as unusual as its visual counterpart. The repetitive, spiraling arpeggios in contrary motion at once forewarn of vertiginous descent (see Ex. 2) and seem to create the animated spirals that emerge as the main love theme is introduced (see Ex. 3). Further, the opposing musical gestures (the arpeggios and love theme) resist a straightforwardly tonal classification; the most plausible keys (E-flat minor and A minor, respectively) yield an unsettling tritone relationship. The arpeggios in high winds and strings are also separated registrally and instrumentally from the punctuating low-brass chords that interject during the first minute of the prelude, creating the striking timbral opposition that pervades Herrmann’s score.

As much as the combination of images and music in the prelude forge an indelible thematic connection between the dizzying experience of vertigo and love for the ideal (i.e., imagined or constructed) woman, both visually and musically, these themes appear irreconcilable. Though Scottie objectifies Madeleine, even attempting to reconstruct her through another woman (Judy), vertigo thwart the successful completion of his task. For Scottie, vertigo is not merely a fear of heights, but a perpetual reminder of his inability to control events. In the context of the film, this manifests as a failure to maintain narrative control, or at the very least, the illusion of narrative control. Yet, so fundamental is the desire to control that it may be seen as the central issue of the first movement.

First Movement: Pursuing Madeleine

The two-measure rhythmic and harmonic ostinato that accompanies Scottie as he follows Madeleine around San Francisco (“Madeline’s
Example 2.  Spiraling arpeggios, prelude, mm. 1–2. From Vertigo. By Bernard Herrmann. Copyright © 1958 (Renewed 1986) by Famous Music Corporation. International copyright secured. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission.


Car”) is far removed from the seductive theme (“Madeline”) that precedes it (see Ex. 4). Rhythmically and harmonically unvarying, it emphasizes motion without progress, Scottie’s furrowed brow reflecting our collective confusion. Harmonically, the ostinato oscillates between chords that allude to a dominant seventh (with B-flat root) and a French augmented sixth.13 Deprived of a tonal context, however, neither the V7 nor the Fr6 resolves in its customary manner. Instead, they appear as disembodied chords, hinting at the possibility of harmonic motion, of dissonance and (through resolution) consonance, but without ever realizing their harmonic potential. They represent an axis: two chords that differ in quality but are closely related in their pitch constitution (see Fig. 1).14

Although the pursuit appears to be narratively static, it ostensibly establishes Scottie as controlling agent, in terms of both the narrative (we see what he sees) and the gaze (through watching he controls someone who is unaware that she is being watched). In short, the act of pursuit at once facilitates spectatorial identification with Scottie and appears to establish him as the agent of narrative control. On another
level, however, Scottie’s voyeuristic pursuit of Madeleine inevitably bestows on her a degree of control. For although we experience narrative through Scottie’s eyes, it is specifically Madeleine’s narrative. Scottie’s willingness to follow her wherever she goes implies a surrender of narrative control. This narrative ambivalence (Scottie simultaneously controls and is controlled by narrative) is reflected in the harmonically ambivalent V⁷–Fr⁶ axis. By refusing to resolve either of these dissonant chords to a consonance, Herrmann offers no musical-narrative conclusion, instead maintaining, like Hitchcock, Scottie’s (and our) ambivalent state.

Retrospectively, Scottie’s desire to control through pursuit may be compared to our desire to reconstruct (and thereby control) the disembodied woman depicted during the prelude. Musically, too, the prelude may be considered the origin of the V⁷–Fr⁶ axis, for the essential gestures
are the E-flat-minor spiraling arpeggios (a potential realization of the \( V^7 \)) and the love theme in A minor (a potential realization of the Fr\(^6 \)). True, these potential realizations of the \( V^7-Fr^6 \) axis occurred before the axis itself was first heard, but this does not invalidate the observation. The need to look into the past to make sense of the present and to reassess the past in light of the present is a narrative device employed often by Hitchcock in his efforts to keep the spectator constantly unsettled.

Scottie’s pursuit of Madeleine unfolds as a struggle to reestablish narrative agency within the context of her increasingly irrational wanderings, a process that owes much to Herrmann’s music. For example, in one sequence Scottie follows Madeleine to Mission Dolores (“The Mission”), enters, walks through the church (“Mission Organ”) to the graveyard, and observes Madeleine looking intently at a gravestone, which we subsequently learn belongs to Carlotta Valdes (“Graveyard”). Filmed entirely without dialogue, we are particularly receptive to music as an indicator of significant narrative events.

“The Mission,” heard as Scottie pulls up outside the whitewashed church, is a harmonically static cue with pedal A-flat and B-flat providing an axis around which revolves a scalar melodic line. In combination with the pedal tones, this line constitutes a variant on the \( V^7-Fr^6 \) axis. Deprived of tonal context and therefore directionless in terms of the musical narrative, it complements Scottie’s labyrinthine pursuit of Madeleine perfectly. Also noteworthy is the vertiginous descent musically rendered over three octaves, from high winds to low strings, escorting us, as it were, to the graveyard.

“Mission Organ” is one of the least characteristic cues in the score, insofar as it is explicitly tonal (A minor) and exhibits complete closure through a perfect authentic cadence (see Ex. 5). Moreover, it is the only cue that uses a church organ, a natural choice that effectively signifies location and provides a comforting timbral shift after the unsettling Hammond organ of the previous cue.\(^{15}\) Despite the tonal bias, however, this cue is linked to the previous one by a further musical evocation of the vertiginous descent. This time the effect is achieved by means of a sequence, although one that, in traversing the musical ground from tonic minor to tonic minor, and without the suspended sevenths with which it is customarily associated, leaves us with the teasing sensation that we are being led somewhere (musically, narratively), only to discover that we have made no progress at all, much like Scottie as he follows Madeleine’s every step.

“Graveyard” contrasts strongly with the previous cue and separates internal and external space. Tonal harmony has been replaced by chromatic harmony, and a single timbral entity (the organ) has been re-

placed by the stratified and unblending timbres of muted violins and bass clarinets. The registral gulf that separates the groups of instruments seems to reflect the incompatibility of the ethereal (irrational) Madeleine with the earthly (rational) Scottie, while the high violins playing a variant of Madeleine’s theme in intentionally saccharine thirds provide an apt musical analog to the soft-focus photography. As with the prior cues, musical progress is an illusion: cadences, such as they are, come to rest on second-inversion chords; the violin lines seem to repeat material, but
with subtle alterations; the violins gently hone in on a specific dyad, only to treat that dyad as nothing more than a momentary resting point; the bass clarinets briefly allude to a clear tonal progression (I–IV–ii–V–I), although the notion of a clearly defined tonic is meaningless in the context of the entire cue.16 The cue even alludes to the tritone axis of the prelude, since it begins in A minor and ends in E-flat minor; but because it lacks a clear sense of tonal progression, the cumulative effect is of a moment frozen in time.

For the sequence described above, Herrmann composed three musically distinct, yet functionally similar cues. Each presents a musical evocation of the endless spiraling depicted by the images and music of the opening prelude. It is not by chance that a descending registral motion prevails in each cue, as this conveys at once the sensation of vertiginous descent and a sense of anticlimax, of a narrative promise left unfulfilled. Ostensibly, then, the music has informed us of nothing new, narratively speaking, instead reinforcing the sensation that we are experiencing (with Scottie) a series of bizarre and impenetrable events. But to stop here is to miss the real importance of the sequence and its attending cues. For the first time, Scottie has left his own rational space (modern San Francisco) and entered Madeleine’s irrational space (the Gothic graveyard). As we have already seen, the shift is effectively rendered through the photographic composition of the graveyard scene, but it is no less effectively conveyed through music. From the jarring, tonally ambivalent sonorities of the first cue, through the tonal harmony of the second, to the fluid chromaticism of the third, Herrmann transports us musically from an alienating to an inviting sound world, analogous to the shift from a rational to an irrational narrative space. In other words, we, the rational spectators, find ourselves being seduced, like Scottie, by the irrational story of Madeleine and Carlotta.

Yet the sequence described above includes one last cue, heard as Scottie sees the gravestone with the name “Carlotta Valdes” carved on it. “Tombstone” is a mini-reprise of the first of the three cues we considered in this section, “The Mission,” and is the first to privilege a narrative event, a fortissimo dynamic forcefully registering the importance of Scottie’s discovery.17 This contrasts sharply with the previous three cues, all of which range from pianississimo to piano. In addition to the narrative import of this cue, one may observe that by reprising the V⁷–F₆ axis, the final cue is linked to the rational narrative space of the first cue, creating a musical-narrative frame (see Fig. 2). The discovery provides Scottie with his first clue, buoying him in his role of rational foil to Madeleine’s irrational state and reaffirming (the illusion of) his narrative control. In summary, through the entire sequence the irrational (person-
Ambivalence and Order in Vertigo

Figure 2. The V\textsuperscript{7}–Fr\textsuperscript{6} axis as musical-narrative frame.

ified by Madeleine) exerts an increasing degree of narrative control, a threat averted by the final cue, which reasserts the rational (personified by Scottie) narrative perspective.

Second Movement: Claiming Madeleine

If Scottie's pursuit of Madeleine during the first movement of the film is signified by the V\textsuperscript{7}–Fr\textsuperscript{6} axis, the chord that dominates the second movement (in which fascination has been superseded by infatuation) extends, and yet subverts, that axis. It is the "Tristan chord," a chord richly coded in musical and extramusical associations, and Herrmann reproduces it pitch-for-pitch as it is first heard in the prelude to Richard Wagner's Tristan und Isolde.\textsuperscript{18}

From Wagner [I learned]:

1. The way it is possible to manipulate themes for expressive purposes and the art of formulating them in the way that will serve this end.
2. Relatedness of tones and chords.
3. The possibility of regarding themes and motives as if they were complex ornaments, so that they can be used against harmonies in a dissonant way.\textsuperscript{19}

Although these are not the words of Bernard Herrmann, but rather of Arnold Schoenberg, they seem particularly apposite in the context of Herrmann's score for Vertigo. Indeed, it is the "relatedness of tones and chords" that makes the complete V\textsuperscript{7}–Fr\textsuperscript{6}–Tristan axis so musically compelling and yet so malleable. Our interest in Schoenberg does not end here, for in Theory of Harmony he discusses tonal contexts for the "vagrant" Tristan chord, vagrant chords being those that "create new routes and new modes of travel."\textsuperscript{20} His discussion reveals that in the context of Wagner's prelude, the Tristan chord acts as a pre-dominant chord
leading to a $V^7$ of A minor, and that the Tristan chord may also function as a $ii^7$ (again, pre-dominant) chord in a cadential progression in E-flat minor (see Fig. 3).

Although these tonal contexts link the Tristan chord harmonically with the tritone (E-flat minor–A minor) axis of the prelude, the real value of this chord, as with both the $V^7$ and Fr$^6$, is its tonal ambivalence. Though founded in tonality, the complete axis defies any single tonal context (see Fig. 4). Indeed, a clear sense of tonality is so successfully obfuscated that each chord is rendered little more than a tonal artifact. The resulting conflict—the chords can resolve in any number of ways, or not at all—creates a tension that Herrmann, like Wagner, sustains for all but a few key moments. Such tension not only reflects musically the Scottie-Madeleine quandary (their love is incapable of fulfillment), but also enables the spectator to share in the experience of that quandary.

\[\text{Figure 3. Tonal contexts of the Tristan chord.}\]

\[\text{Figure 4. The } V^7-\text{Fr}^6-\text{Tristan axis.}\]
That Herrmann felt the influence of Tristan strongly is established from the very beginning of the second movement, in which the allure of idealized love is especially powerful. The camera pans slowly around Scottie’s apartment, revealing Madeleine’s wet clothes hanging in the kitchen and then Madeleine herself, asleep in Scottie’s bed.21 The accompanying cue, “Sleep,” scored, like “Madeline,” for strings only, consists of a series of Tristan chords, each resolving to a C-minor chord. The vertiginous descent that foreshadows the ultimate fate of Scottie’s obsession is very much in evidence here, the registral compass of four octaves traversed by violins, violas, and finally cellos coming to rest on the cello’s lowest note, the open C string.

The same descending gesture begins the next cue, “By the Fire,” although this is interrupted by a variant of “Madeline,” as Madeleine appears in the doorway dressed in Scottie’s robe. When she leaves his apartment while he is on the phone (“Exit”), the gesture is repeated, but this time with a slightly altered resolution, the highest voice of the divisi violins reaching upward to C; this subtly emotive effect recalls Schoenberg’s comment on the manipulation of themes for expressive purposes. The sforzando articulation imubes the Tristan chord with the quality of a stinger, a signifier of Scottie’s anguish at her leaving and an indication of his deepening obsession with Madeleine (see Ex. 6).22

By invoking Tristan, Herrmann anticipates musically a narrative element that arises only in the latter part of the film, and then only implicitly: the potential for the fulfillment of love in death. This is borne out by the few subsequent appearances of the Tristan chord in the second movement, which, placed with great precision vis-à-vis the dialogue, firmly establish a connection between love and death. In “The Forest,” Scottie directs Madeleine to a cross-section of a tree that has been cut down. As she peruses the dates, a single statement of the Tristan chord is heard as the inscription “1066 Battle of Hastings” comes into view. Shortly thereafter Madeleine points to the cross-section: “Somewhere in here I was born . . . and there I died. It was only a moment for you . . . you took no notice.” Later in the same cue, having stressed vehemently the inevitability of her death, another Tristan chord is heard as Madeleine pleads, “Promise me something . . . promise you won’t ask me again. Promise me that.” Yet the most explicit connection between the Tristan chord and death is in the next cue, “The Beach,” in which a downwardly spiraling sequence accompanies Madeleine as she recalls for Scottie her recurring nightmare. At the words, “It’s an open grave . . . and I stand by the gravestone looking down into it . . . it’s my grave,” the sequence abruptly ends, replaced by the Tristan chord, a musical non sequitur emphasized by the displacement of strings by low
winds.

On this occasion the chord is no longer stable, nor does it resolve to a concluding triad. Rather, it oscillates back and forth with the $V^7$ chord, an unnerving effect that seems to undermine the rational order previously imposed by the $V^7-Fr^6$ axis. It is as though the boundary separating Scottie's rational world from Madeleine's irrational world is being gradually eroded, and his identity is becoming increasingly bound to her own.

Like the "Graveyard" sequence discussed earlier, the two cues that follow address the threat posed to Scottie's rational order from control by the irrational. In "3 A.M.," we see Scottie crossing empty streets; the presence of the love theme enables us to diagnose a deepening obsession with Madeleine as the cause of his insomnia. Violas yield to cellos as the theme descends over three octaves, linking the obsession to the maelstrom of Scottie's vertigo. In "The Dream" Scottie is woken by Madeleine, who recounts her dream for him. The violins, in thirds, recall "Graveyard," luring Scottie into Madeleine's irrational world. Correctly decoding her clues, Scottie identifies the location that she describes: "You're going to be all right now, Madeleine. Don't you see, you've given me something to work on now? I'm going to take you down there to that mission this afternoon. And when you see it, you'll remember when you saw it before, and it'll finish your dream, it'll destroy it. All right?" Unlike the "Graveyard" sequence, however, this one has no reprise of the $V^7-Fr^6$ axis to acknowledge the force of Scottie's rational perspective. Instead, the violins, in thirds, return, thereby undoing the order that he has imposed on Madeleine's dream. Convinced by the logic of his argument, Scottie eagerly anticipates the next day, enjoying for the moment the triumph of his rational narrative. But like Madeleine herself, the triumph is merely an illusion.

**Third Movement: (Re)constructing "Madeleine"**

And now there were no bounds to the longing, the desire, the bliss and the anguish of love: the world, power, fame, glory, honour, chivalry, loyalty, friendship, all swept away
like chaff, an empty dream; only one thing is left alive: yearning, yearning, insatiable desire, ever reborn—languishing and thirsting; the sole release—death, dying, extinction, never more to wake! (From Wagner’s description of the action of Tristan and Isolde)24

It is with an impassioned, quasi-Wagnerian tone that Judy composes her confessional letter during the third movement of the film. In it, she evaluates the success of Elster's scheme: "He planned it so well . . . he made no mistakes.” Her next comments usher in the Tristan chord: “I made the mistake. I fell in love. That wasn’t part of the plan. I’m still in love with you, and I want you so to love me.” She is alone in her room, so her address to Scottie is heard only by the audience, an alienating effect complicated further when she turns to face the camera. Feminist critics have interpreted this moment as severing our identification with Scottie.25 As Wood explains, however, “From here on we shall be watching him as much as watching with him. But our involvement with him has been such that this is in essence like watching ourselves, and what we see is again, right up to the final clarification, deeply ambiguous.”26 Thus, our identification with Scottie is not severed but rather compromised by the nature of Judy’s confession. Judy seems to have no suspicion of what is to come; her fear is surely of rejection, not recrimination or death. Her love is pure and unfettered, and her desire to rekindle the relationship with Scottie is not obviously based on an idealized or objectified notion of who or what he is. The confession gives rise to a distressing ambivalence, for while we may share Judy’s hope of reconciliation, we still identify too strongly with Scottie to relinquish the fantasy object that Madeleine symbolized. Later, in “Goodnight,” the love theme is reintroduced as Judy sits in profile before a window, a silhouette with a disconcerting neon-green halo. The gesture is intended to tempt Scottie (and us) to accept her in place of Madeleine, yet like Scottie we can only wish that she really were Madeleine. Not only does Judy fail as a surrogate for Madeleine, but her successful transformation into “Madeleine” will necessarily bring about the end of Scottie’s (and our) fantasy.

This is all the more ironic when we recall that Judy is opposed to the transformation, reluctantly accepting to “wear the darned clothes if you want me to! If you’ll just like me!” She neither demands nor hopes for love and is prepared to concede to a relationship in which she is merely liked, adding later, “I don’t care any more about me.” She is by no means unaware of the real reason for Scottie’s interest in her, however. When Scottie invites her to dinner, she asks, “Why? Because I remind you of her? That’s not very complimentary. And nothing else?” Scottie’s reply is short and to the point: “No.” And yet she accedes to his demands, her compliance over dress merely fuelling Scottie’s obsession.
He turns next to her haircolor, arguing, “It can't matter to you.” Judy's desperate plea (“If I let you change me, will that do it? If I do what you tell me, will you love me?”) is futile, since Scottie has no clear sense of what “it” is that he is doing, or his motive for doing it. Having secured Judy's consent to transform her into Madeleine, he suggests that she “come over and sit by the fire,” a remark all the more chilling for its apparent sensitivity, recalling as it does the words Scottie uttered to Madeleine, as she emerged from his bedroom in his robe. It is as though he is already seeing Judy as Madeleine and can endure her company only on those terms.

At the beauty parlor, Judy undergoes the makeover that will complete her physical transformation into Madeleine (“Beauty Parlor”). The scene, although brief, includes the only reprise of the spiraling contrary-motion arpeggios that dominated the prelude. The musical linking of Judy's makeover with the opening shots of the dislocated face connects the two images, a striking indication of the extent to which Judy has become objectified, less a person than a series of characteristics to be altered (or manipulated) by Scottie. Only now do we grasp the significance of the prelude. Madeleine has been reconstructed according to Scottie's desire, but he will ultimately enjoy neither triumph nor fulfillment. For although Scottie controls Judy, this control is compromised by the perpetual vertiginous descent in which he is trapped. In the conductor's score this short reprise of the prelude carries a rare annotation: “all of the above to be played in a hard brittle manner.” In the narrative context of the film, Herrmann's phrase may be read not merely as a performance instruction, but perhaps also as a reference to the brittle quality of Judy's identity at this unsettling moment.

In the earlier discussion of the prelude it was mentioned that the spiraling figures signifying vertigo were interrupted by the love theme. To describe this motif as a theme is misleading, for it functions more as a cadential gesture, its brevity eliciting an oppressive sense of temporal stasis.27 This quality is a crucial element throughout the “Scène d'amour,” in which successive statements of the love theme accompany Scottie as he waits in Judy's apartment for her return from the beauty parlor. We share his sense of anticipation and wait with him for Judy to return as Madeleine. Hitchcock delays her return for what seems like an eternity, safe in the knowledge that identifying with Scottie, we share his impatience. Yet it must be noted that at this time our identification with Scottie makes us nervous, even uncomfortable. His earlier triumphs—rescuing Madeleine from drowning, falling in love with her—have lately been inverted into his sadistic treatment of Judy. He has not been a hero with whom we might ideally have chosen to identify, and Madeleine's return presents the opportunity for resolution, for Scottie to claim his
object of desire and, subsequently, to reject the obsession. All the while Herrmann's love theme cycles on, an idée fixe inducing the same sense of freefall that characterized the prelude and, because it is scored only for upper-register violins, reminding us of the ethereal, ghostly, and irrational world that Madeleine represents. It is a world to which Scottie seems ready to release himself. Finally, he sees her through the window, walks through to the corridor outside her hotel room, and waits for her to arrive via the elevator.

It is significant that Herrmann announces “Madeleine’s” arrival with the Tristan chord, since the chord has come to signify the ambivalence (fear of falling and desire to fall; fear of the irrational and desire for the irrational) that is so central to the film. Does it represent Scottie’s poignant yearning, or the connection between love and death? The answer lies in the resolution to a dominant ninth (with an E root), a chord that admirably captures our disappointment upon realizing that “Madeleine’s” hair is not quite right. Instead of suggesting a musical sigh (in the manner of earlier resolutions of the Tristan chord to C minor), it conveys a sense of anticlimax (see Ex. 7). Like Scottie, we will have to wait a while longer before the fantasy can be fully realized.

The sequence that begins with “Madeleine” fixing her hair, then emerging ghostlike from the bathroom, and ending with the vertiginous kiss represents an extraordinary visual and musical accomplishment. Every aspect of the cinematic composition is designed to bring Scottie’s (our) dream to life. The scene is rendered otherworldly by the low glow of the green neon light from the Empire Hotel. As “Madeleine” enters the room, her ghostly appearance (gray suit, pale blond hair) is heightened by the use of a fog filter (a sheet of smoked glass in front of the camera lens, which is gradually removed as she moves toward Scottie). Her gestures and gait are now those of Madeleine. Hitchcock places his actors on a rotating platform, and when Scottie and Madeleine kiss, their spinning is a reminder of the spiral as signifier of vertigo, of the simultaneous fear of falling and desire to fall. As the camera tracks around them, the backdrop of the cheap hotel room is replaced by the livery stable at San Juan Bautista. Judy’s space is rejected in favor of Madeleine’s space, the triumph of the (irrational) dream over reality. For a moment Scottie breaks from the kiss, aware that this cannot be happening, but the dream is too strong, the fantasy too desirable, and he refuses to cede to his doubts. Scottie has, albeit fleetingly, reconstructed Madeleine down to the last detail.

The importance of music in this scene cannot be overstated (see Ex. 8). Tremolo strings, the classic signifier of suspense, play melodic fragments that are immediately repeated (mm. 47–54). The love theme makes a fleeting appearance (mm. 51–52) but is subsumed within the
larger goal of working toward the musical and narrative climax. The climax itself comprises two statements of the love theme by full orchestra (mm. 60–63), followed by an ascending sequence based upon a fragment from the love theme. Like the sequences of Tristan, Herrmann’s seemingly endless sequences act as a signifier of the erotic, albeit with the promise of climax stubbornly delayed. The striving for a registral higher melodic goal relentlessly increases tension, inverting the vertiginous descent, yet conveying the same feeling of a total loss of control. We no longer have a sense of where the sequence will end, since musical logic has been cast aside. Instead, we wait impatiently for the reprise of the love theme (mm. 74–77). No sooner does the theme return than it is discarded in favor of another series of concentrated melodic figures, culminating in another rising sequence (mm. 98–105). After the final statement of the love theme (m. 110), the cue progresses in a forceful manner toward a majestic C-major close. The ending is so determinedly upbeat that it stands in stark contrast to much of the rest of the score, musically reinforcing the triumph of illusion over reality, of the irrational over the rational: by possessing Madeleine, Scottie is himself wholly possessed.

**Coda: Destroying the Imaginary**

I have to go back into the past. Once more. Just once more. For the last time.

... One doesn’t often get a second chance. I want to stop being haunted. You’re my second chance, Judy. You’re my second chance.

... Too late... it’s too late... there’s no bringing her back.
Example 8. continued
Example 8. continued
In the coda to Vertigo, the vertiginous descent, until now conveyed visually, musically, and narratively, is finally conveyed verbally through Scottie’s repetitive monologue as he forces Judy up the tower steps. Like the obsessive music of the “Scène d’amour,” Scottie’s repetition of key words and phrases adds emphasis to his speech but also suggests the ranting of a madman. All his questions are rhetorical and, since her guilt has already been determined, Judy is afforded no opportunity to respond. On the only occasion that she manages a full response (“I was safe when you found me, there was nothing that you could prove! . . . I walked into danger and let you change me because I loved you and I wanted you!”), her rational argument (reminiscent of Scottie’s attempts to reason with Madeleine) contrasts with the irrationality of Scottie’s responses (themselves reminiscent of Madeleine’s trances).

This apparent reversal reasserts the intractable nature of Scottie and Judy’s relationship and confirms the fusion of Scottie’s identity with that of Madeleine, presaged by Scottie’s nightmare following Madeleine’s death, in which he sees himself in the role that she had described, walking toward an open grave. The sequence binds Scottie’s identity to Madeleine’s and in doing so makes her reincarnation unfeasible. Although he needs to recreate Madeleine in order to possess her physically, the successful completion of such a project will necessarily kill Madeleine as a fantasy object. If Scottie loses Madeleine, he loses, in effect, himself. His anger at Judy is therefore in part a reaction to the loss of his own identity.

But there is another aspect of Scottie’s monologue that cannot be overlooked. His resentment is based primarily on the realization that Gavin Elster has been there before him and did an even better job of creating the ideal female object: “He made you over, didn’t he? He made you over just like I made you over. Only better. Not only the clothes and the hair, but the looks and the manner and the words!” Scottie is forced to acknowledge that his idealized woman, his fantasy, was not his own creation. Whether or not Elster intended for Scottie to fall in love with Madeleine is irrelevant; the point is that it was Elster who constructed her persona: “Did he train you? Did he rehearse you? Did he tell you exactly what to do, what to say? You were a very apt pupil too, weren’t you! You were a very apt pupil!” She was, we discover, originally in love with Elster, the man who, we now recall, reflected nostalgically on the San Francisco of old (“power, freedom”), when a man could discard his wife and steal her child: “Oh, Judy! With all of his wife’s money and all that freedom and that power. And he ditched you.” When Scottie demands of Judy, “But why did you pick on me? Why me?” he is asking the wrong person, and he probably knows the answer. Elster knew Scottie’s weak-
nesses (acrophobia, attraction to vulnerable people) and fully exploited them. As he climbs the steps, therefore, Scottie’s anger is exacerbated by the realization that his fantasy was not his own—the final humiliating step in the process of emasculation.

The sequence of events that begins with Scottie recognizing the necklace and ends with Judy’s fall from the tower comprises three cues: “The Necklace,” “The Return,” and the finale. The stinger on muted horns that heralds the beginning of the end (“The Necklace”) does more than simply alert us to the fact that Scottie has recognized the necklace. By delaying the stinger until we see the necklace in the mirror, Herrmann preserves the spectator’s identification with Scottie. Just as the early point-of-view shots caused us to pursue Madeleine through Scottie, so too do we see the necklace from his subject position, and our shock is registered simultaneously with his. But what is the nature of this shock? After all, we have been privy to the Judy-Madeleine connection for some time. Our shock arises from the realization that our identification with Scottie has been compromised and rendered ambivalent. It is as though we occupy two spectatorial positions, one in which we identify with Scottie (and are thus complicit in his actions and reactions), and one in which we are separate from him, watching him and judging him from an objective, critical distance. In effect, we are distressed both by sharing in Scottie’s shock and by the potential repercussions of this shock. It is a situation from which we seek escape, through narrative and musical resolution. As Scottie drives Judy to the scene of her crime, a series of Tristan chords is heard, although instead of resolving the effect is rather of harmonic planing to a transposed Tristan chord, followed by a return to the original chord. The tension mounts as we await a satisfactory resolution that never comes.

“The Return” begins after Scottie informs Judy, “I have to tell you about Madeleine now.” The entire cue consists of a series of rhythmically identical chromatic gestures, interrupted by desperate reprises of the climax from the “Scène d’amour,” and two attacks of vertigo (with attendant dissonant chord cluster). The intensity of the repeating rhythmic gesture and its quasi-sequential development is matched by the increasingly dense scoring, culminating in a nihilistic unison statement for strings. Following this cue, much of Scottie’s frantic monologue is unscored, including, significantly, his triumph over vertigo. That Herrmann should have decided not to score this section may at first seem unusual, for the point of the exercise was ostensibly to conquer vertigo. But while Scottie has overcome his acrophobia, his vertigo persists as an inability to come to terms with his lack of control. This, it becomes clear, is what is really at stake, evidenced by Scottie’s instruction to
Judy—“We’re going up to look at the scene of the crime”—at which the final cue begins.

In the finale, Herrmann’s scoring subtly reflects the dialogue between Scottie and Judy and supports the inevitable conclusion that their situation is irresolvable. When, for instance, Scottie grasps the full significance of Elster’s relationship with Judy (“You were his girl”), the strings—associated with Madeleine from the moment she was introduced to us—drop out entirely. When Scottie’s voice breaks as he pleads, “You shouldn’t have been . . . you shouldn’t have been that sentimental. I loved you so, Madeleine,” the strings reenter, reprising in vain the love theme. As though encouraged by the presence of the theme, Judy argues her case, accompanied by music heard earlier in the “Scène d’amour.” At the words, “You love me now. Keep me safe,” however, an unsettling, obsessive chromatic motif from the previous cue returns, effectively denying the feasibility of her request. The final quotation from the “Scène d’amour” comes, as Scottie says, “too late” to save Judy, and the arrival of the nun cuts the music off abruptly, forcing us to listen to Judy’s terrified scream.

Epilogue: Music and the Male Stare

This article began with the image of Scottie looking at Madeleine in Ernie’s and ends with the image of Scottie looking once again at the object of his obsession. What has changed is our desire to share in this looking. For the seductive male gaze has been replaced by an empty stare that arouses in us a disturbing ambivalence: is it a stare of disbelief, or the stare of a man who seeks closure, who, in effect, wants to be sure she is really dead? Disturbing though it may be, the latter conclusion becomes not only plausible but increasingly likely when we take into account the defiant close on C major, which links the death of Judy with Scottie and Madeleine’s embrace in “The Beach,” and with the long kiss of the “Scène d’amour.” Just as these events represented the claiming and the reconstruction of Madeleine, respectively, so Judy’s death becomes by association a similarly triumphant moment.

Musically, the C-major close is a striking and largely unexpected gesture, for Herrmann largely avoids C major throughout the score, saving it for these three crucial moments.30 Once again his source may be Tristan, for not only does the Tristan chord lead to a C-major triad, according to the principles of semitone voice-leading, but the second phrase of the prelude to act 1 comes to rest on a V7 of C (major), contrasting with the A (minor) orientation of the first phrase (see Fig. 5).31
In choosing the key of A minor for the love theme and C major for the moments of emotional consummation, Herrmann may have been alluding to act 1 of Tristan in its entirety, since “A and C . . . act as the double-tonic complex governing the structure of the whole of Act I.” Moreover, just as the central theme of Tristan is the dual impulse of love and death, so it is with Vertigo. At its final appearance, C major signifies both consummation and death and becomes linked via the Tristan chord to the love theme in A minor. The V7–Fr6–Tristan axis is thus complete (see Fig. 6).

Justifying C major programmatically, however, does not account for its narrative effect. Why should Herrmann wish to forge a connection between the triumph of the “Scène d’amour” and the death of Judy? The answer lies in what follows the “Scène d’amour,” when Scottie recognizes the necklace. Not only does this recognition negate the triumph of Madeleine’s reconstruction, but it also proves a devastating, emasculating revelation. For in this moment, all the gestures (both narrative and musical) that have established Scottie as the rational, controlling agent are exposed as components of Elster’s plan. It can be seen that, retrospectively, the introduction of Madeleine at Ernie’s was contrived by Elster to show her off to best effect. The graveyard sequence that enabled Scottie to exercise his inductive reasoning and thereby to reassert narrative control is likewise revealed to have been part of a narrative constructed by Elster specifically for the ingenuous Scottie’s consumption. The fact that Scottie proved such a compliant pawn in Elster’s machinations merely underlines the degree of control Elster exercised and, by implication, the extent to which Scottie has been emasculated. The ultimate triumph is Elster’s.

Throughout Vertigo, death has been associated with the emasculating force of Scottie’s acrophobia. It has led directly to the death of a colleague and indirectly to the death of Madeleine. Paradoxically, however, the death of Judy provides the means by which Scottie’s masculinity may be reestablished. On the fallacy of wish fulfillment, Slavoj Žižek explains, “the realization of desire does not consist in its being ‘fulfilled,’ ‘fully satisfied,’ it coincides rather with the reproduction of desire.” In other
words, Scottie's error lay in seeking to realize his fantasy. Since Judy's reincarnation as Madeleine threatened to destroy Madeleine as object, her death reinstates Madeleine's object status, reaffirming Scottie's role as controlling agent. Disturbing though it may be, C major thereby signifies a triumph, albeit a perverse one. As Scottie looks down at Judy's dead body, his stare restores to him the role of active looker: the narrative agent.

A film that takes as its raison d'être the objectifying nature of the male gaze and the obsessive nature of voyeurism, Vertigo would seem to stack the deck very much in favor of its male protagonist and, through identification, the spectator. Yet the same identificatory processes (visual and musical) to which we as spectators acquiesced have been irredeemably problematized. In seeing Madeleine through Scottie's eyes we have become complicit in his looking and thus remain implicated in his subsequent actions. We have, through Scottie, assumed narrative control, but we have suffered with him Elster's appropriation of that control. It is significant that as Scottie looks down at Judy's dead body, we are neither able, nor would we want, to see what he sees. In this moment, our already compromised identification is finally severed, forcing us to witness from a distance the culmination of Scottie's (and our) obsession, sickeningly affirmed by Herrmann's triumphant C-major chord.

Figure 6. Ultimate resolution of the V⁷-F⁶-Tristan axis.
Notes

I am indebted to Graham Bruce, Christina Gier, Bryan Gilliam, Simon Hay, and Scott Lindroth for their insightful readings of and comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

1. Reviewing the film for the New Yorker, John McCarten wrote: “Alfred Hitchcock, who produced and directed this thing, has never before indulged in such farfetched nonsense.” Along similar lines, Time magazine dubbed the film “another Hitchcock and bull story.” Quoted in Dan Auiler, Vertigo: The Making of a Hitchcock Classic (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 173. Even praise for the film was generally qualified by concerns regarding what was thought to be a most confusing plot.

2. Hitchcock and Herrmann first worked together on The Trouble with Harry (1955). Their collaboration came to an acrimonious end when Hitchcock rejected Herrmann’s score for Torn Curtain (1966).


4. The movements are (1) up to and including Madeleine’s jump into the San Francisco bay; (2) up to and including Madeleine’s fall from the tower; and (3) up to and including the “Scène d’amour.” The coda refers to events following the recognition of the necklace. This division of the film is close to that proposed by Robin Wood, Hitchcock’s Films Revisited (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 109–10.


7. Musical movements will be designated by their cue names as they appear in the conductor’s (short) score, housed in the Music Department of the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (LOC-Music 3449, Item 378). A chronological list of Herrmann’s cues can be found in the appendix. (The cues are not collated in strict chronological order in the conductor’s score.) I wish to thank the music librarians for their help during my visits. Throughout the score, Madeleine is spelled as “Madeline.”

8. Cooper offers an instructive analysis of “Madeline,” in which he discusses the cue in relation to the prelude from Wagner’s Tristan and Isolde; see Cooper, 87–90. Noting the similarities (string-based orchestration, slow tempo, emphasis on suspensions) between the two pieces, it is tempting to regard the adagietto movement from Mahler’s Symphony no. 5 as an alternative model for “Madeline.” Mahler’s movement is used extensively in Visconti’s Death in Venice (1971) in which it is linked to the main character, Gustav von Aschenbach, a rational man who finds himself irrationally attracted to a young boy. One suspects that, as for Scottie, it is the simultaneous desire for and fear of consummation that makes the relationship so compelling.


10. The notion that “Madeline” is intended as an extension of the character is reinforced by Herrmann’s subsequent treatment of the theme. In “The Beach,” the theme is alluded to only through the first few notes and the overall contour of the melodic arch and is otherwise largely unrecognizable. It is replaced by an ever-descending sequence that accompanies her story of “walking down a long corridor . . . at the end of which I
see an open grave . . . my grave." Herrmann has conveyed Madeleine’s breakdown musically, her theme no more capable of maintaining its poise and direction than she is of sustaining her persona. After Madeleine falls from the tower at San Juan Bautista, "Madeleine" is never heard again in its original form. The absence of her theme throughout the third movement undermines the apparent success of Scottie’s attempts to reconstruct Madeleine. Bruce provides an insightful analysis of Herrmann’s score as an exploration of motives and gestures derived from “Madeleine”; see Bruce, 142–70.

11. Annual reruns of It’s a Wonderful Life (dir. Frank Capra, 1946) have sustained this popular image of James Stewart for subsequent generations of film audiences.

12. Wood, 110. Scottie’s acrophobia is but one manifestation of ambivalence, a trait shared by the women in the film. Midge breaks off her engagement with Scottie but makes clear her enduring love for him, while Judy begins her confessional letter: “And so you found me. This is the moment that I dreaded and hoped for.” What separates Scottie from Midge and Judy is his unwillingness (or inability) to acknowledge this ambivalence.

13. The V7 chord on B-flat initially lacks an F, although this note is added to the chord as it appears in subsequent cues.

14. By using the term “axis” I mean to imply that Herrmann moves freely from one chord to another.

15. The conductor’s score indicates that the Hammond organ part was originally conceived for a Novachord. According to Cooper, however, Herrmann’s orchestra included only a Hammond organ; see Cooper, 75.

16. The progression (mm. 11–15) operates within the context of D-flat major, although both first and last chords are in second inversion.

17. Dan Auiler reports that Hitchcock insisted this cue include the tolling of the mission bell and instructed his engineers to record the bell sound on the first day of shooting; see Auiler, 132–33. We may speculate that his motivation for doing so was the traditional association of the tolling bell with death (“never send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee” [John Donne, Devotion 17]). This association is made more compelling at the conclusion of the film, for the nun’s immediate response upon witnessing Judy’s death is to sound the bell.

18. References to the “Tristan chord” throughout this article are to the specific root-position half-diminished chord on F heard at the beginning of Wagner’s prelude.


21. Herrmann’s cue clearly tempers our reaction to the image of Madeleine’s wet clothes. We should, indeed, be shocked by the realization that he has undressed her, but instead the cue imbues the act with a Tristanesque ideality. Hitchcock’s panning shot has a similar effect, passing by the clothes as though they are of no more consequence than Scottie’s fireplace.

22. A “stinger” chord is typically a strongly accented chord used to register shock or surprise. Herrmann’s use of the stinger may be traced back to his scores for Orson
Welles’s radio dramas of the late 1930s, in which the absence of a visual dimension rendered music a principal agent of narrative exigency. For a thorough account of their production of Rebecca (1938), see Simon Callow, Orson Welles: The Road to Xanadu (New York: Viking Penguin, 1996), 418–22.

23. Actually, this chord is lacking an F and is therefore not, strictly speaking, a Tristan chord, although register and instrumentation link it firmly with statements of the chord from the previous cue.


27. One recalls in this context the third of Schoenberg’s “Wagner lessons”: “The possibility of regarding themes and motives as if they were complex ornaments, so that they can be used against harmonies in a dissonant way.” Schoenberg, “National Music (2),” 174.

28. In Tristan, Wagner was the first composer to explore the erotic potential of the sequence, a device that aptly conveyed the “yearning, insatiable desire,” that simmers throughout the opera. Herrmann’s obsessive sequences throughout the “Scène d’amour” were doubtless inspired by Wagner’s model.

29. Bruce discusses the “Scène d’amour” in relation to an excerpt from act 2 of Tristan und Isolde, in which Isolde (like Scottie) impatiently awaits the arrival of her lover; see Bruce, 124–29.

30. This observation does not contradict David Cooper’s claim that “the final resolution . . . onto a C-major chord, [settles] it as the score’s tonic,” for Herrmann’s score abounds with altered C-major triads; Cooper, 39. That Herrmann wished to attach particular narrative meaning to the C-major close is, however, confirmed by the close of “Farewell.” Having returned Madeleine to Mission San Juan Bautista to “cure” her, Scottie embraces Madeleine as she pleads, “it’s too late.” Musically, the moment at which she breaks away from Scottie to enter the mission alone is marked by a Tristan chord that resolves to an altered C-major triad: C, E, F-sharp. The denial of the major triad is a small gesture, musically speaking, but it effectively conveys the sense that Scottie’s anticipated triumph has been frustrated.


## Appendix

Herrmann's nondiegetic cues for *Vertigo* (chronological order)

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### Second Movement

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<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>6C</th>
<th>6D–7A–7B</th>
<th>&quot;The Streets&quot;</th>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;Sleep&quot;</td>
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<td>6D–7A–7B</td>
<td>&quot;The Streets&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;By the Fireside&quot;</td>
<td>6C</td>
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<td>&quot;Exit&quot;</td>
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### Third Movement

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<tr>
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<td>&quot;Dawn&quot;</td>
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<td>6D–7A–7B</td>
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<td>10E</td>
<td>&quot;The Past&quot;</td>
<td>6C</td>
<td>6D–7A–7B</td>
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<td>&quot;The Letter&quot;</td>
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<td>6D–7A–7B</td>
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<td>&quot;Goodnight&quot;</td>
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<td>6D–7A–7B</td>
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<td>&quot;The Park&quot;</td>
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<td>6D–7A–7B</td>
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<td>12E–13A</td>
<td>&quot;The Hair Color&quot;</td>
<td>6C</td>
<td>6D–7A–7B</td>
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<td>&quot;Beauty Parlor&quot;</td>
<td>6C</td>
<td>6D–7A–7B</td>
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<td>&quot;Scène d'amour&quot;</td>
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### Coda

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<td>&quot;The Return&quot;</td>
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