

Reassessing the Hitchcock Touch

Industry, Collaboration,
and Filmmaking

Edited by
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CHAPTER 9

The Visual Peak: Saul Bass as Hitchcock’s ‘Pictorial Consultant’

Stefan Jung

Film is all about imagery. It is, of course, also about more than this: the combination of imagery and sound. Ever since the early days of cinema, however, it has been the impact of the visual that most directly affects the spectator’s consciousness. Alfred Hitchcock is widely acknowledged as one of the pioneers of film, which in turn leads us to scrutinize the effects that Hitchcock’s imagery has on us. Film imagery consists of various (mobile) codes of expression which we analyze in terms of their composition, occasionally with the paradoxical effect that, in order to get hold of the moving image, we freeze it, as when we study the *mise en scène* of stills. Like few other art forms, film—as a collaborative medium—relies on a multitude of such codes of expression, and it is the aim of this chapter to survey the collaboration between the various contributors to these codes—as arguably it takes more than one ‘Master of Suspense’ to put a film together; indeed, a whole team is needed.

Filmmakers, even much less talented ones than Hitchcock, have always had to be aware of the possibilities that the works of other artists offer: “[O]ne of Hitch’s strengths was knowing how to choose his

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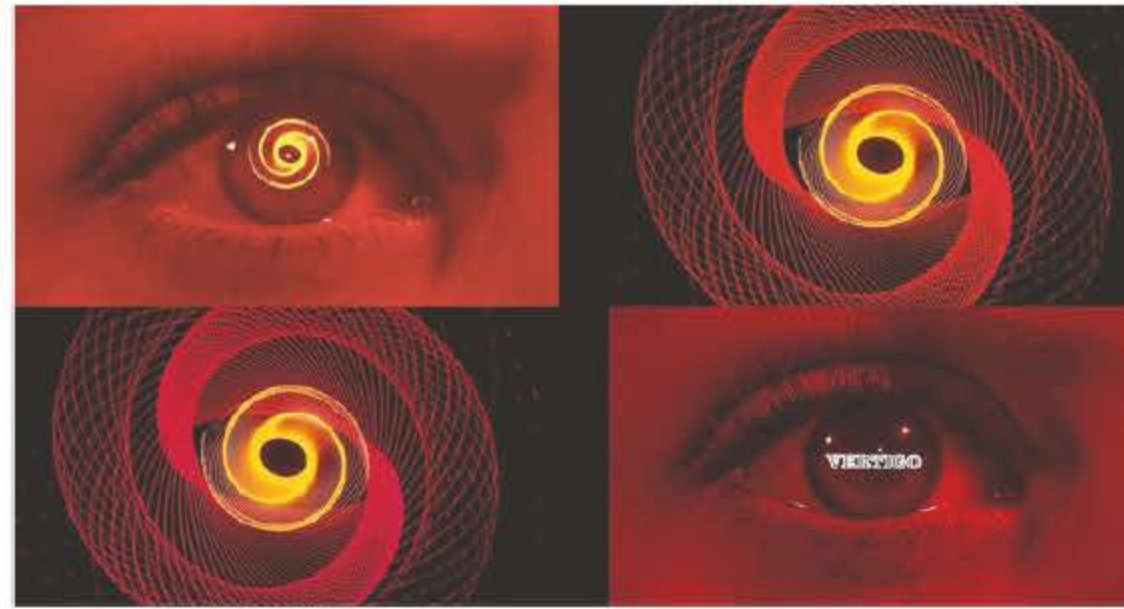


Fig. 9.1 *Vertigo's* opening title sequence

Vertigo

Given that Hitchcock always liked to surround himself with top-notch talent and frequently hired promising young artists on the strength of their latest hits—a strategy which led him to collaborate with composer John Williams immediately after *Jaws* (1975)—it was only logical for him to hire Bass in the mid-1950s. Like Preminger, Hitchcock counted on Bass to provide an iconic image to advertise his next film, and he would end up getting one of the most famous ones there had ever been. In *Vertigo*, Bass was to explore the visual potential of rosettes and circles to anticipate the protagonist's weakness and fear, especially his (visually conditioned) obsession with Madeleine. It is part of Bass's unmistakable style that he establishes all the main plot elements in the title sequence, "grasp[ing] the psychological subtleties of *Vertigo*" so that "his titles function like an overture, compressing the film's themes into a miniature graphic interpretation" (Poynor 119). The sequence highlights how *Vertigo's* two main characters are bound to each other and nevertheless still lose each other—their common fortune being displayed in the sense of absolute dependence, just like the universal yin-and-yang symbol which Bass's work emulates here (Fig. 9.1).