

# The Mormon Review

Books and culture from an LDS Perspective



## The Romance of Materialism: Notes on Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*

Alfred Hitchcock, et al.,  
*Vertigo* (Paramount Pictures,  
1958)

By Joseph M. Spencer

Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) is an unquestionable masterpiece among films. Moreover, one might argue that it serves as a kind of interpretive key for the remainder of the Hitchcock corpus, because it utilizes most radically a filmic trope that appears in films spanning the whole of Hitchcock's career, from at least as early as *The Lady Vanishes* (1938) to as late as his final film, *Family Plot* (1976). I would like to give this trope a name I will explain—namely, “subtractive materialism”—and I would like to spell out its significance in unapologetically Mormon terms.

Though Hitchcock has often been regarded as a Catholic filmmaker—a kind of Flannery O'Connor of film—it seems to me better to regard him as a Freudian, and therefore as an unabashed materialist. That is, though his films are undoubtedly permeated by themes of what might be termed “original sin,” guilt is much more frequently rooted in Hitchcock's films in the determining triangular relationships of the family than it is in a kind of natural or inherited inclination to depravity or evil.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it is a telling fact that

Hitchcock's most overtly Catholic film, *I Confess* (1953), never appeals to the transcendent in its probing of the theme of atonement: sin and redemption are worked out in strictly materialist terms.

If, though, one can point with one hand to *I Confess* as a Hitchcockian film that stages religious questions in a filmic universe that never opens itself to the transcendent, one can and must point with the other hand to the rest of Hitchcock's films, where essentially non-religious questions (most commonly questions of erotic love) are staged in a filmic universe that not only opens itself to, but openly utilizes, the transcendent. The trick, of course, is that Hitchcock's films that deal with the transcendent always do so in a subversive way: the transcendent (the immaterial, the supernatural, the uncanny) is always introduced *only so that it can be undercut*. And it is for this collection of films that *Vertigo* arguably functions as the interpretive key: *Vertigo* most radically demonstrates the filmic mechanism at work in Hitchcock's consistent and consistently materialist exploration—and emphatic rejection—of the transcendent.

The trope or mechanism Hitchcock employs in these films is relatively simple.

First, using especially techniques that encourage psychological identification on the

part of the audience with the main character of the film, Hitchcock slowly lures the viewer

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into the belief that some kind of uncanny explanation lies behind the discomforting plot of the film. In *Vertigo*, this is the belief that Madeleine Elster (Kim Novak) is supernaturally possessed by a dead relative who, because she died at her own hands after going insane, is trying to get Madeleine to kill herself. The audience, at first as reluctant as the main character, Scottie Ferguson (James Stewart), to believe that any such absurdity as demonic possession is possible, is carefully drawn *along with* Scottie eventually into believing that there is indeed some such uncanny explanation for the series of events portrayed.

Second, once Hitchcock has clinched the identification between the audience and the main character, having succeeded in getting the viewer to give her or himself without reserve to his or her fascination with the horrific or forbidden (in *Vertigo*, with the idea of demonic possession), he abruptly—indeed shockingly—reveals the banal material reality of the situation, harshly forcing his audience to face up to the fantastic nature of the fantasy they have (along with the main character) entertained. In *Vertigo*, this comes after Madeleine is dead, when Scottie meets Judy Barton (also Kim Novak), who reminds him of his lost love. The viewer, as deluded as Scottie, believes that Judy really *is* just reminiscent of Madeleine, that is, until Scottie leaves the scene, Judy closes the door, and the film cuts away to a flashback that reveals the *real* plot: Judy *is* Madeleine, and she has been involved in an underhanded murder for which the fantastic story of demonic possession has been merely a cover-up.

The way this disruptive revelation is accomplished in *Vertigo* is filmically remarkable. After a full hour of psychological identification with Scottie, the audience is for the first time left alone with another character, Judy, who turns slowly and looks directly into the camera, directly into the eyes of the viewer—the only time any character does this in the film. As Judy brings the weight of her gaze onto the audience, the picture flashes a startling red, and the flashback that lays bare the ultimate impotence of the fantasy begins. The audience is thus unexpectedly disjoined from its identification with Scottie: he, having left the scene, is not present to learn what the audience painfully comes in an instant to know. Hitchcock thus strips the viewer of her or his identification with Scottie, and so of his or her ability to succumb to the fantasy that still obsesses Scottie. The audience, that is, is left only with the material reality of the plot—but only after having been led, step by careful step, to believe that everything was explainable in terms of the demonic possession that one *really* knew, somewhere inside oneself, *could not* be the case. The viewer, in a word, is forced to recognize how strongly she or he wanted the fantasy—horrific as it was—to be true. And then the viewer is forced for the remainder of the film to watch Scottie’s cruel treatment of Judy, forced to recognize that he or she would have put Judy to the same torment, given the chance, in order to sustain the fantasy.

It is this double mechanism that I am here calling subtractive materialism. It is materialist in that *Hitchcock* ultimately does not posit anything genuinely

immaterial that could explain the plot of the film. But it is subtractive in that it lures the *audience* into believing that some such explanation is indeed available before it scandalously subtracts the very possibility of maintaining that perverse hope.

But what does such subtractive materialism have to do with Mormonism, or how would one spell out its significance in unapologetically Mormon terms?

Hitchcock’s basic materialism—carried over, perhaps, from Freud (certainly not from Catholicism)—might of course be said to correspond to Joseph Smith’s teaching, canonized in D&C 131:7-8, that “there is no such thing as immaterial matter.” But my interest here is primarily in Hitchcock’s *subtractive* materialism, in his directorial decision (1) to invite his audience to look for the immaterial while preparing in the meanwhile (2) to prove the inexistence of the immaterial at a point further along in the viewing experience.

One can, it seems to me, sense something like this at work in Mormonism. Mormonism presents itself without question as a religion—as a model for rightly worshipping God and communing with angels, for seeking revelation and witnessing miracles, for recognizing sin and finding redemption. And yet, if one pursues the Mormonism of Joseph Smith’s Nauvoo—and perhaps especially of Brigham Young’s Utah—to its conclusion, one comes to find that one is dealing with a religion of unflinching immanence that speaks of a corporeal God and of human deification, that understands revelation to be dialogical and miracles to be

grounded in unknown natural laws, that so complicates the question of sin and redemption that Douglas Davies writes anthropologically about the Mormon “cultural dilemma of salvation.” Lured into what she or he originally believed was a model for approaching the transcendent, the convert finds in the end that he or she has embraced a religion of immanence.

This explains, I think, the unflagging work of many Evangelicals to “unmask” Mormonism. Evangelical anti-Mormonism is, often enough, an attempt to subtract from Mormon materialism its subtractive element, that is, to render it a bare—and therefore godless—materialism, an atheism that only *pretends* to a kind of religiosity.

However, it seems to me that Mormonism’s *subtractive* materialism is one of its greatest theological strengths. To be or to become Mormon is, at least in some sense, to pass through a process of recognizing that everything one had initially hoped was absolutely transcendent is actually material, immanent, and therefore *real*. That is, Mormon orthodoxy—by which I have reference not to “Mormonism without creativity” or “Mormonism afraid to explore the implications of its scriptures,” but “Mormonism heavily invested in and faithful to Joseph Smith’s Nauvoo teachings”—calls for a progressive recognition that one’s desires to discover a God to whom one could attribute responsibility for the ills of the world are all misguided. Embracing the romance and the perpetual revolution of Mormon orthodoxy—to speak in the fashion of G. K. Chesterton—is to come to give oneself to a fully

materialist universe in which nothing can be explained by the transcendent, to come to assume the infinite responsibility of taking up the work, with God, of redeeming a world stigmatized by finitude and weakness, to come to see that the world itself can only be redeemed when human beings recognize the significance both of their own immortality and of the finitude and weakness implied in God’s love. In this sense, Mormonism cannot be reduced to bare materialism. But neither can it therefore be pressed into the service of the transcendent.

It is this doubly irreducible Mormon materialism that can be found in the work of the great Mormon theologians: Orson Pratt, B. H. Roberts, John A. Widtsoe, etc. Undeniably spurred by polemical necessity—writing, that is, in response to the kind of Evangelical anti-Mormonism mentioned above—these thinkers have shown themselves to be unwaveringly committed to representing Mormonism *as a religion, as a theology*, even when they have attempted to show Mormonism’s scientifically rigorous rationality. (The only exception of which I am aware is Orson Pratt’s “Great First Cause.” However, it is certainly significant that it was precisely *this* piece that started all the trouble between Pratt and Brigham Young.) Though I do not think it would be fair to describe any of the great Mormon theological works as employing the *mechanism* of subtractive materialism, it seems clear that thinkers like Pratt, Roberts, and Widtsoe *are* fully engaged in defending a Mormon materialism that is structured through and through by the persistent employment of

the mechanism in workaday Mormonism.

That Mormon theology has mustered itself primarily in defense of a doubly irreducible Mormon materialism suggests that Mormonism’s subtractive materialist *mechanism* is just as jarring as Hitchcock’s.<sup>2</sup> Which leads me to make, by way of conclusion to this review, a kind of proposal for a Mormon film—one I would love to see played as much in the Legacy Theater on Temple Square as in commercial venues.

Might the story of Joseph Smith and early Mormonism—or even of contemporary Mormonism, for that matter—be filmically portrayed through the eyes of a character who sees it at first as a transcendentally bestowed means to save her or him from his or her terrible difficulties? The director of such a film—Hitchcock resurrected? the “Mormon film movement,” at any rate, reinvented!—would use every filmic technique possible to create an identification between the audience and the character through whose eyes the story is told. But, in a horrible, climactic/anti-climactic moment, the entire transcendent fantasy (“fantastic Mormonism”) on which the audience would come (through identification) to depend would be cut away, leaving the individual viewer to face up to the Mormon materialist vision of God and the Mormon materialist task of redeeming the world. Whatever would be left of the film after that climax/anti-climax would—like Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*—force the audience to make a decision about what one had before believed Mormonism or even God to be, and so either to recoil in horror at the

monstrosity that is Mormonism, or to rejoice in the glorious task and divine work Joseph Smith set before the world.

Two years of being Mormon, to be experienced in two hours of watching a film . . . .

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<sup>1</sup> Note the heavy emphasis on the mother-son relationship in Hitchcock's greatest films: *North by Northwest* (1959), *Psycho* (1960), and *The Birds* (1963)—not to mention explicit thematizations of Freudian theory and psychotherapy in films like *The Lady Vanishes*, *Spellbound* (1945), and *Marnie* (1964).

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, one might suggest that many of Joseph Smith's difficulties

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both in Kirtland and in Nauvoo were manifestations of how shocking the revelation of Mormonism's investment in immanence can be.

