DOUBLE HAPPINESS

As I was walking, one hot summer afternoon, through the deserted streets of a provincial town in Italy which was unknown to me, I found myself in a quarter of whose character I could not long remain in doubt. Nothing but painted women were to be seen at the windows of the small houses, and I hastened to leave the narrow street at the next turning. But after having wandered about for a time without enquiring my way, I suddenly found myself back in the same street, where my presence was now beginning to excite attention. I hurried away once more, only to arrive by another detour at the same place yet a third time. Now, however, a feeling overcame me which I can only describe as uncanny, and I was glad enough to find myself back at the piazza I had left a short while before, without any further voyages of discovery.

SIGMUND FREUD
"THE UNCANNY"
1919

At the heart of Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) is a crucial scene of pursuit that encapsulates the entire formal device, psychological tension, and existential drama of the film. The sequence enacts, both literally and metaphorically, the unnerving sense of déjà-vu that Freud describes in his essay on "The Uncanny (Das Unheimlich)." Scottie Ferguson is a retired detective who has been hired by a wealthy college classmate, Gavin Elster, to follow his wife Madeleine whom he suspects is haunted by her grandmother's ghost. One day Madeleine jumps into the San Francisco Bay, but Scottie is there to save her. The following day Scottie trails Madeleine's green car through the twisting, winding, curving streets in a confused, seemingly aimless route only to find that he has encircled the city and returned in an ever-tightening spiral to his own home guided by the phallic landmark Coit Tower (aptly chosen for its sly lexical proximity to "coitus"). As Scottie approaches her, we see that Madeleine has slipped a note into his mail slot. She smiles, leans against the railing in front of his apartment, and watches him retrieve the note. He takes it, reads it, and responds:

S C O T T I E I hope we will, too.
M A D E L E I N E What?
S C O T T I E Meet again, sometime.
M A D E L E I N E We have.

The erotic tension between the two is displaced within this brief conversation in a complex temporal embrace where past, present, and future tenses interpenetrate each other. The first line—*I hope we will, too*—signals to a future event that in the process of taking place: Scottie's enunciation coincides with their meeting again. The single interrogative word that makes up the second line—*What?*—causes Scottie to repeat the words that Madeleine is likely to have written (past tense) in her note—that they meet again (future tense), which opens the third line. The word *again*, however, suggests the repetition of their present reunion, which has now happened, at an unspecified sometime in a future yet to come. The past tense that structures the final reply—*We have*—is uttered in a present tense that is both present and tense with the possibility of a future sometime that has just transpired, circling back to the poly-temporality already there in the first line. Like the tortuous drive through the city, like Madeleine's swirling chignon, like Saul Bass' spirographic design in the opening credits, the twisting play with projected, retracted, repeated, spoken, and lapsed verb tenses that unfolds and enfolds in these eleven compact words enacts the vertiginous sense of the uncanny that recurs throughout the film—of being lost, of being disoriented, and of eventually finding oneself at the starting point forevermore transformed.

This multi-temporal lexical embrace unfolds against a minor architectural detail that has escaped the attention of most Hitchcock commentators, that may or may not have been part of the deliberate scheme in Hitchcock's set design, that may ultimately be an inside joke so internal that only a dizzy Chinese Hitchcock enthusiast who has seen the film once too many times would pick up on it. This scene takes place at the site of Scottie's home—the Heimat—framed by the repetition, three times, of 囍(shuangxi), the Chinese ideogram for double happiness hung above the doors of lovers for good fortune. "Now," as Freud wrote, "a feeling overcame me which I can only describe as uncanny." Hitchcock's sense of the uncanny in Vertigo culminates visually in this Freudian slip and articulates itself in Scottie's heterochronic use of the future tense and Madeleine's exquisite reply: "I hope we will, too," "We have." And as with the Unheimlich, once the already-seen—the déjà-vu—slips into view, you find yourself uncontrollably back at the starting point again and you are in that moment forevermore transformed.

Maria H. Loh