Curing Hitchcock's Vertigo:
A Second Dance with Rancière

ABSTRACT:
Building on my previous exploration of the role of dance in the contemporary French political philosopher Jacques Rancière's *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, first published in French in 2011, the present essay turns to another book originally published in the same year, *The Intervals of Cinema*. Having previously established that the core of Rancière's philosophical method is an analysis of philosophical homonyms into figurative dancing conceptual partners, I begin by applying that method to the first chapter of *Intervals*, "Cinematic Vertigo: Hitchcock to Vertov and Back." There I identify two series of such dancing partners, as follows: *Hitchcock's image-controlling, capitalist vertiginous fall*, and *Vertov's movement-equalizing, communist balanced dance*. I then critique the implicit marginalizing of women and female bodies in the films and chapter, including Hitchcock's protagonist's best friend and ex-fiancé, and Vertov's cosmetologists and switchboard operators. Finally, I offer a corrective from the proto-feminist life of my grandmother, a onetime cosmetologist, switchboard operator, and Glamour Shots amateur model, my grandmother, Louise Nunnelley, or "Mamaw." Such are the unacknowledged material basis of Rancière's radical democratic philosophy, the specifically-embodied and positioned female dancers who continue to get lost in his figurative dance.

KEYWORDS: Jacques Rancière; Alfred Hitchcock; Dziga Vertov; *Vertigo*; dance

Building on my previous article on the contemporary French philosopher Jacques Rancière and dance, the present essay deepens that analysis by turning to his film criticism, where I identify an affirmation of figurative dances alongside a marginalizing of women and female bodies of the dancers.[1] To summarize the previous work, Rancière has been criticized for a conception of "politics" that is insensitive to the diminished agency of the corporeally oppressed. In a recent article, Dana Mills locates a solution to this alleged problem in Rancière's *Aisthesis*, in its chapter on Mallarmé's writings on modern dance pioneer Loïe Fuller. First, Mills's reading exacerbates an "homonymy" (Rancière's term) in his use of the word "inscription," which means for him either a vicious literal carving on living bodies ("bodily carving"), or a virtuous figurative carving on nonliving bodies ("corporeal writing") which I take

[1] This is arguably the result, at least in part, of Rancière's Hegelian dialectical heritage, because I have previously explored the same problem in Hegel. See Joshua M. Hall, "St. Vitus' Women of Color: Dancing with Hegel," *Comparative and Continental Philosophy* 9(1): 2017, 43-61.

Mallarmé to affirm in Fuller. Second, Rancière himself misses a homonymy in Mallarmé on Fuller, namely, "dance," meaning either "ballet," or "dance in general" (including Fuller's). Third, Rancière's chapter on Fuller includes another "dance" homonymy, meaning either "concert dance" or what I termed Fuller's new "art of meta-movement." Finally, this latter art is equivalent to Mallarmé's "corporeal writing" and can be understood as a new form of dance education, in pursuit of a worker-dancer utopia.

In the present essay, I first apply Rancière's philosophical method (analyzing philosophical homonyms into figurative dancing partners) to the first chapter of *The Intervals of Cinema*, entitled "Cinematic Vertigo: Hitchcock to Vertov and Back." There, I identify two choruses, or series of conceptual dancing partners, as follows: (1) *Hitchcock's image-controlling, capitalist vertiginous fall*, and (2) Vertov's *movement-equalizing, communist balanced dance*. I then critique Rancière's repetition of what many critics have argued is a marginalizing exploitation of women and female bodies in Hitchcock, including *Vertigo*'s protagonist's best friend and ex-fiancé (played by actor Barbara Bel Geddes), and Vertov's anonymous cosmetologists and switchboard operators.[2] Finally, I offer a corrective to this problem in the proto-feminist figure of a former cosmetologist, switchboard operator, and amateur model, my grandmother Louise Nunnelley, or "Mamaw." In sum, the unacknowledged material basis of Rancière's *The Intervals of Cinema* is the bodies of women—the specifically-embodied and positioned dancers who disappear in his affirming figurative dance.

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[2] For two examples of this critique, see Robin Wood, "Male Desire, Male Anxiety: The Essential Hitchcock," in *A Hitchcock Reader*, ed. Marshall Deutelbaum and Leland Poague (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 223-233; and Tania Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

I. Capitalist Vertigo, Communist Dance

From the first sentence of the chapter of *Intervals of Cinema* on Hitchcock, Rancière returns to the same philosophical method that I identified in my previous article, namely a splitting of concepts into twin dancing conceptual partners. In this case, they are the "two movements" of the (1) "visual unrolling of images specific to cinema" and (2) "the deployment and dissipation of semblances more broadly characteristic of the narrative arts" (10). Here, Rancière chooses Hitchcock's *Vertigo* as "the most perfect synchronization of the two movements," which nevertheless "includes a fault" (19). For readers unfamiliar with the film, its basic plot is as follows.

A lawyer and police detective (nicknamed "Scottie") retires from the force due to vertigo-inducing acrophobia after almost falling to his death, and inadvertently facilitating the death of a fellow officer who attempts to save him. A wealthy businessman old friend ("Gavin") asks Scottie to follow his wife Madeleine to observe her allegedly strange recent behavior. After Scottie's initial observation, Gavin expresses the fear that Madeleine is possessed by her great-grandmother, Carlotta Valdes, a cabaret dancer romanced, impregnated, abandoned, and separated from their child by a wealthy married man, leading to her madness and suicide. When Scottie observes Madeleine fall into the San Francisco Bay, he rescues her, before falling in love with her the next day. And the following day he sees what he believes to be her leaping to hear death from a belltower, failing to save her due to his vertigo. Suffering a blackout and nervous breakdown, Scottie spends a year in a sanatorium, and upon his release sees a woman who looks just like Madeleine, who he later discovers is in fact Gavin's mistress Judy, who had been impersonating Madeleine to him from the beginning, as part of Gavin's conspiracy to disguise his murder of his wife as suicide. But since Judy genuinely fell in love with Scottie, she decides

not to confess the crime, and instead try to make him fall in love with her real self, which fails when his obsession with her Madeleine-resemblance prompts him to give her a makeover, which enables Scottie to solve the murder mystery. Finally, Scottie forces her confession, and cures his vertigo, by returning to the scene of the crime and climbing to the top of the belltower. But just as he embraces her, the figure of a nun emerges from the darkness of the trapdoor entrance, startling Judy into spiraling backward off the edge of the tower and to her death.

Setting up his analysis of *Vertigo*, Rancière claims that, in its opening credits, a "play of abstract spirals weaves a connection between three ovals that enclose suggestive physical features: a pert mouth, a distraught eye, a pretty chignon" (20). However, as attested by another philosopher-interpreter of the film, the credits in fact begin with the shot of a woman's face, shifting to her mouth and then her eye, followed by a series of complex geometric spirals.[3] Thus, Rancière is again subtly erasing women and female bodies. This also happens, in both Rancière and multiple plots summaries online, regarding the very existence of a major supporting character, namely Scottie's best friend and ex-fiancé, the fashion designer and painter Marjorie "Midge" Wood.[4] First, Midge's importance includes being in love with Scottie for the entire film, first suggesting the ultimately successful cure for his vertigo, connecting him with a local bookseller who provides his first clue to solve the film's first mystery, and faithfully attending to him during his rehabilitation at the sanitorium. Second, Midge looks like a less glamorous version of Judy as Madeleine, with a similar height, weight, build, and blonde hair. Third,

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[3] See Robert Pippin, "The Philosophical Hitchcock: 'Vertigo' and the Anxieties of Unknowingness," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 161(4): 2017, 293-298, 295.

[4] Another feminist reading of the film also valorizes Midge, including in the following observation: "In a small way, Midge equilibrizes, she counteracts the vertigo, straitens the wandering, recuperates misalignment, mediates over- and under- stabilization, she restores limit" (70). Deborah Linderman, "The Mise-en-Abîme in Hitchcock's 'Vertigo'," *Cinema Journal* 30(4): 1991, 51-74.

Hitchcock seems to imply that Scottie will ultimately marry Midge after the end of the events depicted in the film, in part because he filmed an alternate ending that concludes with Scottie in Midge's apartment (perhaps rationalizable by a revelation to Scottie that she looks almost as much like "Madeleine" as Judy did).[5] Finally, Midge is the only woman in the movie who takes any initiative or agency in the film, including by stalking Scottie to Madeleine/Judy's apartment, and painting herself as the subject of the *Portrait of Carlotta Valdes* painting central to the film.

Returning to Rancière's analysis, he argues that the film's "narrative logic" will "bring three vertigoes together: Scottie's acrophobia, the murdering husband's manipulation to make his wife appear suicidal, and lastly Scottie's obsessive fascinating with the false Madeleine" (20). Rancière then contextualizes his reading in contrast to Deleuze's famous reading of the film in his *Cinema* books, wherein "Scottie's acrophobia" symbolizes "that paralysis of the driving system – crisis of the movement-image leads to revelation of the time-image," as one of Hitchcock's protagonists who "change from active heroes to passive onlookers" (21-22). By contrast, Rancière—again analyzing homonyms into dancing conceptual partners—distinguishes between "two sorts of 'passivity' and their effects" in *Vertigo*, namely (1) Scottie's vertigo, and (2) Scottie's "fascination with the character pretending to be fascinated by death" (22). It is these two dancing conceptual partners which Hitchcock, according to Rancière, ultimately fails to perfectly unite. Specifically, Rancière criticizes the surrealistic scene of Scottie's nightmare, along with Hitchcock's choice to include two "revelation" scenes (whereas there is only one revelation in the novel on which *Vertigo* is based, the crime thriller *The Living and the Dead* by the French authorial duo Boileau-Narcejac).

[5] For a supporting interpretation, and more on *Vertigo*'s alternate ending, see D. A. Miller, "Vertigo," *Film Quarterly* 62(2): 2018, 12-18, 18.

Pivoting to the novel itself, Rancière notes that "the hero's passion and the murder of the real Madeleine take place in the spring of 1940 as if in prelude to the German tanks about to converge in Paris," and "The discover and killing [by the protagonist] of the false Madeleine take place in Marseille during the collapse of Nazism," an important political context that is entirely lost in *Vertigo* (24). Additionally, the novel "obeys an earlier model [than the film's] and one specific to literature: the story of the fascination with the image and the power lurking behind the image: death, the wish to return to the void" (24). In short, "the nihilist logic of illusion as the real truth of existence" (25). At the level of character, this logic can be seen in the fact that "Everything happens as if the real Madeleine were dragging the woman who has usurped her identity into the abyss," for which Rancière finds literary precedents in the betrayed pastor's wife in Ibsen's play *Rosmersholm* and Wagner's tragic character Isolde (25).

Such a nihilist logic, however, according to Rancière, "is rejected by Hitchcock and his screenwriter" (25). Instead, Hitchcock "reveals himself as the supreme manipulator who invents illusions and vertigos at will," even "at the cost of weakening the imaginative pull of the story" (26). It is the "manipulatory logic" that Rancière finds operative in the vertigos he posits in the opening credits, which reveal "the handicap cinema has in relation to literature," namely that "the art of images struggles to achieve what the art of words can do: subtracting even when adding material" (26). Taking the example of Scottie's surrealist nightmare, Rancière asserts that viewers "know what the weakness is: dream images always have to be signaled as dream images with arbitrary combinations of objects in the same shot, or arbitrary ordering of a sequence of shots" (27). In short, "too much richness is damaging: the dream rhetoric destroys the dream" (27). This leaves the viewer, Rancière concludes, "with neither the falseness of life nor the reality of the dream," but rather—and unsatisfactorily—the director Hitchcock as "the

manipulator of manipulation, the well-meaning conjuror who invents and melts simultaneously into a single continuum the wonders of confusing true with false and dissipating that confusion" (27-28). To paraphrase this difficult sentence, Hitchcock manipulates his manipulative villains, facilitating viewers' both intoxication with, and liberation from, these villains' illusions.

Here, Rancière shifts to his chapter's other primary dance partner, namely the pioneering Soviet filmmaker and film theorist Dziga Vertov (1896-1954). For Rancière, Vertov is the pinnacle of the opposite tendency in film, namely "settling, through the new means of the new means of the truth machine, the conflict between the old poetic logic of realist schemes and the new literary logic of equivalence between truth and falsehood" (28). In other words, Vertov and his followers "set out to deploy a vertigo of the gaze that was neither a fictional expedient nor a life sickness, but an explosion of the energies of a new world" (28-29). This phrase "vertigo of the gaze," however, implicitly privileges the perspective of the camera(man) over that of the subjects, the conjuror-choreographer over the dancers. It is for this reason that I characterize Vertov's opposition to Hitchcock as based on a deeper level—not at the level of vertigo, but at the level of a virtuously healthy way of being (dance) over a viciously unhealthy way of being (vertigo).

Fleshing out his analysis, Rancière turns to Vertov's celebrated masterpiece, *Man with a Movie Camera*, in which viewers "see the camera and the cameraman all the time—as a giant perched on the roof of a building for example, or dwarfishly reflected in a beer glass" (29). In this way, Vertov "asserts a fundamentalist position: rejection of fiction, rejection of the art of storytelling," wherein "cinema is as opposed to stories as truth is to falsehood" (29). More precisely, the "visible" for Vertov is "the place where energies that constitute the truth of a world are made manifest" (29). And this results in a "dual status of the machine-eye," wherein it

"appears first as a supreme manipulator carrying everything into the *dance* it is organizing" (29, emphasis added). Note the first appearance of "dance" here, at the vital point—in Rancière's Aristotelian terminology, the "reversal" [*peripeteia*] of the plot that imposes a surprising resolution on the viewer. This point is also the fulcrum that connects *Aisthesis* to *Intervals*.

For an example of this dancing power in Vertov, several times in *Man with a Movie Camera*, as Rancière observes, the camera "is seen metaphorically in the form of a conjuror who amazes children by making things appear, disappear and change shape" (29). And then at the very end of the film the viewer watches the camera appear independently from out of "its box, place itself on the tripod, and bow to the audience like a conductor, before the crank handle starts turning – by itself – to orchestrate the *ballet* of overprints and vertiginous connections across all kinds of different movements," namely "*dancers' entrechats*, touches on piano and typewriter keys, accelerated gestures of telephone operators pulling and inserting plugs, aircraft in the sky, trams, cars and carriages in the street" (29-30, emphasis added). In this dancing scene, the most important point for Rancière is that everything, including "the treatments in a beauty salon," are "all caught up in one rhythm" (30). In sum, "There are no semblances and no reality," but only "the universal communication of movement, leaving no place for a truth hidden behind appearances nor time for the deadly fascinations of the gaze" (31).

In elaborating on the "rhythm" of Vertov's cinematic dance, Rancière makes the chapter's first explicit connection to the titular *Intervals*. What "Vertov's camera suppresses," Rancière claims, "is the delay or interval that makes it possible for the gaze to put a story to a face," which is precisely the "interval that provokes Scottie's obsession with the false Madeleine" (31). Elaborating on this technique, Rancière claims that the "omnipotence of the machine-eye is thus inverted" in *Man with a Movie Camera*, which inversion "finds an exact

symbol in the telephone exchange, where the operators do nothing but insert and remove the jack plugs that complete communications independently of their will" (31). The result of this alleged involuntary machination, for Rancière, is that the "machine-eye's automatism sidelines the imperialism of the gaze along with its servitude," thereby revealing that its "real power is the power to eliminate: it dismisses the couple of [1] the eye that manipulates appearances and [2] the eye in the thrall of them" (31). In the example of *Vertigo*, this would mean the eyes of Hitchcock and Scottie, respectively.

Rancière then clarifies this point with by returning to a more detailed comparison of cinema and literature. Vertov's "machine-eye achieves naturally," he claims, "what literature had to achieve through artifice: the disappearance of any obvious sign of art in its product," thereby revealing that the "truth of the movement machine is the equality of all movements" (32). This equality, however, is no that of "the nihilist equivalence of all the manifestations of a blind life," but rather what Rancière terms "the rhythm of unanimous life" (32). Translated into Vertov's Marxist political philosophy, "the single dance of synchronous dynamisms thus identifies with the communist deployment of all energies" (32). The flaw in this cinematic communist logic, however, is the following "paradox":

> the time when scientific socialism aspired to refute utopian socialism by linking the communist future with the intrinsic development of productive forces was also the time which had broken with theories assigning a purpose to life and giving science the task of understanding that purpose and defining the means to attain it (32).

In short, "'Life does not seek anything': that was the nihilistic secret that gnawed away" at Marxism, revealing that "such movement is going nowhere" (33). And this, in turn, led Marxism's "scientific rigour" to "assert itself as the pure need for the violent act against

authority to impose political management on the unending movement of productive life" (33). Thus, Vertov's Soviet communism, just as much as Hitchcock's U.S. capitalism, for Rancière, remains bound to the tracks of industrialization for its own sake, and to that degree, unfree. Worse still, this vision of an "eurythmy of life" in Vertove is one that he "shared with the future Nazi Ruttmann: the symphony of the great city between its laborious early-morning awakening and the pleasures of the evening" (34).

From Vertov's perspective, however, cinema "offers itself as the immediate achievement of a communism existing solely in the relationship between all movements and all intensities" (34). Central here, for Rancière, is what he terms a "self-dismissal of the eye" in Vertov, which offers "the formula not only for a new art, but for the immediate realization of a new world" (34). In short, "cinema comes up with its own communism: a communism of universal exchange of movements," which makes the camera "the machine that places all machines in communication by redeeming them from the imperialism of goals (34). And while this by itself was enough for Deleuze to celebrate Vertov, Rancière nevertheless cautions that *Man with a Movie Camera* "can be seen in two exactly opposed ways," namely as (1) "the perfect illustration of a technological voluntarism that subjects all reality to the imperialism of a panoptic eye," or as (2) "the dismissal of all optical imperialism to the advantage of free communication of movements"—and it "offers a perfect balance between the two opposite positions" (35). Perfect control or perfect freedom, totalitarian panopticon or communist utopia.

Following this logic to its conclusion, Rancière pivots to his chapter's third cinematic master, the French-Swiss filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard, and his documentary film, *History of Cinema*. On Rancière's interpretation, Godard's filmic history "links two themes," namely (1) "the displacement of utopia" by Hollywood dream-factories, and (2) "the betrayal of cinema"

when it abandoned the calling of story-denying truthteller (36). In this context, Rancière identifies Hitchcock's obsessive gaze as the paradigmatic example of "the fallout or remains of the cinematic utopia" (37). More precisely, the camera with Hitchcock goes from being a "truth-machine" to being instead the instrument of "an obsession" (37).

In the case of *Vertigo*, this obsession-machine "role is played by the automobile," in which, in Rancière's description, "Scottie seems to be driving in a state of weightlessness, guided by a gaze that is already elsewhere, being drawn towards the next trap: the portrait, the cemetery, the waters where the simulated suicide took place or the belfry of the real crime" (37). In short, "The movement leads to the traps: the gaze is a principle of illusion" (37). Contrary to Godard, however, Rancière suggests "a somewhat different conclusion," namely that "Hollywood never achieved the factory that communism had dreamed of," but "merely recycled the elements of the communist mechanical dream to the profit of the old art of storytelling" (37). Nevertheless, and crucially for Rancière,

> the fact that this transfer was possible reminds us that an art is never just an art; at the same time it is always a suggested world. And its formal methods are very often the remains of utopias aimed at much more that pleasing its audience, with the very different objective of redistributing the forms of palpable collective experience (37-38).

Thus, while Godard "wants both the power of the gaze present at the birth of things and that of the machine which dismisses the centrality of the gaze to put everything in communication with everything else," Rancière counters that doing so "obscures the tension at the heart of Vertov's enterprise, between the communication of movement and the centrality of the gaze" (38). More precisely, "In *Man with a Movie Camera*, both the eyes of the camera and of the cameraman are omnipresent, but that omnipresence is also a continuous self-suppression" (38). Because,

Rancière concludes, "to be the instrument of the universal communication of energies, the camera should function blindly, like a telephone exchange" (38).

Zooming out to Rancière's chapter as a whole, I derive the following figure for Rancière's dancing conceptual partners from Hitchcock and Vertov:

-(1a) Hitchcock's (2a) image- (3a) controlling (4a) capitalist (5a) vertigo's (6a) fall

-(1b) Vertov's (2b) movement- (3b) equalizing (4b) communist (5b) balance's (6b) dance

In this figure, the number (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6) indicates which couple the individual dancing concept belongs to, and the letter (a or b) indicates whether that dancer is (in social dance terms) a "lead" or "follow" in that partner dance.

Given their relative assertiveness, as well as pride of place in Rancière's analysis and chapter title, the lead here might seem to be the dancers in the first list, associated with Hitchcock (the a's). However, the chapter's conclusion suggests that Rancière is deploying the technique of "back leading," wherein a more-experienced follower in a partner social dance (usually a woman) manages to indirectly guide a less-experienced leader (normally male).[6] Simply put, the follower manages to lead the leader in their shared dance while giving the impression (to everyone, including the leader) that they are instead following. It is a subtle art, in which most female social dance teachers are quite proficient. And on this note of subtle female artists, I turn to my conclusion, and the late-in-life social dancer who was my grandmother.

[6] For more, see Joshua M. Hall, "Dancing with 4E Cognitive Science and Human Science Psychology," *Middle Voices* 2(2): 2022, 2-15, 6.

II. Conclusion: Mamaw's Proto-Feminism

As I noted above, my maternal grandmother, Louise Nunnelley, or "Mamaw," worked as a stylist and a switchboard operator, and later in life became an avid social dancer, and had a glamorous whirlwind romance with a wealthy widow, which was encapsulated for them in a glitzy "Glamour Shots" photo of her.[7] By exploring briefly these aspects of her life, I hope to both honor her, and to offer a partial corrective to the way that Rancière's analysis of *Vertigo* and *Man with a Movie Camera* marginalizes women and female bodies.

First, in terms of the hairdressers, Rancière's phrase "treatments in a hair salon" grammatically and conceptually elides the subjects of the phenomenon, namely the female cosmetologists. For these women, the activity of providing treatments is not merely a source of income for living, but also a site of considerable (if spatially restricted) autonomy, and often an outlet for creative and artistic expression and fulfillment. An additional benefit, in my grandmother's case, was that she was able to provide free haircuts to the entire family (myself gratefully included), for the rest of her life. This also enabled many additional moments of emotional intimacy, facilitated in part by the vulnerable position of the person receiving the styling. In my dancing terms, the stylist is also a kind of figurative dancer, and perhaps even a choreographer (especially for those who own their own businesses, and thus achieve greater autonomy even in the public marketplace and community).

Second, in terms of switchboard operators, the most crucial thing that Rancière omits from the process is that the operator (which is, obviously, a Latinate word for "worker") has to speak to the people on either end of the line, and decide each time when and how to connect them. On the hospital switchboard where my grandmother worked, this usually meant having to

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[7] For more, see Mark Dent, "The Last Five Glamour Shots Locations in the United States," *The New York Times*, 10 May 2019: https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/10/style/glamour-shots-1990s.html.

deal with physicians and their god-complexes, which made for an extremely high-stress workplace environment, where the workers had a constant fear of making mistakes, losing their jobs, and therefore being unable to contribute to family incomes, to say nothing of their dignity and self-respect being constantly endangered by ego-induced explosions from overworked doctors. These stories that I heard growing up were brought back to life for me when watching Netflix's "longest-running non-U.S. original series," *Las Chicas del Cable* (Cable Girls), which explores the newly feminist lives of telephone switchboard operators in 1920s Madrid, Spain.[8]

Finally, in terms of obsession and glamor, my grandmother's late romance proved quite the controversial and disruptive force in our family, for whom our long-suffering, endlessly altruistic grandmother figure finally created and held a space for her own individual happiness and fulfilment (which was even more poignant given that it followed a miserable first marriage to my grandfather begun when she was only a child of sixteen). At first, we were all highly critical of her new relationship, and the glamorous headshot that symbolized it. But even those who were initially most upset, like my mother, eventually developed an affection for the picture, perhaps in part because of the beautiful joy and happiness it radiates, which only deepened after her death. This, finally, is the kind of woman, and the kind of complex and proto-feminist female embodiment, that is unfortunately marginalized in Rancière's film criticism of *Vertigo* and *Man with a Movie Camera* in his *Intervals of Cinema*, and thus suggests a possible corrective thereto.

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[8] For more, see John Hopewell, "How Netflix Grew Spain's *Cable Girls* as it Evolved Itself," *Variety*, 3 Jul 2020: https://variety.com/2020/tv/global/netflix-cable-girls-season-five-finale-1234696813/.