



Vertigo

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Though admiring *Vertigo*'s pictorial splendour, I found Kim Novak gauche, the plot baloney and the whole enterprise lacking the master's customary snap. I never supposed that I was merely retracing the steps of the film's original Anglo-American critics. In 1958, John McCarten of *The New Yorker* had lambasted it as 'far-fetched nonsense', while Arthur Knight of *Saturday Review* crabbed that 'technical facility is being exploited to gild pure dross'. As for *Sight and Sound*, editor Penelope Houston's verdict was sniffy at best: 'One is agreeably used to Hitchcock repeating his effects, but this time he is repeating himself in slow motion.' How a band of lunatic French *cinephiles* intervened with the scandalous suggestion that a popular entertainer might be a serious artist – and gradually won the non-auteurist heathen to their creed – is too familiar a tale to belabour here. Suffice to say that I too was dismally behind the beat. I still thought of Hitchcock as a crackerjack marksman who in *Vertigo* had overshot the target.

My epiphany occurred 20 years later when I was obliged to teach the film on an undergraduate course. Perhaps the most emphatic conversions are the fruit of subliminal waiting. All I know is that everything I had judged wrong about *Vertigo* suddenly, alchemically seemed right. The gilded dross was transformed into pure cinema. Hitchcock regularly brandished the phrase, yet – not conspicuous for his metaphysical leanings – understood it simply to express the practical resources by which film declares its independence. Editing, camera movement, sound design owe little to the prior arts; even *mise en scène*, with its roots in stagecraft, becomes *sui generis* through the infinite mutability of screen space. The challenges of sovereignty are terrifying, however, and most filmmakers cravenly fall back on the inherited armature of theatre: well-told stories, plausible characters, good performances. Hitchcock's famous distrust of both actors and screenwriters certified an absolute visual élan that would brook no contradiction. For all that, he was far from being an accursed renegade like Welles. His genius rested on unconditional faith in the studio system and its mission of delivering smartly packaged escapism to a broad audience.

But if Hitchcock religiously ticks the boxes of classical Hollywood style, he also bends them to his autocratic will. *Rear Window* lifts ordinary point-of-view shots to a new level of cold ruthlessness, thereby exposing the seedy voyeuristic illusion at the heart of cinematic pleasure. *Vertigo*, which concerns the effort to model a real woman into an ideal, is nowadays commonly diagnosed as another reflexive text: the ultimate demystification of stardom and its origins in male fantasy. Such rational readings hold water, but leave me dissatisfied. They cannot account for a delirious excess that paradoxically borders on abstraction and renders the film a true nonpareil in Hitchcock's career.

Early reviewers who savaged the idiocy of the plot were in their way more prescient. Let me spare any existing *Vertigo* novices the details. Basically, we are asked to swallow that, in order for a murder to appear a suicide, criminal mastermind Gavin Elster (Tom Helmore) can rely on the acrophobia of

traumatised ex-cop Scottie Ferguson (James Stewart) kicking in at the precise moment needed. (In his famous interview with François Truffaut, Hitchcock volunteers that this is a ‘flaw in the story’ that still ‘bothers’ him.) One may blame the source material, Boileau-Narcejac’s 1954 potboiler *D’entre les morts*; yet having engineered this baroque conspiracy, the script (by Alec Coppel and Samuel Taylor) then blows the whistle in an eccentrically timed flashback that genre fans still quarrel over. Identifying a structural flaw, Hitchcock even reportedly got cold feet and wanted to remove the sequence at the last minute, but was talked out of recalling prints for re-editing by Paramount.

The problem was bigger than he imagined. For in *Vertigo*, the tightly knit fabric of classical narrative starts to unravel. Who knows why this was happening, but television is the usual suspect. Confronted by its pipsqueak rival, 1950s Hollywood answered with spectacle – laying on panoramic colour extravaganzas for which traditional story was an increasingly slender alibi. The CGI-led blockbusters of our own era constitute the endgame in this disintegrative process, their loosely episodic form resembling beads on a string more than the intricate lockstep of cause and effect. Though Hitchcock cheerfully slept with the enemy when required, *Vertigo* is one of the plush exercises whereby a panicky industry hoped to recoup its dwindling figures. But here, the cinema of attractions yields an intense, surrealist poetry. As Scottie goes driving, driving around San Francisco in pursuit of his chimerical love interest Madeleine (Novak), the action resolves into elaborate set pieces: the visit to the flower shop, the churchyard, the art museum, the McKittrick Hotel, the Golden Gate Bridge, the sequoia forest. It could be a sightseer’s itinerary, and indeed every year flocks of cinephiles do the ‘*Vertigo* tour’. That such an institution has evolved is not surprising, for the movie holds a singular power to contaminate viewers with its own quality of dreamy obsession.

Hitchcock’s best critic Robin Wood describes the San Francisco locations as ‘little pockets of silence and solitude’, both attaching to the city and somehow outside it. The silence is not literal, given Bernard Herrmann’s throbbing, Wagnerian score. Yet the alternation between long, dialogue-free passages and scenes of talky exposition creates a strange, sluggish rhythm that waxes ever more ceremonial and trancelike. Robert Burks’ glamorising cinematography (with its liberal use of fog filters) raises each place into a distinct fetish, isolated from the exigencies of plot.

Classical narrative pushes relentlessly forward. *Vertigo* stalls, rambles, repeats (three meals at Ernie’s restaurant, three chases up the fatal bell tower). The goal-oriented, mystery-solving hero that Stewart essayed in previous Hitchcock films now loses confidence, drifting in perpetual circles. The entropy that afflicts Scottie brings him within striking distance of Antonioni’s listless, world-weary universe. His fear of heights is nominally cured through extremity; but if he starts by hanging over one abyss, he finishes by staring into another. So it is that the pleasure principle of Hollywood cinema succumbs to the death instinct. For behind Scottie’s obscure compulsion to possess Madeleine/Judy lurks a desire for nothingness – the ecstasy of sinking forgetfully into the One. Never has a work of ostensible light entertainment been this dark.

Filmmaker and theorist Jean Epstein had his own word for pure cinema: *photogénie*. Once it had relinquished the ‘historical’, the ‘educational’ and the ‘novelistic’, he believed, the camera lens in conjunction with the film author’s personality would illuminate the inner ‘moral value’ of things. That’s just what

occurs in *Vertigo*. When Judy, having reluctantly agreed to pin up her bleached hair in exact conformity with the lost object Madeleine, advances through the green neon haze of her shabby hotel room, both Scottie and we catch an unspeakable glimpse of the sublime.

Modern, civilised Midge (Barbara Bel Geddes) may mock Scottie’s fascination – and, of course, it all turns out to be a shell game perpetrated by arch-choreographer Elster (or his accomplice, Hitchcock). But that’s cinema – an organised lie that gestures, however dumbly, at truth.

Peter Matthews, *Sight & Sound*, September 2012

VERTIGO

Directed by: Alfred Hitchcock
©: Alfred J. Hitchcock Productions
Production Company: Paramount Pictures Corporation
Associate Producer: Herbert Coleman
Assistant Director: Daniel McCauley
Screenplay by: Alec Coppel, Samuel Taylor
Based on novel D’entre les morts *by:* Pierre Boileau, Thomas Narcejac
Director of Photography: Robert Burks
Technicolor Colour Consultant: Richard Mueller
Special Sequence by: John Ferren
Special Photographic Effects: John P. Fulton
Process Photography: Farciot Edouart, Wallace Kelley
Edited by: George Tomasini
Art Direction: Hal Pereira, Henry Bumstead
Set Decoration: Sam Comer, Frank McKelvy
Costumes: Edith Head
Make-up Supervision: Wally Westmore
Hair Style Supervision: Nellie Manley
Titles Designed by: Saul Bass
Music by: Bernard Herrmann
Conductor: Muir Mathieson
Sound Recording by: Harold Lewis, Winston Leverett

uncredited
Assistant to the Producer: Peggy Robertson
2nd Unit Directors: Herbert Coleman, John P. Fulton
2nd Unit Photography: William N. Williams, Irmin Roberts, Loyal Griggs, Wallace Kelley
Camera Operator: Leonard South
2nd Unit Operators: Buddy Weiler, Kyme Meade, Fred Kaiffer

Cast

James Stewart (*John ‘Scottie’ Ferguson*)
Kim Novak (*Judy Barton/‘Madeleine Elster’*)
Barbara Bel Geddes (*Midge*)
Tom Helmore (*Gavin Elster*)
Henry Jones (*official*)
Raymond Bailey (*doctor*)
Ellen Corby (*hotel manageress*)
Konstantin Shayne (*Pop Leibel*)
Lee Patrick (*mistaken identity – car*)

uncredited
Alfred Hitchcock (*man outside shipyard*)
Paul Bryar (*Detective Captain Hansen*)
Margaret Brayton (*saleswoman*)
William Remick (*jury foreman*)
Julian Petruzzi (*flower vendor*)
Sara Taft (*nun in tower*)
Fred Graham (*falling policeman*)
Molly Dodd (*beauty operator*)
Don Giovanni (*salesman*)
Roxann Delmar (*model*)
Bruno Della Santina (*waiter*)
Dori Simmons (*mistaken identity – restaurant*)
Rolando Gotti (*maître d’*)
Carlo Dotto (*bartender*)
Ed Stevlingson (*attorney*)
Joanne Genthon (*Carlotta Valdes in portrait*)
Nina Shipman (*mistaken identity – art gallery*)
John Benson (*salesman*)
Buck Harrington (*gateman*)
Jack Richardson (*male escort*)
June Jocelyn (*Miss Woods*)
Miliza Milo (*saleswoman*)
Jack Ano (*extra*)
Bess Flowers, Forbes Murray (*customers at Ernie’s*)

USA 1958©
128 mins

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