

VERTIGO (1958) Alfred Hitchcock

P Michell, 2015

Cinema Studies Introduction:

It is now some 35 years since Hitchcock's passing and our first film gives a chance to examine this master filmmaker in arguably his finest work.

We must always remember that film is a collaborative medium. Director, writer, cinematographer, editor and the actors. Of course studio style.

In the late 1990s the film was given a full restoration and we'll see that lovely version.

Earlier screened Hitchcock films:

North by Northwest (1959) – Feb 2014

Notorious (1946) – Feb 2013

Synopsis:

Police detective John 'Scottie' Ferguson is asked by an old college friend, Gavin Elster, if he would have a look into his wife Madeleine's odd behavior. Lately, she's taken to believing that she is the reincarnation of a woman who died many years ago and Elster is concerned about her sanity. Scottie follows her and rescues her from an apparent suicide attempt when she jumps into San Francisco bay. He gets to know her and falls in love with her. They go to an old mission church and he is unable to stop her from climbing to the top of the steeple, owing to his vertigo, where she jumps to her death.

A subsequent inquiry finds that she committed suicide but faults Scottie for not stopping her in the first place. Several months later, he meets Judy Barton, a woman who is the spitting image of Madeleine. He can't explain it, but she is identical to the woman who died. He tries to re-make her into Madeleine's image by getting her to dye her hair and wear the same type of clothes. He soon begins to realize however that he has been duped and was a pawn in a complex piece of theater that was meant to end in tragedy.

- *Written by [garykmcd](#)*

Cast:

James Stewart sacrificing some of his genial screen presence to play the neurotic, obsessed Scottie. He is cold to his longtime friend and onetime fiancé, Midge ([Barbara Bel Geddes](#)); too forceful and urgent with Madeleine; and downright cruel in his attempts to make over the crude and world-weary shop girl Judy (also played by Kim Novak) into the elegant, mysterious Madeleine.

Bel Geddes is Midge, a warm island of sanity and normality where Scottie can't quite settle down. In a dual role, Novak is spectacularly beautiful, provocative and elusive as Madeleine and earthy and pleading as Judy. While there are other characters in the film, they're little more than props or plot devices. The movie takes place in the

little world created between Scottie and Madeleine and their twin obsessions.
Colour / Vistavision, 128 mins

Overview:

One of Alfred Hitchcock's most powerful, deep, and stunningly beautiful films (in widescreen 70 mm *VistaVision*) - it is a *film noir* that functions on multiple levels. At the time of the film's release, it was not a box-office hit, but has since been regarded as one of the greatest films ever made. The work is a mesmerizing romantic suspense/thriller about a macabre, doomed romance - a desperate love for an illusion.

It is an intense psychological study of a desperate, insecure man's twisted psyche (necrophilia) and loss of equilibrium. It follows the troubled man's obsessive search to end his vertigo (and deaths that result from his 'falling in love' affliction) and becomes a masterful study of romantic longing, identity, voyeurism, treachery and death, female victimization and degrading manipulation, the feminine "ideal," and fatal sexual obsession for a cool-blond heroine. Hitchcock was noted for films with voyeuristic themes, and this one could be construed as part of a 'trilogy' of films with that preoccupation:

Rear Window (1954)

Vertigo (1958)

Psycho (1960)

The film's screenplay, written by Alec Coppel and Samuel Taylor, was based upon the 1954 mystery novel *D'Entre les Morts* (literally meaning "From Among the Dead" or "Between Deaths") by Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac. Boileau and Narcejac were also the authors of the story for French director Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Les Diaboliques (1955, Fr.)* starring Simone Signoret. The film's theme of play-acting and/or remaking a woman by male domination was also echoed in Greek legend, and in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (and *My Fair Lady (1964)*). The film spawned clones with similar themes, such as Brian DePalma's *Obsession (1976)*, and director Kenneth Branagh's *Dead Again (1991)*.

Poster taglines trumpeted: "Alfred Hitchcock engulfs you in a whirlpool of terror and tension! - He Thought His Love Was Dead, Until He Found Her in Another Woman." One of the film's posters featured an abstract vertigo effect - a spiraling shape with the figures of a man and a woman falling into its center. Although much of the film's interiors were shot in Paramount's Los Angeles studio, the exteriors were often shot on location (mostly in San Francisco, including such spots as Fort Point, the Palace of the Legion of Honor, Ernie's, and the graveyard at Mission Dolores).

Hitchcock's masterpiece was the recipient of only two Academy Awards nominations, Best Art Direction-Set Decoration, and Best Sound, and it was left without a single Oscar statuette. Both James Stewart's performance and Kim Novak's marvelous transformations - from Madeleine to Judy, and to Judy (pretending to be Madeleine) - are rarely matched in the history of cinema. Her performance as a cool and icy blonde recalled the way that Hitchcock often presented and treated his ethereal leading ladies, who included Madeleine Carroll, Grace Kelly, Vera Miles, and Tippi Hedren. The film was passed over by the Academy for the frothy musical tale of *Gigi* (1958).

<http://www.filmsite.org/vert.html>

The Confusion:

Vertigo (1958) is the Hitchcock film in which the confusion of ontological registers—of reality with illusion—takes center stage. Indeed, it's a case study of someone for whom this confusion is nearly pathological. The James Stewart character, Scottie, is duped by a performance with criminal intent, as he falls for a woman he believes to be Madeleine, but who in reality is a woman named Judy (played by Kim Novak) perpetrating a masquerade. Around this "false" Madeleine, a narrative is created that's designed to ensnare Scottie. The film concerns a mysterious case of "possession"—a staged fascination with death—played out in a series of silent tableaux, each of which aestheticizes and eroticizes the Madeleine figure. The film's narrative structure is circular and repetitive; it's been suggested that the film itself represents a distinct form of madness. "*Vertigo* is just a movie," writes Stanley Cavell in *The World Viewed*, "but no other movie I know so purely conveys the sealing of a mind within a scorching fantasy." What is the role of psychoanalysis in Hitchcock's work? Is psychoanalysis merely one "surface feature" of Hitchcock's work, as Richard Allen has suggested, subject to irony like all the others? What draws psychoanalytic critics to Hitchcock's work, and how, if at all, is this phenomenon related to its modernism? [Philoctetes Center]

Alfred Hitchcock – Director / Producer (1899-1980)

Completely undervalued for most of his cinematic life. Nil academy awards for his famous films.

Described by Mark Cousins as most important image maker of 20th century – more so than Picasso.

Belief in a 'Pure Cinema':

... a style of film making he described as "pure cinema" - using camera movement, editing, music and sound to tell stories that would be impossible in any other medium. Even as early as the 1920s, while his contemporaries were simply filming stage plays, Hitchcock was creating a cinematic language that has endured and influenced every filmmaker who came after him.

Some reasons for his genius. I've updated this list from 2013/14.

1. Point of view. Camera is often 'eye of character'. Can change to another POV.
2. Cinema is about proving the unprovable. Eg: belief in god. His films have 'other worldly' logic. People move from scene to scene doing things with little logic. Yet this is accepted by us.
3. Ordinary every day life is often not shown in his films. Despite being set in here and now.
4. Understanding nature of fear. Exists in ordinary places. Different from shock. Example in Saboteur we are shown many times the armed bomb before it explodes on the bus. It is this prelude with child carrying the bomb that creates the fear. Naturally we are still shocked with the bus explosion. We've been expecting it and 'wanting' it.
5. Hitcock's films are very female. (Yet differing views on women.)
6. Brilliant use of the closeup. Often used to highlight a theme. (eg: hands in 39 Steps, bomb in Saboteur, key in Notorious).
Hitch quote: "Close-ups are like clashes of cymbals."
7. His films often start without traditional long establishing shot. Hitch moves straight and quickly into the story. (Use of closeups in 39 Steps – instead of establishing vaudeville theatre from outside. We saw ticket being bought, etc. The chase on the rooftops in Veritgo.)
Hitch Quote: "Films have to engage the viewer in the first seven minutes."
8. As Hitch began making films during the silent era he is very astute in the use of silence. Often not using music just natural sound to create tension. (eg: in Saboteur atop the Statue of Liberty).
9. Yet he was highly aware of how important the use of music. (In Vertigo can be romantic or chilling. Psycho with 'screeching' strings for shower scene. Bird noises for The Birds. Lots of silence then scary bird sounds. Tension again.
10. Use of editing of shots high, then under to create tension. He calls the high shot – a 'tremolo'.
11. Whilst Hitch is famous for putting an ordinary person into extraordinary circumstances. He does so with well known (in fact famous) screen actors – Cary Grant, James Stewart, Ingrid Bergman, etc. Sometimes playing amplifying type (eg Vertigo).
12. The mother character –dominant, over bearing, powerful.
13. Literary references. Hitch understood the concept of the novel and its history from Greek tragedy and Shakespeare.

Quotes:

"The audience screams and cannot bear the agony is some of my films. That gives me great pleasure: I am interested less in stories than in the manner of telling them."

Sadoul – Dictionary of Film Makers (1972) pp117

- Claimed to have said making a film was boring as he'd already made it in his head.
- Gave his editors little room to cut. Thus films have mostly come out as he intended.
- Incredibly prolific and successful film maker.
- 'Mothers' and authority 'Police' often motifs in Hitchcock films.
- Sanity vs Insanity
- Hitchcock as a Catholic – his wife converted for him.
- Use of 'obvious' artifice – often uses back projection in an obvious way.
- Police (authority) is ambivalent to the point of menacing. That which serves to protect can be at worst that that causes our paranoia. Often unable to assist when needed.

<http://sensesofcinema.com/2012/feature-articles/boy-meets-girl-architectonics-of-a-hitchcockian-shot/>

Ken Mogg on Hitchcock:

A gifted writer with deep literature analysis of Hitchcock (life's work). Melbournian. Met Hitchcock.

Involved with 'The Labyrinth' website – formerly 'The McGuffin'.

<http://www.labyrinth.net.au/>

Mogg's literate analysis of Hitchcock from a literature & British point of view. Wilde, etc.

<http://sensesofcinema.com/2005/great-directors/hitchcock/>

Hitchcock FAQ including discussion on MacGuffin:

http://www.labyrinth.net.au/%7Emuffin/faqs_c.html

Other Personnel

Robert (L) Burks (1909-1968) - Favourite Cinematographer of Hitchcock.

Did much work at Warner Bros. Expert in forced perspective, striking B&W images. 46 films inc The Glass Menagerie (1950), The Fountainhead (1949), Patch of Blue (1965). Hitch films from Strangers on a Train (1951) – Marnie (1964). Also Special Effects on many more films inc The Big Sleep (1946), Key Largo (1948).

Edith Head (1897-1981) – Costume Designer. One of the most famous costume designers for films. Wait for it – 444 films!

Last film Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid (1982). In 1958 she did 14 films (inc Vertigo) Her trademark "sunglasses" were not "sunglasses" but rather blue lensed glasses. Looking through a blue glass was a common trick of costumers in the days of Black and White film to get a sense of how a color would photograph. Edith had a pair of glasses made out of the proper shade of blue glass to save herself from looking

through a single lens. Her friends commonly would see her in regular "clear" glasses. 35 Oscar nominations and 8 awards make her both the most honored costume designer and woman in Academy Award history to date.

Rarely did her own sketching because of her time schedule. Almost all sketches of "hers" one sees today were actually done by a devoted staff of sketch artists.

Trivia

The film was unavailable for decades because its rights (together with four other pictures of the same period) were bought back by [Alfred Hitchcock](#) and left as part of his legacy to his daughter. They've been known for long as the infamous "Five Lost Hitchcocks" amongst film buffs, and were re-released in theatres around 1984 after a 30-year absence. The others are [The Man Who Knew Too Much](#) (1956), [Rear Window](#) (1954), [Rope](#) (1948), and [The Trouble with Harry](#) (1955).

[Kim Novak](#) has told interviewers that while in her "Judy" costumes, she did not wear a bra (bralessness was extremely unusual for a woman of that time). Novak has said that it was an element of the Judy costuming that helped her feel much more comfortable as Judy than as Madeline, whose costumes were much more severe and stiff.

When [Kim Novak](#) questioned [Alfred Hitchcock](#) about her motivation in a particular scene, the director is said to have answered, "Let's not probe too deeply into these matters, Kim. It's only a movie."

[Bernard Herrmann's](#) score is largely inspired by [Richard Wagner's](#) "Tristan und Isolde" which, like the film, is also about doomed love.

[Alfred Hitchcock](#) was embittered at the critical and commercial failure of the film in 1958. He blamed this on [James Stewart](#) for "looking too old" to attract audiences any more. Hitchcock never worked with Stewart, previously one of his favorite collaborators, again.

The movie's poster was as #3 of "The 25 Best Movie Posters Ever" by Premiere.

Costume designer [Edith Head](#) and director [Alfred Hitchcock](#) worked together to give Madeleine's clothing an eerie appearance. Her trademark grey suit was chosen for its colour because they thought it seemed odd for a blonde woman to be wearing all grey. Also, they added the black scarf to her white coat because of the odd contrast. While Madeleine recovers in Scottie's apartment from her fall into the bay, he waits on his sofa. Seen on his coffee table is a copy of the 1950s pulp men's periodical "Swank", which much later would develop into an extreme hardcore pornographic magazine. At the time, it would have consisted of a mix of cheesecake pictures and action/adventure stories by contemporary writers.

The film is based upon the novel "D'Entre les Morts" (From Among the Dead) which was written specifically for [Alfred Hitchcock](#) by [Pierre Boileau](#) and [Thomas Narcejac](#) after they heard that he had tried to buy the rights to their previous novel "Celle qui n'était plus" (She Who Was No More), which had been filmed as [Les Diabolique](#) (1955).

The original novel on which this movie is based by Boileau and Narcejac is called in french "D'entre Les Morts" (From Among The Dead). It is a play on Luke's Gospel Chapter 24 verse 5, spoken by the Man, or Gardener, after the Resurrection: "Who comes to seek the living amongst the dead?". This is said to, amongst others, Mary Magdalene whose name is nowadays used as Madeleine, the name of the protagonist in novel and film.

When this movie opened at San Francisco's legendary Castro Theater during its restored re-release in October of 1997 (only a few months after the death of star [James Stewart](#)), it did more business there than any other theater in the US that weekend.

1958 Academy Award Nominations (nil given) for Vertigo

Best Art Direction - Henry Bumstead -
Best Art Direction - Frank R. McKelvey -
Best Sound - George Dutton -
Best Art Direction - Hal Pereira -
Best Director - Alfred Hitchcock -
Best Art Direction - Sam Comer -

Reviews:

Obsession With the Past

Yoel Meranda

Vertigo is one of Hitchcock's most complex movies. On the surface there is a great story that is full of wonderful details, but if we want to go deeper we find out that the movie works in many levels and that it is both psychological and philosophical. It is interesting that Hitchcock almost "hides" this complexity with his style. When we start analyzing *Vertigo*, we actually discover that every shot has a meaning and a purpose. However, his form is never distracting, and in some wonderful scenes, his camera angle or editing almost seems "simple" and ordinary. Thus, the main focus point is always the story itself.

The story is about someone who feels a very strong obsession towards the past. He feels he has lost the "perfect past" and wants to recreate it. In this paper, I will argue that the idea of the "lost past" and of the "urge to recreate it" is a recurring theme of *Vertigo*. Some of these instances deepen our understanding of how past can affect a person, and some just reflect Scottie's feelings. I will also briefly discuss the

philosophical meanings found in this aspect of the film.

The film clearly has two parts. They can be separated as the events that take place before Madeleine's fictional death and the ones that take place afterwards. In the first part of *Vertigo*, Scottie falls in love, but at the object of his affection is "dead". All through the second part, he tries to recreate the "beautiful past" again. Especially in the scene in Ransohoff's where he wants to buy her some dresses, his movements are obsessive, his stare very direct. In the movie, it is the first time we see him so sure of what he wants. The scene where Judy comes back to the hotel room after making her hair like Madeleine is also very similar. First, we see Scottie's point-of-view shot looking outside the window and watching Judy (with blonde hair) coming, then he goes out of the room and starts to look at the empty corridor (again point-of-view). The long take of the empty corridor gradually increases our suspense, as we are just as much as curious and excited as Scottie. The scene thus expresses his desire and impatience of recreating the past by making us identify with his emotions. When she finally comes, he realizes that her hair does not exactly look like Madeleine's. This small detail is sufficient to disappoint him because what he really wants is the "past" itself. Any reproduction of it will not be enough. Of course, it is an illusion, as everything that he will make her do will have to be a reproduction and nothing else. He only is satisfied when she exactly looks like Madeleine. We see his eyes literally shining (by the lighting) with desire and passion. Hitchcock emphasizes the fact that Scottie is creating himself an illusion by using the green light coming from outside. Judy looks lost in the green as if we were not sure whether she was real or not. We understand that Scottie is actually disconnected from the reality of the present and he is lost in his illusion that he created the "perfect woman" who, he thinks, is dead. In this scene, Hitchcock suggests that bringing back the past in its entirety and its reality is impossible.

Then Scottie takes Judy in his arms. The camera moves around them, stylistically reminding us of his acrophobia (I will mention this later.), then the background becomes the stable of San Juan Bautista, the place where Madeleine was dead. Hitchcock thus implies that in Scottie's mind she has been resurrected. However, because of the effects of the previous "green light shots", we know that she actually is not.

Scottie's obsession of recomposing the past is never over. Just as he achieves the change he wants in Judy, he discovers that she is the same person as Madeleine. Only then can he understand that the "perfect" past that he had in his mind was just an illusion. It was just a fictional reality created by Gavin Elster. Thus, he is actually cured from his "melancholia" and he is no more in love with that woman. Now, he is only obsessed with facing the truth and taking revenge by making Judy face it as well. For example, in the last scene of the movie, at the top of the bell tower, his look is not the look of a lover, but a look of someone who is full of hatred. The dark lighting of his face also emphasizes the dark side of Scottie that comes to the surface at that point. Also, his last line in the movie is: "Too late... too late... there's no bringing her back." He has totally lost his internal ideal.

Moreover, Madeleine's imaginary obsession toward Carlotta Valdes is not only a plot element that helps Hitchcock construct his story, but also makes us think about the limits of being affected by the past. As we do not know the reality (as Scottie), we are forced to think whether "...someone out of the past, someone dead, can enter and take possession of a human being?" as Gavin puts it. With Scottie, we are questioning ourselves about the reality and reasons behind Madeleine's acts.

"How much can the past affect the present?" or "How much of our present life is based on our memories from the past?" are the types of questions we are forced to raise while we are following Madeleine with Scottie. In the movie, there are long scenes just showing his car following hers. By making all those long scenes without any apparent reason Hitchcock makes us think about the hero's emotional state and ask all those questions. They are also a metaphor for Scottie's state of mind. He does not know where he is going; he does not know where everything is going to lead him. There is no predetermined destination, there is only wandering, which symbolizes the search for truth. Is Madeleine mad or not? And who is she, really? Moreover, Carlotta's story reflects the life of an important person in the film who we see only once: Gavin's wife. As the historian Leibel tells us, Carlotta was a woman loved by her husband and then "thrown away". It is interesting to notice that Gavin's wife is also literally "thrown away" by her husband. This connection brings us to another nostalgic element in the film: the idea of San Francisco as a city that symbolized the freedom for man in the past and that has now changed. Leibel later adds: "Men could do that in those days. They had the power... and the freedom."

Similarly, Gavin Elster is still the man who has "the power", as opposed to Scottie who is not even able to have a normal relationship with a woman. He often repeats that he is a "man of independent means", as if he wants to prove it to himself. The decor in the bookshop conveys a feeling of nostalgia from the very beginning. There are not only some old maps of San Francisco and some prints, but also some antique objects. One interesting thing to be noticed is the poster of the outlaw who is wanted. This can be related to Scottie's feeling of guilt for letting someone die, and also the fact that Gavin is going to end up being just like that outlaw. I already mentioned that he is also parallel to Carlotta's husband. Therefore, Hitchcock describes an important character of the movie without even showing him.

The idea of old San Francisco is also mentioned in the scene where Scottie is in Gavin's bureau. Again on the walls, there are some old pictures and drawings of old San Francisco. Gavin says: "San Francisco's changed. The things that spell San Francisco to me are disappearing fast. I'd like to have lived here then. The color and excitement...the power... the freedom." He obviously envies Carlotta's husband who could easily throw his wife away. The difference between the "manhood" of the two men is also underlined by the mise-en-scene in Gavin's office. Although Scottie sits as if he was unconfident (the plot gives his physical disability as a reason to that), his friend seems very relaxed and very sure of himself.

The recurring of the same idea of "gay, old bohemian days of gay, old San Francisco", as Midge puts it, deepens the feeling of nostalgia and the idea of "lost, perfect" past. In the beginning, in the scene where Scottie and Midge have a long chat, we understand that Midge is still in love with Scottie. She even says: "You know there is only one man for me in the world, Johnny-O." Then we learn that they were engaged once and that she "blew" it. Her look and emotions that she is trying to hide, which is also stressed by Hitchcock who uses two close-ups, tells that she really is nostalgic about that. Parallel to the other characters in the film, she too thinks that she found the happiness in the past, and cannot find it anymore.

It is interesting to see that although the main story is only about a past lived in the first part of the movie, many elements force us to go much earlier. I already mentioned the idea of "gay, old San Francisco", Midge's nostalgia and Madeleine's obsession toward Carlotta.

There are also other examples that follow this formula, such as Scottie's acrophobia. From their conversation with Midge, we learn that he had it before the cop fell from the rooftop. In his dream, we see the idea of Vertigo blending in his uneasiness with the past. The Scottie's fall dissolves to Madeleine's spiral hair and the image of Scottie shouting is superimposed to Carlotta's grave. Hitchcock thus implies that they are parallel feelings and in *Vertigo*, they are interconnected. The connection is also expressed by some formal elements recurring throughout the film. For example, the turning circle is a motif that forces us to make this connection.

First, in the two animated sequences (the credit titles and the dream), there are rotating circles, which actually symbolize Scottie's acrophobia. Then, Madeleine's spiral hairstyle that is the same as Carlotta's in the portrait reminds us those circles, as does the flowers she bought. When he realizes that the Madeleine's hairstyle and her flowers are the same as the ones in the portrait, two similar forward tracking-zoom shots express the parallelism between those. The stairs in the San Juan Bautista that are a symbol of his Vertigo are an example too. Lastly, the tracking camera movement around Judy and Scottie, which I already mentioned, reuses the motif. This interconnection between acrophobia and his preoccupation of the past raises the possibility that both of his problems may be related to the same psychological problem, dating back to his childhood. They may even be the results of the same fear, which is not the subject of this paper.

Another example is the scene in the forest. From the very beginning of the scene, there is a disturbing silence in the surroundings. Scottie says: "Only silence. It's always like this. No birds live here!" The silence and the lack of movement around them convey the idea of eternity in that scene. Hitchcock also emphasizes this by taking some middle-long shots of our heroes, showing how they seem unimportant compared to those huge trees that seem to be "ever-living" as Scottie puts it. Their voices seem to be coming from far away, which suggests that they are lost in this environment, symbolizing how Scottie is actually lost in the psychological sense. As I mentioned earlier, he is led by the events of the story, and never has the "power" to

act on his own. This scene is very different in many ways from the other scenes of *Vertigo*. It is the first time in the movie that time seems to stand still as if the past, the present and the future seem to unite in one point. It is therefore questioning what "the past" really means. I think Hitchcock suggests that the memory is only a human invention that has nothing to do with the nature. Those trees do not have anything to be nostalgic about or to remember although they are "ever-living". However, human beings force themselves (and because of their psychologies, are forced) to think about the concepts of past and future. Looking at the cut tree, Madeleine says: "I don't like them... knowing I have to die."

Vertigo covers a long time scale, starting from the growth of the trees and ending with the present. By putting in the center of the story a man who has a fixation to the past, and repeating, in many occasions, the difference of the past from the present, Hitchcock makes us think about our personal memories from our childhood (acrophobia) and our collective memories about the society (San Francisco).

Nobody in *Vertigo* is able to deal with this problem: Scottie does not know the difference between illusion and reality; Midge is not mature enough to see that Scottie is not attracted to her anymore, the fictional Madeleine cannot live the present as someone dead takes over her life and Judy does not understand that Scottie only loved the puzzle of Madeleine. The only exception is Gavin Elster who at least achieves what he wants, although he knows it would be much easier a century ago. Showing all those people struggling with their memories and their past, Hitchcock forces us to think about ourselves. He makes us ask questions such as "How much of my present life is the result of the past?" or "What are the ways of liberating ourselves from memory-obsessions?" Interestingly, despite all of this, he also reminds us that "past" is nothing but a creation of human mind and should not be given more importance than it deserves.

Source:

<http://waysofseeing.org/vertigo.html>

Vertigo: The Best Film of All Time?

Peter Wertz March 2013 Feature Articles Issue 66

Way back in 1982, *Vertigo* debuted on the BFI's *Sight & Sound* Poll of Best Films at number 7. Since then it has slowly ascended, finally summing the list in 2012, displacing the oft-thought irreplaceable *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941). No list is gospel, but the collaborative nature of the *Sight & Sound* poll, along with its tenure and visibility within the world of film lend the list a weight that few can counter. Which makes *Vertigo* a legitimate contender for the throne—the protean, elusive, much debated Best Film of All Time. Except, here's the thing: it's not.

Let's play with some hypotheticals here. Let's say that *Vertigo* was a modern release. Let's say it came out in 2012 amidst the *Masters and Beasts* and *Lincolns*, and let's say that the look of the film was updated so as to avoid distracting a modern audience, the general visual quality of the film cleaned up to fall in line with a

modern offering. The script is the same, the shots are the same, but the film was released in 2012 instead of 1958. Objectively, this would not be a Best Film of All Time candidate. It probably wouldn't even be a Best Picture nominee.

To be clear, this isn't an attack on *Vertigo*. It's a great film from one of the greatest directors, and that's nothing to sniff at. But there's an important question one must ask when finding so many past-era films hogging the top of these "Best of" lists. How can a film from a different era compete in every way with the decades of films that it inspired? Critics tend to be purists, referring to golden years of film that have long since passed, yet the nature of film (or any art form, for that matter) is to move forward, allowing the work of its progenitors to guide and hone the work of its progeny, resulting in an inevitable wear of time on films that once served as a guiding light for cinema. Auditing older films in this way can be an awful challenge, as far too often our chief perspective of a film is the first one we ever formed. Yet it doesn't really do anyone any good to hold a film in high regard based on the context of the world into which it was released. For the medium to flourish we *must* view the films we have loved in the past through the lens of the present, because the nasty reality of film is this: Just because it was great back then, doesn't mean it's great now. It's why a film like *Bonnie & Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967)—once considered a bastion of New Cinema—is now, at best, a *key moment in cinema history*. It's what makes titles like *Citizen Kane* or *2001* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968)—films stunningly ahead of their time—so uniquely special. And it's the reason that *Vertigo* simply cannot be the Best Film of All Time.

Vertigo does a number of things astoundingly well. The double structure is a stroke of genius, with the film's first half producing a terribly compelling thriller, and the second opening up Jimmy Stewart's Scottie in a way that reveals his motivations while illuminating his true color. It's a beautifully shot and composed film, with innumerable visual references to Scottie's titular vertigo, and breath-taking colour manipulation that pulls you into his tormented head space. Yet at the core of the film sits a love story that, for a modern audience, is virtually impossible to abide. Like so many films from eras past, the "love" in *Vertigo* is actually just lust and desperation, and like so many anachronistic directors, Hitchcock doesn't seem to be too concerned about it. This life-changing, world-breaking love between Scottie and Kim Novak's Madeleine is recklessly shallow, and results in an inevitable cheapening of both characters.

Consider: After being hired by her own husband to tail her, Scottie first sees Madeleine across a room, and in her elegance and beguiling bloneness, falls deeply, hopelessly in love. Despite having an adorably eager gal pal in Barbara Bel Geddes' Midge—a character that nowadays would inevitably end up being *The Girl*—Scottie has eyes only for Madeleine. This becomes doubly problematic when we find that Madeleine is truly Judy, a foxy brunette living in a tiny hotel room, and lacking the grace of the contrived Madeleine. After the apparent suicide of Madeleine, and months of paralyzing depression, Scottie finds Judy, yet somehow doesn't recognize the woman he loved so desperately. In the end, he drives himself crazy trying to

recreate his lost love with fine gowns and dye jobs, when the actual woman is standing right in front of him. To recap: a man falls in love with his idea of a woman, loses her, finds her again without recognizing her, and attempts to turn her into the idea he loved. This is intriguing, sure, but it also unavoidably turns Hitchcock's protagonist into a fool; a demented old lecher whose libido has crippled him beyond repair. Can someone so dense, so cripplingly insensitive truly be the hero of the Best Film of All Time? As for Novak's poor Judy, whose love for Scottie is thick enough to accommodate his ceaseless alteration to her very personhood, should she be viewed as anything more than a sad sucker who simply fell into the wrong set of arms?

Modern audiences are savvier than they once were, more prepared to dig into the essence of a character and appraise his authenticity. We long for complexity because people are complex, and ultimately we want to find ourselves (or some imagined version of ourselves) within our protagonists. Thanks to his deranged unraveling in the second half of the film, John 'Scottie' Ferguson was never a wholly likable character, whether it be 1958, or now, or anywhere in between. But there are elements to his character that simply wouldn't exist in a modern hero, and date the film considerably. He is brashly superior, with an unadorned disregard for women that often seems to colour the leading men of that era. He is, quite conspicuously, not very good at his job. Yet Hitchcock doesn't seem to present these traits with the intention of denigrating or investigating his hero. They're simply there, distinctly antiquated elements of a movie from a different time.

I've always had trouble understanding why conversations on good film are so heavily weighted towards the medium's beginnings. Critics and film lovers tend to revere the past and degrade the present, without appreciating the difference between experiencing an era first hand, and looking back at it through rose-coloured binoculars. This is faulty for two distinct reasons: One, film is affected by context more than any other medium, and two, film progress happens visibly and with astonishing quickness. We cannot help but view modern films within the confines of our modern framework, and this is precisely how films *should* be viewed. A Best of All Time list will inevitably consider past contexts and older ideas, but treating these preceding generations of film as though they hold some unassailable purity is patently wrongheaded. Whether we like it or not, the nature of film is to move forward, and the nature of the past is to be altered by present points of view.

It's inevitable that films from the past will be diminished by the best work of the present, but more than that, it's important that we appreciate the importance of progress. Even if it spoils a film as hallowed as *Vertigo*.

(Sirk, Hollywood and Genre)

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Source – Senses of Cinema

<http://sensesofcinema.com/2013/feature-articles/vertigo-the-best-film-of-all-time/>

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This site gives all the above cross links -
<http://filmstudiesforfree.blogspot.com.au/2010/11/study-of-single-film-alfred-hitchcocks.html>