

François Truffaut,

Hitchcock (1964)

1983

F.T. *Vertigo* is taken from the Boileau-Narcejac novel *D'Entre les Morts*, which was especially written so that you might do a screen version of it.

A.H. No, it wasn't. The novel was out before we acquired the rights to the property.

F.T. Just the same, that book was especially written for you.

A.H. Do you really think so? What if I hadn't bought it?

F.T. In that case it would have been bought by some French director, on account of the success of *Diabolique*. As a matter of fact, Boileau and Narcejac did four or five novels on that theory. When they found out that you had been interested in acquiring the rights to *Diabolique*, they went to work and wrote *D'Entre les Morts*, which Paramount bought for you.

Can you tell me what it was about this book that specially appealed to you? *

* Scottie Ferguson (James Stewart), who, due to acrophobia (fear of heights), has resigned from the San Francisco police force, is asked by Gavin Elster (Tom Helmore), a former friend, to shadow his wife, Madeleine (Kim Novak), whom he describes as a suicidal neurotic.

A.H. I was intrigued by the hero's attempts to re-create the image of a dead woman through another one who's alive.

As you know, the story is divided into two parts. The first part goes up to Madeleine's death, when she falls from the steeple, and the second part opens with the hero's meeting with Judy, a brunette who looks just like Madeleine. In the book it's at the beginning of that second part that the hero meets Judy and tries to get her to look like Madeleine, and it's only at the very end that both he and the reader discover that Madeleine and Judy are one and the same girl. That's the final surprise twist.

In the screenplay we used a different approach. At the beginning of the second part, when Stewart meets the brunette, the truth about Judy's identity is disclosed, but *only* to the viewer. Though Stewart isn't aware of it yet, the viewers already know that Judy isn't just a girl who looks like Madeleine, but that she *is* Madeleine! Everyone around me was against this change; they all felt that the revelation should be saved for the end of the picture. I put myself in the place of a child whose mother is telling him a story. When there's a pause in her narration, the child always says, "What comes next, Mommy?" Well, I felt that the second part of the novel was written as if nothing came next, whereas in my formula, the little boy, *knowing* that Madeleine and Judy are the same person, would then ask, "And Stewart doesn't know it, does he? What will he do when he finds out about it?"

The former detective gradually falls deeply in love with the woman he is trailing. He saves her life when she attempts to drown herself but, because of his phobia, is unable to prevent her death when, some time later, she throws herself from the top of a church steeple. Overwhelmed by guilt feelings, Scottie has a nervous breakdown. With the help of an old girl friend, Midge (Barbara Bel Geddes), he returns to a normal life.

One day, on the street, he encounters the living image of his dead love, who claims she is Judy Barton and maintains she has never seen him, or heard of Madeleine. He is attracted to the girl but puzzled by the uncanny resemblance. The truth is that Judy is Madeleine, who, at the time of their former meeting, was not Elster's wife but his mistress. Her supposed death was part of a carefully planned hoax to get rid of the real wife, with the two accomplices staging the killing in such a way that the helpless detective would swear he has witnessed Mrs. Elster's suicide.

When Scottie finally becomes suspicious, in an attempt to make Judy confess, he takes her back to the tower and forces himself to accompany her to the top, only to see the terrified young woman accidentally trip and this time really fall to her death.

In other words, we're back to our usual alternatives: Do we want suspense or surprise? We followed the book up to a certain point. At first Stewart thinks Judy may be Madeleine; then he resigns himself to the fact that she isn't, on condition that Judy will agree to resemble Madeleine in every respect. But now we give the public the truth about the hoax so that our suspense will hinge around the question of how Stewart is going to react when he discovers that Judy and Madeleine are actually the same person.

That's the main line of thought. But there's an additional point of interest in the screenplay. You will remember that Judy resisted the idea of being made to look like Madeleine. In the book she was simply reluctant to change her appearance, with no justification for her attitude. Whereas in the film, the girl's reason for fighting off the changes is that she would eventually be unmasked. So much for the plot.

To put it plainly, the man wants to go to bed with a woman who's dead; he is indulging in a form of necrophilia.

F.T. Those scenes in which James Stewart takes Judy to the dress shop to buy a suit just like the one Madeleine wore, and the way in which he makes her try on shoes, are among the best. He's like a maniac.

A.H. That's the basic situation in this picture. Cinematically, all of Stewart's efforts to re-create the dead woman are shown in such a way that he seems to be trying to undress her, in-

stead of the other way around. What I liked best is when the girl came back after having had her hair dyed blond. James Stewart is disappointed because she hasn't put her hair up in a bun. What this really means is that the girl has almost stripped, but she still won't take her knickers off. When he insists, she says, "All right!" and goes into the bathroom while he waits outside. What Stewart is really waiting for is for the woman to emerge totally naked this time, and ready for love.

F.T. That didn't occur to me, but the close-up on Stewart's face as he's waiting for her to come out of the bathroom is wonderful; he's almost got tears in his eyes.



A.H. At the beginning of the picture, when James Stewart follows Madeleine to the cemetery, we gave her a dreamlike, mysterious quality by shooting through a fog filter. That gave us a green effect, like fog over the bright sunshine. Then, later on, when Stewart first meets





Judy, I decided to make her live at the Empire Hotel in Post Street because it has a green neon sign flashing continually outside the window. So when the girl emerges from the bathroom, that green light gives her the same subtle, ghostlike quality. After focusing on Stewart, who's staring at her, we go back to the girl, but now we slip that soft effect away to indicate that Stewart's come back to reality. Temporarily dazed by the vision of his beloved Madeleine come back from the dead, Stewart comes to his senses when he

spots the locket. In a flash he realizes that Judy's been tricking him right along.

F.T. The whole erotic aspect of the picture is fascinating. I remember another scene, at the beginning, when Stewart hauled Kim Novak out of the water. He takes her to his place, where we find her asleep in his bed. As she gradually comes to, there's an implication, though it's not specifically stated, that he's probably taken the girl's clothes off and has seen her in ✓



the nude. The rest of that scene is superb, as Kim Novak walks around with her toes sticking out of his bathrobe and then settles down by the fire, with Stewart pacing back and forth behind her.

Vertigo unfolds at a deliberate pace, with a contemplative rhythm that contrasts sharply with your other pictures, which are mostly based on swift motion and sudden transitions.



A.H. That's perfectly natural since we're telling the story from the viewpoint of a man who's in an emotional crisis.

Did you notice the distortion when Stewart looks down the tower stairway? Do you know how we did that?

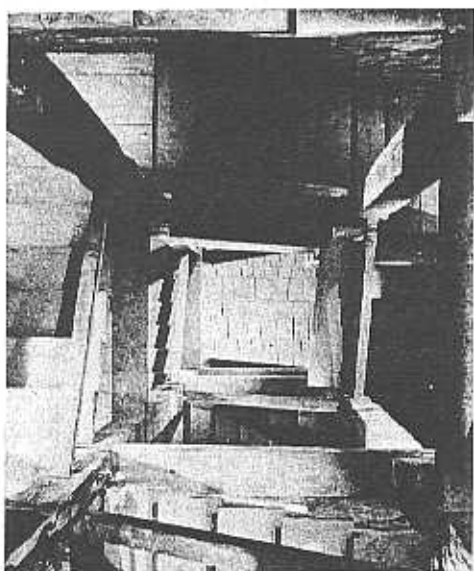
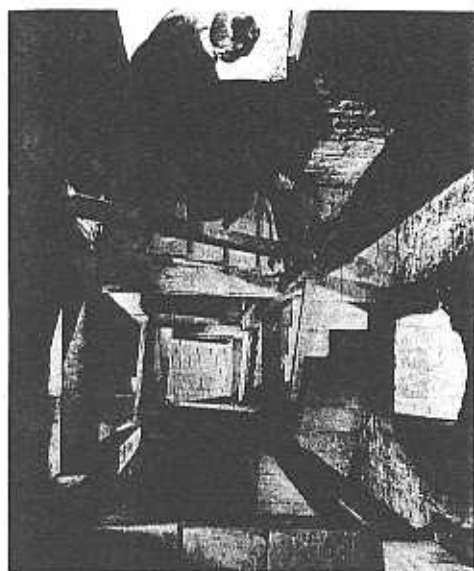
F.T. Wasn't that a track-out combined with a forward zoom?

A.H. That's it. When Joan Fontaine fainted at the inquest in *Rebecca*, I wanted to show how she felt that everything was moving far away from her before she toppled over. I always remember one night at the Chelsea Arts Ball at Albert Hall in London when I got terribly drunk and I had the sensation that everything was going far away from me. I tried to get that into *Rebecca*, but they couldn't do it. The viewpoint must be fixed, you see, while the perspective is changed as it stretches lengthwise. I thought about the problem for fifteen years. By the time we got to *Vertigo*, we solved it by using the dolly and zoom simultaneously. I asked how much it would cost, and they told me it would cost fifty thousand dollars. When I asked why, they said, "Because to put the camera at the top of the stairs we have to have a big apparatus to lift it, counterweight it, and hold it up in space."

I said, "There are no characters in this scene; it's simply a viewpoint. Why can't we make a miniature of the stairway and lay it on its side, then take our shot by pulling away from it? We can use a tracking shot and a zoom flat on the ground." So that's the way we did it, and it only cost us nineteen thousand dollars.

F.T. As much as that? I feel that you really like *Vertigo*.





A.H. One of the things that bothers me is a flaw in the story. The husband was planning to throw his wife down from the top of the tower. But how could he know that James Stewart wouldn't make it up those stairs? Because he became dizzy? How could he be sure of that!

F.T. That's true, but I saw it as one of those assumptions you felt people would accept. I understand that the picture was neither a hit nor a failure.

A.H. It has made money by now.

F.T. In your terms, wouldn't that be considered a flop?

A.H. I suppose so. One of our whimsies when a picture isn't doing too well is to blame it on the faulty exploitation. So let's live up to the tradition and say they just didn't handle the sales properly! Do you know that I had Vera Miles in mind for *Vertigo*, and we had done the whole wardrobe and the final tests with her?

F.T. Didn't Paramount want her?

A.H. Paramount was perfectly willing to have her, but she became pregnant just before the part that was going to turn her into a star. After that I lost interest; I couldn't get the rhythm going with her again.

F.T. I take it, from some of your interviews, that you weren't too happy with Kim Novak, but I thought she was perfect for the picture. There was a passive, animal quality about her that was exactly right for the part.

A.H. Miss Novak arrived on the set with all sorts of preconceived notions that I couldn't possibly go along with. You know, I don't like to argue with a performer on the set; there's no reason to bring the electricians in on our troubles. I went to Kim Novak's dressing room and told her about the dresses and hairdos that I had



been planning for several months. I also explained that the story was of less importance to me than the over-all visual impact on the screen, once the picture is completed.

F.T. It seems to me these unpleasant formalities make you unfair in assessing the whole picture. I can assure you that those who admire *Vertigo* like Kim Novak in it. Very few American actresses are quite as carnal on the screen. When you see Judy walking on the street, the tawny hair and make-up convey an animal-like sensuality. That quality is accentuated, I suppose, by the fact that she wears no brassière.