

## VERTIGO

*Released:* 1958

*Production:* Alfred Hitchcock for Paramount

*Direction:* Alfred Hitchcock

*Screenplay:* Alec Coppel and Samuel Taylor; based on the novel *D'Entre les*

*Moris* by Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac

*Cinematography:* Robert Burks

*Editing:* George Tomasini

*Music:* Bernard Herrmann

*Running time:* 120 minutes

### *Principal characters:*

Scottie Ferguson	..... James Stewart
Madeleine/Judy	..... Kim Novak
Midge	..... Barbara Bel Geddes
Gavin Elster	..... Tom Helmore

Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* is a film which functions on multiple levels simultaneously. On a literal level it is a mystery-suspense story of a man hoodwinked into acting as an accomplice in a murder, his discovery of the hoax, and the unraveling of the threads of the murder plot. On a psychological level the film traces the twisted, circuitous routes of a psyche burdened down with guilt, desperately searching for an object on which to concentrate its repressed energy. Finally, on an allegorical or figurative level, it is a retelling of the immemorial tale of a man who has lost his love to death and in hope of redeeming her descends into the underworld, the most famous of these stories being that of Orpheus and Eurydice in Greek Mythology. *Vertigo*'s complexity, however, does not end with this multilevel approach to its tale; the film also succeeds in blurring the already fine line between objectivity and subjectivity. It takes the viewer so far into the mind of the main character (Scottie, played by Hitchcock veteran James Stewart) that the audience's own objectivity, at least initially, is lost and replaced by complete identification with Scottie's fantasies and obsessions.

Scottie is a San Francisco police detective who, during a rooftop chase, nearly plunges to his death. The psychological scars left by this incident and, probably more significantly, by the guilt of having been responsible for the death of a fellow officer who tried to rescue him, induce in Scottie a phobia—vertigo, or fear of high places, the phobia which initially caused his accident.

Throughout the rest of the film Scottie remains psychologically and symbolically suspended from that rooftop. He takes on a job as a private detective for an old college friend named Gavin Elster (Tom Helmore) who is worried about the strange behavior of his wife, Madeleine (Kim Novak), whom Scottie has never met. Madeleine is a wanderer, and in trailing her, Scottie becomes

one too. As he follows her through museums, graveyards, and forest haunts he becomes obsessed with this phantom woman who apparently believes herself to be the reincarnation of a turn-of-the-century belle named Carlotta. Visually Hitchcock reinforces this loss of objectivity and descent into obsession by photographing Scottie's wanderings in soft-focus and at a gliding, dreamlike pace. In the scenes of Scottie tailing Madeleine by car through the streets of San Francisco, the vehicle seems to be floating above the pavement. This feeling is enhanced even more by the lilting, musical background of master film composer Bernard Herrmann. With the growth of Scottie's obsession comes an equal and concurrent increase in the credibility of Madeleine's claims. Her appearance, her strange visits to places which Carlotta frequented, and her speech all seem to confirm her belief that she is the reincarnated Carlotta. As noted before, however, Scottie is no longer a logical, detached observer, and because the viewer is given no more information than Scottie, neither is he.

The romance which develops between this obsessive searcher and this half-phantom, half-woman magnificently exploits San Francisco and its environs as a backdrop. Hitchcock's use of landscape and geography is most revealing. The locations chosen are all connected with the past and with time: the Palace of the Legion of Honor Museum, the Portals of the Past, the ancient redwoods. Even the details within scenes are keyed as symbols for the timeless state Scottie has entered: the mirrors (traditional passageways into the underworld) in the flower shop at which Madeleine stops and the elegant restaurant, Ernie's, in which he first sees her, and the fog-enshrouded graveyard of the Mission Dolores.

The central symbol for the film is, however, the mission at San Juan Batista. It is here that Scottie searches for Carlotta's past in hopes of finding verification for Madeleine's claims. Steeped in history, the mission is safely isolated from the everyday world. It is a museum of California's past, a place of religious ritual and retreat. It is to these ancestral roots that Madeleine returns, and it is here that Scottie is forced to confront not only his obsession with her but also his phobia. Madeleine, driven to the site of Carlotta's suicide by some force, ascends the bell tower of the mission, pursued by Scottie. In an agonizingly painful scene, Madeleine jumps from the tower as Scottie, frozen by his acrophobia and unable to climb the staircase, is forced to watch, for a second time, someone fall to his death.

The second half of the film traces Scottie's nervous breakdown and his feeble attempts at recovery, which are halted abruptly with the discovery of a woman named Judy who resembles the lost Madeleine. The confusion of dream and reality is now almost total. The viewer is as perplexed as Scottie as he proceeds to take advantage of this second chance fate has apparently handed him. It is at this moment in the film that Hitchcock makes his most daring move. For the first time he gives the audience access to more infor-

\* leave  
Scottie's past

mation than what is known to Scottie. Judy confesses, in a letter she destroys before sending, that she posed as Elster's wife and that her supposed derangement and suicide were hoaxes concocted by Elster to cover the murder of his wealthy wife.

The tone of the film now changes drastically as the viewer is given back, at least partially, his distance and his objectivity. The mood becomes much more ironic as the audience watches Scottie transform Judy in clothes, makeup, hairstyle, and speech into his image of Madeleine. Perhaps the most powerful visual moment in the film occurs when Judy/Madeleine emerges from the bathroom of her apartment after Scottie has put the final touches on his Galatea. Bathed in an ethereal green light, she embraces Scottie, who is now completely lost in the dream, and the camera begins a series of dizzying 360° tracking shots around the couple. Scottie looks up from the embrace and the apartment has become the mission stables in which he first passionately kissed Madeleine. The scene is a visual externalization of the interior state of Scottie's mind, the dizziness (another form of vertigo), overlapping of fantasy and reality, and obsession becoming madness.

The denouement of the film details Scottie's discovery of the hoax and his painful movement toward a cure. Discovering a piece of Madeleine's jewelry in Judy's dresser, Scottie decides that he must relive the traumatic incident which caused his breakdown. He takes Judy to the mission bell tower and, dragging her behind him, ascends the staircase to the parapet. Elated by his victory, he turns to Judy as if to embrace her. At the moment of his triumph, however, a figure in black appears (a nun literally, figuratively the image of death or moral retribution), and a terrified Judy falls to her death. Scottie walks to the edge of the tower and stares down disconsolately. Instead of breaking the pattern as he intended, he has only succeeded in repeating it. His vertigo has been conquered, but at the price of a second love.

*Vertigo* is probably one of the most potent influences on a whole generation of filmmakers, particularly the French New Wave, which paid homage to the film again and again. Alain Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad* (1962) can be seen as an elliptical reworking of the plot of *Vertigo* as well as being filled with details from the film, even down to the musical score. François Truffaut has included an allusion to *Vertigo* in almost all of his own films, but most notably in *The Mississippi Mermaid* (1970), in which a deceptive Catherine Deneuve (in two *personae*, one named Marion, one Julie) leads a maddened Jean-Paul Belmondo on a chase through the corridors of "amour fou."

It is unfortunate that *Vertigo*, which many cinema historians, such as Donald Spots, feel is Hitchcock's masterpiece, as well as one of the greatest films of all time, is unavailable for public screenings in the United States. Along with another masterful Hitchcock/Stewart film, *Rear Window* (1954), litigation makes it difficult, if not impossible, to view. There is so much in *Vertigo*, that a single showing barely opens the door to its understanding. Hopefully the

future will provide filmgoers a greater opportunity to view it again—and again.

James Ursini