

Vertigo: Sixty years since the release of Alfred Hitchcock's disturbing classic

By Joanne Laurier
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In celebration of the 60th anniversary of its release, Alfred Hitchcock's masterpiece *Vertigo* was presented recently in cinemas nationwide in the US by Fathom Events, Turner Classic Movies and Universal Pictures.

The 1958 classic psychological thriller was based on the 1954 novel *Entre les morts* (*Among the Dead*) by French crime writers Pierre Boileau and Pierre Ayraud (whose pen name was Thomas Narcejac).

The movie was not a box office success, despite being a glamorous, big-budget effort directed by the "master of suspense," and featuring one of Hollywood's most beloved actors (James Stewart), along with budding sex symbol Kim Novak. Its darkness and obsessiveness may have seemed odd to audiences at a time when American affluence and power were supposedly at their height. *Vertigo* has its apparent flaws, including an implausible murder plot, certain trite or banal elements, and an uneven performance from Novak, but it has endured and proven to be one of the most troubling American films of the postwar period. This is a conundrum worth investigating.

Stewart plays John "Scottie" Ferguson, a one-time lawyer turned policeman, who once had the aspiration to become San Francisco's police chief. His terrible fear of heights and the role it plays in the accidental death of a fellow officer lead him to retire from the force. Recovering from the trauma with the help of loving friend and former fiancée Midge (the wonderful Barbara Bel Geddes), Scottie seems restless, unsatisfied and essentially marking time.

Life takes a sharp turn when the wealthy shipbuilder Gavin Elster (Tom Helmore) hires Scottie ostensibly to shadow his wife, Madeleine, and uncover the roots of her sudden strange behavior. In fact, it is Elster's mistress (Novak) posing as his wife whom Scottie is following. As the ruse continues and deepens, Elster plants the seed in Scottie's mind that Madeleine is possessed by the ghost of a dead woman, Carlotta Valdes, the mistress of a European man who went insane when he took their child and deserted her, and that she may be suicidal. Inevitably, Scottie falls madly in love with the mystical, mystifying Madeleine.

The reality, which the spectator learns three-quarters of the way through, is that Elster has hired Scottie because the latter's vertigo will prevent him climbing a tower from which the husband plans to push his real wife, although Scottie thinks it is the woman he has been following and with whom he has fallen in love that plunges to her death.

After Madeleine Elster's demise, a coroner charges Scottie with negligence, although not legal culpability, and the former detective retreats into a catatonic state, mourning the death of the woman he knew as Madeleine. Not even Midge, armed with a Mozart recording ("Mozart's the boy for you...the broom that sweeps the cobwebs away") can assuage his acute melancholia.

Soon after he emerges from the sanatorium, more or less returned to full mental health, Scottie notices a woman on the street in downtown San Francisco who reminds him strikingly of the dead Madeleine. It turns out that she is a working class woman named Judy Barton (who, in fact, played the part of Madeleine in Elster's plot). After fanatically and

painstakingly transforming the young woman into Madeleine, Scottie discovers the deception perpetrated by Judy and the Machiavellian Elster and forces her up the stairs at the scene of the original crime. Judy, now having lost her emotional bearings, accidentally falls from the tower. Scottie's vertigo is cured, leaving him able to stare down the well of the mission tower—his future choked by the cold hand of death.

Vertigo is an extraordinarily beautiful film, with images so sharp, crisp and well-delineated they create almost a hyperrealism—particularly evident in the middle of the movie during the partly animated dream (Scottie's) sequence. Stewart is superb, portraying a bland, vaguely self-satisfied Americanness that corsets a cauldron of contradictory emotions. Novak exudes enough of an air of mystery to compensate for whatever she lacks in technical ability. Another crucial element contributing to the movie's angst and disquiet is the genius score of Bernard Herrmann, which stands alone as an independent artistic contribution.

However, the purely aesthetic qualities and the immense talents of all those involved only go so far in explaining the depth of the anxiety and tension that virtually never lets up from the credits to the end of *Vertigo*. Indeed, the rare, brief scenes of calm and ordinariness, to borrow a phrase from a very different context, are merely a bringing of Ferguson in particular "into order between...battles and...campaigns." During these moments, Scottie prowls around, waiting for something else and wishing to be somewhere else. As his mind wanders, it is gathering force to pursue his only partially understood fixation. ("Why are you doing this? What good will it do?" "I don't know. No good, I guess. I don't know.") Midge provides only a fleeting resting place from the unfolding psychological tempest.

The British filmmaker and Communist Party member Ivor Montagu, who worked with Hitchcock in the 1920s and 1930s (and ended up producing or co-producing Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, *The 39 Steps*, *Secret Agent* and *Sabotage*), told an interviewer that the famed director possessed "a sense of tension" that "comes from suggestion and a sense of suggestion in composition. ... [Hitchcock] always wanted to take the suspense and the dramatic contrast from incidents of everyday life." The filmmaker was a master at embodying and dramatizing tension in images and movement. And, as we will discuss below, the tensions are not merely personal psychological ones, but the tensions of the age.

The essay by British film critic Robin Wood on *Vertigo* in *Hitchcock's Films* is one of the most thoughtful and valuable pieces written about the film. Wood considers the movie to be "Hitchcock's masterpiece to date," which he believes possesses an "intense tragic sense" and to be animated by "a simultaneous awareness of the immense value of human relationships and their inherent incapability of perfect realisation."

It is worth citing certain passages in Wood's essay. He provides an eloquent description, to begin with, of *Vertigo's* haunting opening credits designed by Saul Bass: "We see a woman's face; the camera moves in

first to lips, then to eyes. The face is blank, mask-like, representing the inscrutability of appearances: the impossibility of knowing what goes on behind the mask. But the eyes dart nervously from side to side: beneath the mask are imprisoned unknown emotions, fears, desperation.

“Then a vertiginous, spiralling movement begins in the depths of the eye, moving outwards as if to involve the spectator: before the film proper has begun, we are made aware that the vertigo of the title is to be more than a literal fear of heights.”

Wood points to the means by which Hitchcock, in the opening sequence, makes it possible for the spectator to experience the central character’s terrifying dizziness, as Scottie hangs from a gutter high above a city street: “The sensation of vertigo is conveyed to the spectator by the most direct means, subjective shots using a simultaneous zoom-in and track-back that makes the vast drop telescope out before our eyes; we watch, from Scottie’s viewpoint, the policeman hurtle down (at the movie’s opening.)”

This sense of hurtling toward the earth and, at the same time, the earth rising up toward one, this simultaneous going and coming (and vertigo may be defined as combining the fear of falling and the desire to fall), find expression in Hitchcock’s camera movement. Numerous times a shot of a character moving toward the camera, or from right to left or left to right, cuts to a shot of an individual or object moving in an opposed direction, creating an unsettling sensation.

The practical, realistic Midge, as Wood argues, represents “one of the possibilities before Scottie.” A would-be painter, she is now engaged in creating a strapless bra with “revolutionary uplift. ... Works on the principle of the cantilever bridge. ... An aircraft engineer down the peninsula designed it.” The only hint of creative artistry in her modernistic, cluttered apartment-studio is the Miró print on her wall. We know, as Midge certainly knows, that—as warm, direct and generous as she is—she has no chance with Ferguson against the other-worldly, distraught, perhaps half-mad Madeleine, whose wealth and elegance, and complicated life story, strongly evoke the excesses and secrets of the past.

When Midge attempts to make Scottie face reality by painting a satirical portrait of herself as Carlotta Valdes, it only further alienates the former detective.

Scottie’s vertigo, on the most basic level, expresses the unconscious terror that his environment is unstable and out-of-control. This combines with a simultaneous attraction and wish to surrender to this loss of control. His swooning in Midge’s arms when his little experiment at overcoming his fear of heights fails is a remarkable moment, and, parenthetically, it is difficult to imagine any other Hollywood star besides Stewart showing such vulnerability.

Wood writes that at this moment, after Ferguson looks down into the street below, “Scottie has seen death, and the experience has undermined all possibility of his accepting Midge and the life she represents as adequate fulfillment.” Wood makes many cogent and intriguing points in his essay, but it is also necessary to explain why it was that such an intense work of art appeared when and how it did, and in the form it did. For that, it is also necessary to take history and social life more fully into account.

From one point of view at least, *Vertigo* is an examination of the tightly wound, middle-American Scottie with his legalistic, cop mentality and an intense state of discontent, a state of discontent he is only dimly and unclearly aware of. Why is he discontented? He has desires, elementary human needs that are in conflict with the prevailing conditions of life, in supposedly prosperous and successful postwar America.

Scottie’s conformism and complacency (“I’m still available. Available Ferguson”) on the surface do battle with an inner world that is seething with a desire for something more fulfilling and satisfying, more profound human relationships.

The grip in which his fantasy about Madeleine and the past hold him is

a measure of the depth of his unhappiness with the present, incarnated in Midge’s anti-artistic “human engineering,” the bleak, sterile corridor of the sanatorium, the apparently drab, pointless humdrum of everyday life in 1957 San Francisco. Scottie perpetually wants to be someplace else.

The grip of his fantasy is unrelenting and frightening. Too late, Judy tries to appeal to Scottie on her own behalf, not as someone who has come back from the dead: “Couldn’t you like me, just me, the way I am?” Undeterred, Scottie continues to insist on her changing her clothes and the color of her hair to match Madeleine’s. Judy goes on: “If I let you change me, will that do it? If I do what you tell me...will you love me? ... All right, then, I’ll do it. I don’t care anymore about me.” It is one of the most painful moments in American film.

This conflict between Scottie’s outer calm and his state of inner upheaval is accentuated by potentially dangerous, threatening shifts taking place in American life. One of the patrician Elster’s first comments is “San Francisco’s changed. The things that spell San Francisco to me are disappearing fast.”

We noted about *Vertigo* in 1998: “Scottie finds the changes in San Francisco and American life dizzying, alluring, terrifying, in particular the invasion of a non-white, non-Protestant population—ethnic, Latin, black. ...

“Contrasted with this is the Old San Francisco epitomized apparently by the shipping magnate Gavin Elster, whom we first see in his elegant wood-paneled office, decorated with models or paintings of nineteenth century clipper ships. Of course, the patrician Elster proves to be a liar and a murderer, further disorienting Scottie and pulling the rug out from underneath him.”

Bill Krohn in his *Hitchcock at Work* makes the point that the “Carlotta tragedy delineates the sexual-political primal scene of California, colonized by Spaniards and annexed by the US,” and what’s more, Scottie “guesses that Elster did the same thing to Judy after the murder of his wife, the real Madeleine Elster.”

Hitchcock was a popular entertainer who also took his art and the examination of life seriously. One cannot properly speak about *Vertigo* without understanding the most important features of the filmmaker’s biography: Hitchcock was a conscious artist of the mid-twentieth century, with all its threats and dangers, and possibilities. No one is suggesting that he was a “Bolshevik.” Hardly. But he came of age at the time of the Russian Revolution and lived through the 1926 British general strike, the rise of Stalinism and fascism, and two catastrophic world wars. He associated with left-wing figures in London in the 1920s and 1930s, and to a certain extent, in Hollywood after he moved there in 1939.

Charles Barr, in his Criterion Collection notes for Hitchcock’s *The Lady Vanishes*, comments that the “son of a tradesman [with mixed Irish and English ancestry], Hitchcock was exposed to the subtle brutalities of the English class system from an early age, both in his own education and as a precocious London theatergoer fascinated by the work of such anatomists of English society as [George Bernard] Shaw and John Galsworthy.”

Contrasting Orson Welles to Hitchcock, critic Andrew Sarris once wrote that “Welles is concerned with the ordinary feelings of extraordinary people and Hitchcock with the extraordinary feelings of ordinary people. Whereas Welles flourishes in baroque settings, Hitchcock functions in commonplace settings.”

But what is Hitchcock exploring in these “commonplace settings”? An intriguing interview (“The Censor Wouldn’t Pass It”) appeared in November 1938 in *Film Weekly*, the British film journal, in which Hitchcock informed his questioner: “Soon after the general strike in 1926 I wanted to put the whole thing into a film. I saw in this subject a magnificently dynamic motion picture. When I suggested the idea to my production-chief he approached the British Board of Film Censors, who immediately vetoed it. ... In order to give utterance to the violent things which I want to express I have been forced into fiction. ... If your picture is

too obviously a criticism of the social system, Whitehall [the British civil service and government] shakes its head.”

Some water had flowed under the bridge by 1957. However, there is no reason that Hitchcock was less sensitive to the turmoil and traumas of his age, including McCarthyism, repression and conformism in America. *Vertigo* emerges from the period of the Cold War and the aftermath of the Hollywood witch-hunts. Despite the appearance of a prosperous post-war America, the country was at war with itself and the world.

Vertigo's meticulous realism both indicts and empathizes with Scottie's squeezed, linear policeman mentality at odds with other, more profound longings, which depend, in the final analysis, on a radical change in social circumstances.

In producer-actor John Houseman's memoir, *Run-Through* (1972), he insightfully described Hitchcock and his contradictory character:

“I had heard of him as a fat man given to scabrous jokes—a gourmet and an ostentatious connoisseur of fine wines. What I was unprepared for was a man of exaggeratedly delicate sensibilities, marked by a harsh Catholic education and the scars from a social system against which he was in perpetual revolt and which had left him suspicious and vulnerable, alternately docile and defiant. He was an entertaining and knowledgeable companion: books and paintings, dogs, house and politics all occupied a place in his life. But his passion was for his work, which he approached with an intelligence and almost scientific clarity to which I was unaccustomed.”

Vertigo, in my view, was the high point of Hitchcock's career and artistry.

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