

VERTIGO

Directed by Alfred Hitchcock
Distributed by Paramount Pictures
Released in 1958

Few films have come so far. Dismissed upon its release in 1958, Alfred Hitchcock's forty-fifth film is now legendary. *Vertigo*, the tale of a San Francisco detective with too much time on his hands, claims the admiration of millions of fans, scholars, and critics. Many consider it the greatest film ever made. It certainly is the best of Hitchcock. More suspenseful than *Shadow of a Doubt*, more intimate than *Notorious*, more expressionistic than *Rear Window*, more serious than *Psycho*, *Vertigo* is a dark romance wrestling with the vicissitudes of traditional male-female relations. No film handles the perverting of love with such discretion. And no film marries lust and betrayal with such an unsettling combination of hammer blows and needle pricks.

The story, for all its bizarre plotting, is remarkably universal. Anyone who's been in love has been disappointed, either by the object of his affections or maybe as a result of inflated expectations. And every one would like to be admired, to be cared for and appreciated. Thus, *Vertigo* makes a deep *intuitive* impression.

Almost no film has been analyzed as exhaustively as *Vertigo*. Its remarkable shifts of point-of-view; its iconic imagery of the forest, the nightmare, and the murder; its elegiac surrealism; its bold conceit of sacrificing surprise for suspense; and its incomparable score have inspired voluminous writings viewing the human condition through the prism of *Vertigo*.

Scotty is a man who can't recognize his own limits. Midge knows him better than he knows himself. She loves him, but it was she who called off their engagement, perhaps recognizing that he could not relate to women in a realistic manner. Midge is pretty, but not sexy. She is loving, but not sensual. There is no mystery about her. She is as straightforward as her artistic renderings of new brassieres. She reduces sex to the level of pure practicality. But she understands how love can survive romance; among other necessary qualities, these prevail: honesty, patience, sacrifice, fortitude.

She fully recognizes the severity of his vertigo, which he is quick to dismiss. He'd rather quit the force than serve where he can be useful, behind a desk. Midge says that it's where he belongs, but he wants to keep adventuring, exploring and questing. Madeline's condition is for him the ultimate case. He's got a really important mystery to solve and he can feel heroic. Madeline makes him feel needed. She wants his protection and his comfort, and he responds to her helplessness, but it's all fake, and all in keeping with what Scotty wants out of life—he wants something impossible. Mathematical Midge knows this, but "the hard-headed Scot" won't accept it. He's a lot like Gavin Elster, looking to the unattainable, idealized past which San Francisco cultivates assiduously. He doesn't have time for honesty, patience, sacrifice, and fortitude; he wants the color, the excitement, the power, the freedom.

He knows he shouldn't accept the task of following Elster's wife. But he allows his curiosity to lead him down a path where, though he once thought the whole idea of being possessed ludicrous, he now refuses to accept anything else, as evidenced by his rejection of

Midge's parody-portrait. She doesn't know the whole thing is a con, but she does know that Scotty is taking it all way too seriously. He no longer sees the situation objectively—he is lost, having given himself body and soul to Madeline. It angers Midge that Scotty would (she thinks) sleep with Elster's wife. In her mind he's betraying Elster and he's betraying her, in a way.

But she can't find a way to slow his deliberate slide into lunacy. And once he's there, only Judy can get him out. (After all, she led him there.)

Though we can't get inside his head (because he refuses to speak his mind to Midge, the film's conscience), we can gauge the depth of his emotional involvement by his actions. While pursuing any clue he can, he speaks to Gavin Elster, Pop Lievel, and Madeline with an intensity out of keeping with his laconic persona. On top of that, we get the sense that at some point he stops caring about Elster and just follows Madeline for himself. When he rescues Madeline from the bay, he's betraying his secret by calling her, "Madeline, Madeline" when depositing her in the car. Instead of taking her to Elster's apartment, he, significantly, takes her to his own. That's because, for Scotty, she belongs to him now. He has no problem stripping her down and laying her in his bed, knowing full well who she is. This is where he crosses the line.

But, as they say, his cover is 'blown.' Before, if she saw him, he could pass himself off as another random wanderer like her. But now that she knows him, if he is seen by her again, all bets are off. But he doesn't care, he's so far gone. He's just stalking Madeline.

Upon their formal introductions by the fire, Madeline suggests that she call him "Mr. Ferguson," as she should, given that she's married and considerably younger. But he won't hear of it, won't keep his distance. This, of course, fits right into Gavin Elster's plans, as Madeline is really Judy putting on an incredible act. But all we know at this point of the story is what Scotty knows, and what he's doing based on that knowledge is seriously wrong.

Gavin Elster seems to be the weakest character, merely a catalyst to set the labyrinthine plot in motion. However, going behind the story, we discern that he may, like the other players, qualify as an emotional wreck. We know he is a calculating killer who manipulates people like a puppet master. But he is also, perhaps, passionate. We know that Judy was his lover. We don't know if he recruited her merely to facilitate the murder or if he decided to murder his wife to be with her. That she looks somewhat like his wife is a given, but it's not a necessity for the murder to work. Gavin Elster will be asked to identify the body. Scotty probably never saw the corpse up close. And since he was the only one thinking that Judy was the real Madeline, Gavin's scheme is not obvious enough to draw suspicion. Scotty was just the set-up, available to witness the death, but unable to stop it.

So Gavin calmly wraps things up and retreats to Europe. But what if he really wanted Judy and was upset when Judy fell in love with Scotty? As she confesses in her discarded letter, "that wasn't part of the plan." Gavin finds that he's locked in a fantastic love triangle with his fall-guy, and the scheme to embroil Scotty now becomes as much a means of revenge as a way to kill off his wife—implicated in another bizarre death, Scotty will lose his only love and suffer 'til the end.

With his wife gone, Gavin unloads some cash and the necklace on Judy, confident she won't talk because of her own involvement, or counting on the difficulty of extradition from

another country. But maybe his retreat from America was as sad as Scotty's retreat from the bell tower. Sure, it's just a guess, but by considering the story from Gavin Elster's perspective, we can appreciate that a figure who seemed a mere catalyst for the plot has his own challenges. Just like Judy, Scotty, and Midge, he can't hold everything in his control. Scotty tells Madeline in the stables, "Try for me." Midge tells Scotty at the sanatorium, "Johnny, please try." And Judy says, "Couldn't you like me, just for me?" It's richly ironic that just before Madeline runs into the tower, Scotty holds her tight, saying, "Nobody possesses you." He's *trying* to possess her, she's really possessed by Gavin, and later in the film, she, Judy, loses herself to the idealized memory of a woman who never really existed, Madeline (who's supposedly possessed by Carlotta). It's as if all these disparate souls are interconnected. Carlotta dies, tragically. Decades later, one of her kin, the real Madeline Elster, dies, similarly discarded by a callous man. With her dies the idealized Madeline of Scotty's fantasies, and, not long after, Madeline's embodiment, Judy. Prisoners of destiny's chain gang, each personage tumbles, at her appointed time, into the grave.

What Scotty wants, he can never have. Madeline is but a construct. This mysterious creature is helpless, yet independent, cool to the eye but warm to the touch, married, yet virginal. Her contradictions are many, particularly because she is really Kansas-born, Kansas-bred, earthy, carnal, and manipulative. But somehow she falls in love with a very flawed man, one who seems to be a blank slate for us to project our own feelings upon. However, as the story progresses, we stop seeing what we want to see and realize that Scotty is cruel, neurotic, and extraordinarily possessive. But he was pitifully duped, employed as a pawn in an outrageous murder plot destined to crush his spirit. Once the whole sordid scheme is revealed with Judy's flashback, our sympathies constantly shift—we feel awful for doorstep Judy, desperately searching for any way she can be loved. But then Scotty sees the necklace, and we're instantly back on his side—you started this and Johnny-O's gonna finish it once and for all, you bra-shirkin' whore! The look on Scotty's face, as the epiphany passes across it, speaks volumes, and it's the most exhilarating moment of the film.

But where can we go from here? What does the audience want? Revenge, reconciliation... neither feels right. In a story with such strong overtones of spiritualism and the cycles of time—Carlotta returning, the rings of the tree, endlessly-crashing waves, one fall after another—somebody *must* die. It could be Scotty, but Judy works better. It is her ironic comeuppance, facing a death eerily similar to that of the woman she helped destroy, Elster's wife. Also, as Madeline was unattainable (which paradoxically was central to Scotty's desire for her), now that she is back, and with their souls bared, only if she dies will she remain unattainable. Yes, Scotty had this woman, but it was Judy he had sex with, not Madeline. He was living out a fantasy that gives a whole new meaning to the term 'virtual reality.' He made himself believe that this was really Madeline he was bedding, resurrected through force of will. And Judy allowed herself to be taken because she was so desperate to be accepted she would cater to any sick fantasy, even if it degraded her very identity beyond recognition. Judy is confusing the erotic with the intimate, as many of us are wont to do.

Beyond possession, attraction, identity, and security, *Vertigo* deals eloquently with death, specifically the feelings of death, the attraction of release balanced with the fear of the unknown. Judy fears Scotty, even as she loves him—only when she fully gives herself over to Madeline and, for the first time, sleeps with Scotty, does she let go. She crosses over. In literature, orgasm is analogous to death—it's the great release; all senses acute, the spirit mysteriously passes into a new reality. Judy kills herself by giving into Madeline and by giving her body to Scotty. And in the subsequent scene, with their passions spent somewhere in the fadeout, she inhabits Madeline, exhibiting pure contentment. But now her true death is inevitable.

Scotty says he wants to be free of the past, but really all he wants is the past. He wants Madeline back, he wants the power and the freedom. Once he discovers the pendant around Judy's neck, he starts playing a role, just as she did. Half crazy, he's probably not sure if he's trying to cure himself of vertigo or love or what. Maybe he'll just kill her.

Bullying her up the steps of the tower, all the while he works out his rage. She, terrified, anguished, and (possibly) suicidal, scarcely resists. Scotty generates a new name for this frightened, gorgeous girl cowering before him in the belfry. She's not Madeline, nor the Judy to whom he was so dismissive. He calls her 'Maddy.' "I loved you so, Maddy."

Ah, but he doesn't love her now. Despite her desperate entreaties, he can't keep his mind off of the fantasy. "No," he whispers, "there's no bringing her back." We can't say he loves a corpse, because the woman he loved never existed. Judy *is* Madeline, physically, but Madeline was always an idealized construct of Scotty's wandering mind. We often saw Madeline, then Judy, in profile, because neither incarnation was a complete person, just half the story.

Vertigo is related to dizziness, and, depending on the definition, the two may be synonymous. Vertigo can be very disturbing, but in some instances this sensation of seeing or feeling movement even as the body is stationary can be strangely exhilarating. It's like a kind of disembodied weightlessness. (This construct matches the famous 'Vertigo' shot conceived by Hitchcock of simultaneous forward-zoom/reverse-tracking movements as well as Scotty's repulsion-attraction to Judy.) Vertigo is often a by-product of a balance disorder, and some balance disorders induce the feeling of falling. Falling is the only fear, some say, that is ingrained at birth; all other fears are learned. And falling is one of the major themes of dreams/nightmares.

Acrophobia, the fear of heights, is one of the more common in the phobia-fear lexicon. Falling is a great terror, but it is the rushing advance of the ground, the sensation of imminent death, that so terrifies. However, many people enjoy skydiving. These people enjoy the thrill of descent, safely channeling the adrenaline rush (as the body anticipates annihilation) through the mind's filter of assurance. For the experienced skydiver, there is no fear, because he fully expects the chute to open and to land without incident. Therefore, it is not falling, per se, that so frightens a man, but, anticipating the impact, feeling helpless in the face of death.

What we are considering here is something fundamental and instinctively understood. So when, in the dream sequence, Scotty Ferguson, falling into the grave, emerges on the other side of the vortex as a shadow headed straight for those Spanish tiles, we feel the simultaneous fear of death (by hitting the tiles) and see the helplessness (or acceptance?) of the figure (arms

and legs nearly still). But the real shocker is when, just before impact, the figure passes into a gray realm of frightening ambiguity. Now there is no knowledge, and the fear of the known has been supplanted by the fear of the unknown. However, with nothing to strike, the figure is oblivious to harm, neither floating nor falling—an endlessly terrifying or endlessly exhilarating prospect. This is an extraordinary representation of madness, primal fear, "falling" in love, and, most important, the longing for oblivion. Sometimes people neither want to live nor die. They seek that third, impossible option available only in the mind—oblivion. At that point where death is seen as both a blessed release and a terrifying passage, oblivion is the only way. So Scotty retreats, fully, into a life of the mind.

But there can only be death or life, despite mistaken promises of reincarnation, rebirth, and supra-chronological second chances. In his dream, Scotty may want to join Madeline in death, or he may want to take her place, falling in her stead. But it's too late for that. And he still has many challenges to overcome. By the time the film has spent itself, he and Judy will have made their choices, and fate will have denied them the consequences of their actions. There is no retreating into the past. There is no way to go but forward, toward inexorable death.

A lot of films don't make sense, but they don't make us care either. And so a curious two hours pass into the subconscious. But when a film doesn't make sense but hits us like a two-ton piano, we've no masts left to which we can strap ourselves. We cannot dismiss or diminish; we care too much. We can't rationalize, we can't rest comfortably in our superior understanding. We're no longer smugly at ease with the world. No, *Vertigo* dogs us like the memory of Madeline hounded Scotty over the precipice of madness.

Speaking broadly, the movie's greatest strength is that it doesn't make total sense. Thus follows the unease and the compulsion for practically everyone who takes cinema seriously to tackle this film. Additionally, the uncertain, loose conclusion of *Vertigo* lets us project on the canvas of the story what we projected onto Scotty's character. We see ourselves as we'd like to be seen and then we see ourselves as we really are.

Few films can inspire, mystify, frighten, and haunt like *Vertigo*.