

# Vertigo

By Thomas Leitch

For sixty years the “Sight and Sound” poll of the world’s fifty greatest films was headed by the same film: “Citizen Kane.” Each time the poll was taken, every ten years beginning in 1962, “Kane” ruled — until 2012, when “Vertigo”, which had first cracked the top ten in 1982, two years after director Alfred Hitchcock’s death, and then climbed to second place in 2002, finally overtook it. Yet “Vertigo,” a commercial disappointment when it was first released and one of the cinema’s slowest-blooming critical darlings, continues to divide audiences around the world. It may be Hitchcock’s most ambitious and unsparing film. It is certainly his most autobiographical film. Yet its languorous pace, its dreamlike logic, its floridly improbable plot, and its abrupt ending make it one of those films you love if you love films like that, as directors from Martin Scorsese to David Lynch clearly do, and you admire from a distance or greet with bewilderment if you don’t. What’s all the fuss about?

The film began as a decidedly less splashy alternative to “Flamingo Feather,” the project Paramount Pictures had proposed for Hitchcock’s return from Warner Bros., where he had made “The Wrong Man.” “Flamingo Feather,” based on a novel by Laurens van der Post, would have continued in the vein of colorful, extroverted international intrigue that had scored so successfully at the box office in “To Catch a Thief” and “The Man Who Knew Too Much.” But Hitchcock was more interested in another property Paramount had recently purchased for him, a novel called *D’Entre les morts* — “From Among the Dead” — by the French writing team of Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac. Working successively with draft screenplays by Maxwell Anderson, Alec Coppel, and finally Samuel Taylor, Hitchcock transplanted the story to San Francisco and planned it around James Stewart and Vera Miles. When Miles announced that she was pregnant, she was swiftly replaced by Kim Novak, the top female box-office star in America. Stewart had made three other films for Hitchcock, but Novak had never worked with him before, and as was his habit with other blonde leading ladies from Madeleine Carroll to Tippi Hedren, he devoted himself to grooming her for the part, echoing the story in which she would star.



*Scottie (James Stewart) tries to comfort Madeleine (Kim Novak). Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.*

“Vertigo” is at heart a story of possession, or rather a series of possessions. John “Scottie” Ferguson (Stewart), an attorney whose work with the police ends in the opening scene when he slips down a roof while chasing a fleeing suspect and the officer who attempts to rescue him plunges to his death instead, is entranced by Madeleine Elster (Novak), whose husband Gavin (Tom Helmore), disquieted by her habit of disappearing for long days without any explanation or apparent memory of where she has been, asks Scottie, an old friend of his from college, to follow her. As Scottie decorously follows Madeleine to a downtown flower shop, the Mission Dolores, the Palace of the Legion of Honor, and a solitary hotel room, he gradually falls in love with this mysteriously remote woman, ignoring the humorously skeptical warnings of Midge Wood (Barbara Bel Geddes), another college friend who has clearly been carrying a torch for him for years. When Madeleine throws herself into San Francisco Bay under the impression that she is Carlotta Valdes, the distant relative whose death a century earlier she is reenacting, Scottie is close enough to save her, and an edgy romance blossoms between them. After a second, tragically successful suicide attempt, when she throws herself from the top of the tower at the Mission of San Juan Bautista, Scottie is inconsolable despite Elster’s assurance after the inquest that “we know who killed Madeleine”: her certainty that she was possessed by Carlotta Valdes caused her to jump.

Madeleine has certainly been possessed, but not, as the film’s final movement reveals, by Carlotta Valdes. Gavin Elster, greedy for his wife’s money, has found someone to impersonate her, go into stra-

telegically timed trances, speak as one possessed, and then lead Scottie to witness a suicide that is actually murder, confident that the acrophobia he revealed in the film's opening scene will keep him from looking too closely into the fact that the dead woman is not the woman he has been following. The person responsible for Madeleine's spectrally seductive appearance and her ultimate fate is Elster, who has created her specifically to appeal to Scottie, in a stroke of what Tania Modleski has called "femininity by design." So Scottie has been possessed by a model Elster has fashioned for him — not by Madeleine Elster, who in turn has not been possessed by Carlotta Valdes.

The first two-thirds of the film offers a compelling analogy between filmmaking (and film viewing) and falling in love, both of which involve a surrender to figures who have been created expressly to awaken our solicitude and win our love. This paranoid view of love, crystallized in the central metaphor of vertigo, which combines a fear of falling with an unreasoning desire to fall, is cruelly sharpened in the film's last third, in which Scottie, months after Madeleine's death, happens to see Judy Barton (Novak again), the woman Elster had hired to impersonate the wife he planned to kill, and unwittingly follows in Elster's footsteps by making the reluctant Judy over once more into Madeleine in order to solace himself for his lost love. This climactic movement, in which the initially sympathetic and monstrously ill-used Scottie becomes equally monstrous as he empties his victim of her identity in order to refashion her as the false Madeleine, marks Hitchcock's most profound exploration of both romantic love and his own vocation as a filmmaker determined to manipulate his audience's every reaction by attempting to control every feature

of his films, especially his performers, who might be said to be emptied of their own identities so that they can become vehicles for Hitchcock's nightmares.

The film's direct depictions of Scottie's vertigo — especially a celebrated dream sequence indicating his psychotic breakdown after Madeleine's death — have dated dramatically. The elements that have not dated are Saul Bass's haunting titles, Bernard Herrmann's heartbreakingly operatic score, Robert Burks's long traveling shots of Scottie as he follows Madeleine yearningly from one San Francisco landmark to another, and the indelible performances of James Stewart and Kim Novak as the star-crossed lovers. Perhaps the most telling tribute to the film's sweeping view of romantic love, which it both celebrates and submits to a devastating critique, is the fact that to this day, most viewers, marginalizing or dismissing the pathetic and self-sacrificing Judy Barton, remember "Vertigo" as a love story between Scottie Ferguson and Judy's more successful alter ego Madeleine Elster, a woman he never actually meets.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

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