



# Vertigo

**Director:** Alfred Hitchcock  
**Country:** USA  
**Date:** 1958

A review by Tim Robey for *The Daily Telegraph*:

## Is Alfred Hitchcock's thriller *Vertigo* really the best film ever made?

For the first time in 50 years, a movie other than *Citizen Kane* has topped one of the most widely recognised canons in cinema – Sight & Sound's esteemed 10-yearly poll of critical favourites. That film is Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. For a long time, it has been nipping at *Kane*'s heels, having come second in this contest by just five votes a decade ago. Somewhat surprisingly, it sailed into the top slot by a wide margin on this occasion. We have a new Best Film of All Time, and it could well be here to stay.



The announcement could hardly have fitted in more perfectly with the Hitchcock mania of this summer had the man himself made it, perhaps while purring that reports of his death in 1980 had been somewhat exaggerated. This week the British Film Institute, which publishes Sight & Sound, kicked off its two-and-a-half-month retrospective of Hitchcock's complete works, having premiered superb restorations of some of his neglected silent films with specially commissioned new scores as part of the London 2012 Festival. Hitchcock's international standing as a titan of his medium has never been higher, and there has never been a better moment to get on down to the South Bank and discover what the fuss is all about.

Lots of people own up to favourite Hitchcock films that aren't *Vertigo* – it's by no means unanimously considered his great masterpiece – and in the past I've wondered if his sheer productivity acted as a vote-splitting handicap in these contests. He made scarier films (*Psycho*), more playful ones (*Rear Window*), more suspenseful ones (*Strangers on a Train*), and a very great number that are easier to watch.

Still, there's a special intensity to *Vertigo*, and a very personal kind of power. Hitchcock could be such a tease, offering the slyest hints of a devious personality behind the glossy facade of his plots, but here there's something deadly serious going on, as if he decided to drop the elegant gamesmanship once and for all, and lay something bare about his and our deepest propensities and fears.

From its opening titles, with Saul Bass's swirling geometric designs sucking us down helplessly into a vortex, the movie both enacts and invites a certain kind of obsession. Weirdly, this wasn't always the way. It was a dismaying flop when it came out in 1958, and not even the reviews were all that appreciative.

Critics complained that the story, taken from a novel called *D'Entre les morts* by the French crime-writing team of Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac, was obtuse and implausible. Audiences didn't like seeing Jimmy Stewart in such a strange and often unsympathetic role, craving the same sense of being on his side that *Rear Window* (1954) and *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956) had given them. *Vertigo* didn't quite work, if you're talking strictly about the mechanisms of suspense that Hitchcock had trained his audience to enjoy in film after film.

Even though its rehabilitation as a classic was well under way at the time, I remember my first viewing being something of a disappointment, too. I was hoovering up Hitchcocks from their TV airings in my mid-teens, high on *Psycho* and *Notorious*, and found the whole structure of this one broken and

bewildering. It didn't satisfy my early notions of what "Hitchcockian" meant, and the lure of it as romantic fantasy probably didn't strike much of a chord either. Next to the addictive wickedness of his other thrillers, it was an oddly foreign proposition, arty and stilted-seeming.

What I hadn't realised is that *Vertigo* is the ultimate grower. If its laboriously slow ascent to the highest stratum of critical adoration has proved anything, it is that. In its very bones, the movie is about a repetitive pattern of romantic obsession, and it is entirely fitting that such a pattern makes more sense the more we see it repeated: it's an experience that gets correspondingly more deep and dreamlike with every viewing, echoing further back into the reaches of the subconscious. There's something quasi-religious about returning to it, knowing all the mistakes that Stewart's Scottie Ferguson is going to make all over again, and recognising every facet of Kim Novak, from ethereally seductive to seemingly guileless to manipulative and doomed.

Having given it another chance, and another, and several more, and decided that it was extraordinary, I wrote part of a finals thesis about the diptych structure of the script, which is broken-backed in a deliberate way – it starts twice, and most of the second half is a tragic attempt on Scottie's part to replicate and mend the first. Unfortunately, it's too late. He is the victim of a conspiracy, but also of a fiddly, throwaway Hitchcocky thriller plot we're uniquely permitted not to give two figs about.

The point is that the plot – he's the stooge in the long-planned murder of an old friend's wife – thwarts Scottie's great fantasy, which is an impossible dream of fulfilling love with Novak's Madeleine, and his response to this is to go very believably insane.

When he finds Madeleine's spitting image, Judy, in the second half, his attempts to remake her into the woman he once knew are charged with all our ideas of the Hitchcock blonde as something to be caught and possessed, almost bottled. The movie gains creepy resonance when we think about Hitchcock's infamous casting methods – his attempts to sculpt here Novak and later Tippi Hedren into the latest ice-cool beauty, as if resurrecting the Ingrid Bergmans and Grace Kellys who had been reluctant to come back for more. One Hitchcock biographer, Donald Spoto, had a field day with this text, reading Scottie as a thinly disguised version of the Svengali auteur, a kind of necromancer summoning up old idols and forcing his living leading ladies to wear their clothes.

There are more rewarding avenues to explore, though, about the lure of *Vertigo* as a picture that monumentalises the illusions, conceits and consolations of the cinematic art. Hitchcock never used colour with such swooning yet nightmarish force. It's as if red and green – opposite poles on the spectrum, capable of strikingly beautiful juxtaposition but also headache-inducing contrast – were established in this one movie as the new black and white.

As Madeleine walks entranced around a graveyard near the beginning, she is bathed in the ghostly light of a green fog filter, an aura Hitchcock later supplies to Judy using the neon sign outside her flat. The reds flare up like danger signals even as Scottie's libido swells. In Bernard Herrmann's score, certainly one of the greatest in the history of movies, we have an extraordinary invitation to escape into the film's high-wire realm of hope and sadness.

*Vertigo* often gets called a critics' film, which immediately explains why it has triumphed in this particular poll, but that is shorthand for saying that it is a film for people crazy about film, immersed in it, unable to live without it. *Citizen Kane* is a critics' film, too, and I won't pretend that return visits to that flawless, glinting toy train of a movie don't hold comparable excitement, because they do.

Still, it's pleasing to see the baton passed for a while, and a film chosen that is profound, penetrating and unfathomable rather than (quite) perfectly formed art. *Vertigo* pioneered that camera effect, known as the dolly zoom, whereby the viewer (the point of view is always Stewart's) appears to fall into an infinite abyss while remaining quite still. The film itself is that abyss, and we're still falling into it and for it.

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