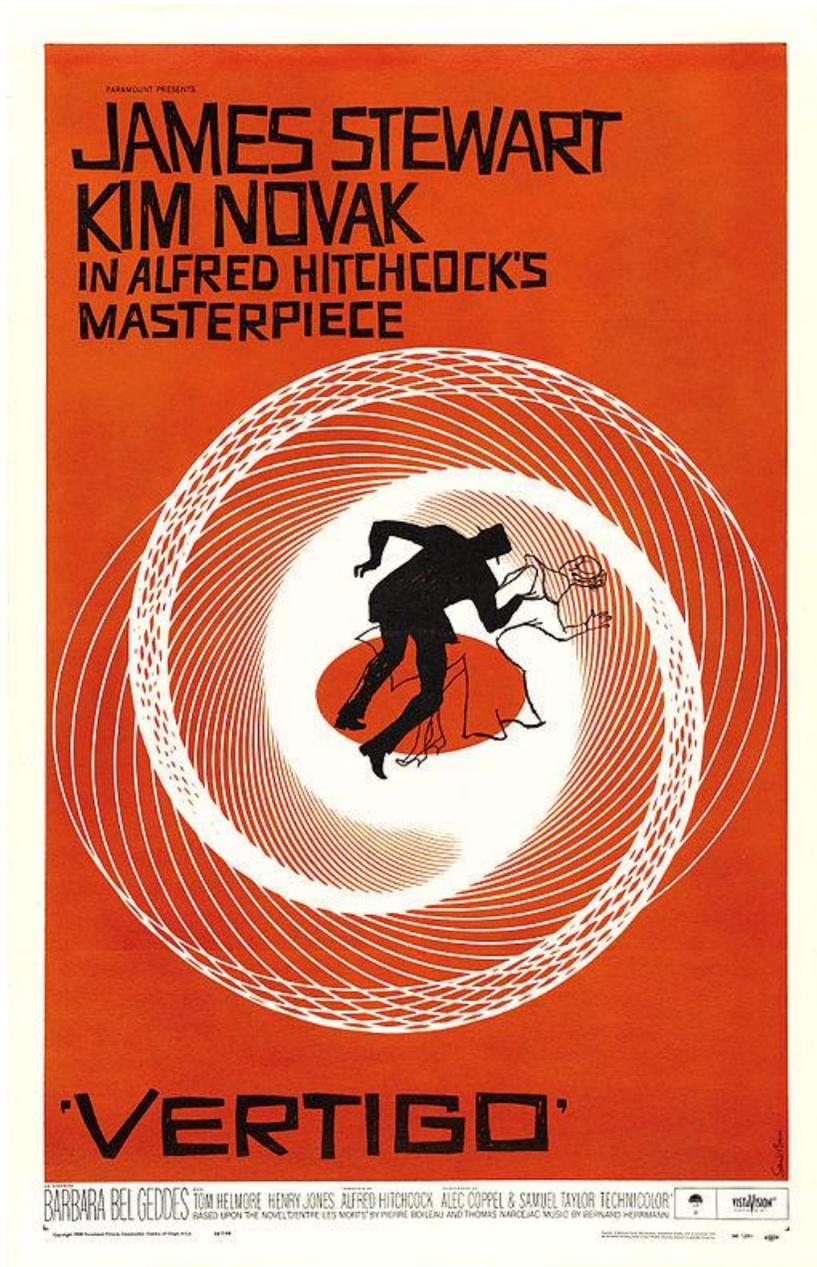


# Vertigo



*Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill*

## *Film Credits*

Produced and Directed by Alfred Hitchcock.

Associate Producer: Herbert Coleman.

Screenplay by Alex Coppel and Samuel Taylor.

Screenplay: based on the fictions of Pierre Boileau and Thomas Naccejic.

Cinematography by Robert Burks.

Art Direction by Henry Bumstead and Hal Pereira.

Original Music by Bernard Hermann.

Edited by George Tomasini.

Costumes by Edith Head.

Special Photographic Effects by John B. Fulton.

Cinematic length: 128 minutes.

Cinematic release: May 1958.

Upon release and until 1983 *Vertigo* was distributed by Paramount Pictures. From 1983 to the present, distribution is by Universal Pictures.

DVD release date: 2000.

Check for ratings. Rating 95%.

All images are taken from /the public domain/Wikipedia/Wikimedia/Wordpress/  
with permission.

## Cast

**James Stewart** as Scottie Ferguson

**Kim Novak** as Madeleine Elster

**Barbara Bel Geddes** as Midge

**Tom Helmore** as Gavin Elster

**Raymond Bailey** as Scottie's doctor

**Paul Bryar** as Captain Hansen

**Henry Jones** as the coroner

**Ellen Corby** as the hotel manager

**Konstantin Shayne** as a bookstore owner

**Lee Patrick** as the woman in the carpark

**Margret Bacon** as the nun

## Review

Discussing the best film ever made with a drama student got an initially surprising answer. His choice - *Vertigo*. After a second and third viewing it did not shift my first ten choices, but I could see why an astute student would choose this film above others. I could also see why it was not considered a film classic until over a quarter of a century after its first release.

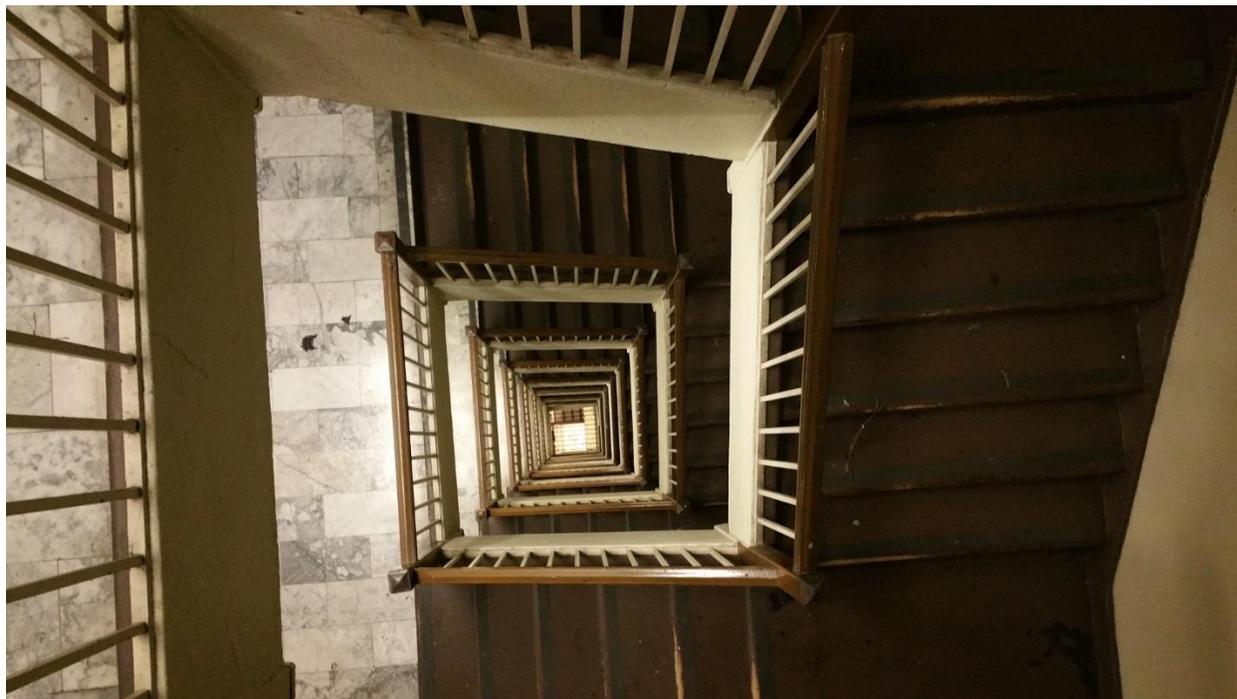
Some of the reasons were technical and legal. After not doing particularly well on its 1958 release the film became one of Hitchcock's "lost films" caught up in

copyright and distribution restrictions and so that it was not shown on television or in art house theatres until the 1980s. This meant that it was unavailable for assessment unless people relied on old memories or early writings from its initial release. When it was rereleased for cinematic showings and then released on video and DVD its greatness was recognised.

The other reasons for this delay in appreciation go back to 1958. Unlike most Hitchcock films *Vertigo* was not initially a critical or commercial success. The reasons are not hard to find. For starters it is the worst possible date movie and not just because the romance becomes disastrous. In its outcome, in what it says about neurotic compulsions shaping romance, about needs feeding delusions, *Vertigo* almost amounts to an attack on the concept of romance. The hero and heroine do not represent goodness incarnate and both actually have distasteful characteristics. The casting of James Stewart, who usually plays successful good guy heroes who embody decency, plays against his usual persona. Here his character, an introverted, manipulating, neurotic loser went against his appeal to mass audiences. Apparently the studio or people connected with marketing were not happy with the film either; an alternative ending was filmed, but remained unused.

Hitchcock's characters and the unfolding plot both imply that beneath conventional superficialities society is not filled with good people and that goodness does not win. Despite many overwhelming unsubtle moments, many subtle, ambiguous and intricate touches emerge. The average viewer might not puzzle these out, but be uneasily aware of them. Audiences generally do not like feeling that something in what they have seen or heard has gone beyond their understanding. This clash between the blatantly obvious and the subtle makes the movie unsettling, which Hitchcock probably intended to do, but in mass culture usually audiences dislike this. As often happens in Hitchcock's films, despite their edicts and firm opinions, characters in law enforcement, the medical world and courts do not get situations or personalities right: a sense of false order covering society, of ugly realities being camouflaged, permeates this work. In Hitchcock's Hobbesian world villainy frequently wins. People do not fill cinemas to see that reality, quite the reverse. *Vertigo* also lacks the moments of wit, verve, humour and satire that frequently pepper Hitchcock's films. Much of the pacing is slow and repetitive.

The ending literally goes up in the air and leaves the viewer wondering what will happen next the clear answer can only be nothing good.



*Vertigo indeed. After a few seconds using this shot. Hitchcock wobbles it, giving the audience a sense of Scottie's perception of vertigo*

Despite these problems or perhaps because of them, *Vertigo* is a great movie. The aspects mentioned above which had made it unappealing to audiences in the conformist 1950s made it a success when rereleased in the more cynical 1980s. Formula plots with one possible interpretation, the law being wise and victorious, contrived happy endings and cardboard code heroes and passive heroines waiting to be rescued were all passé. The "I Like Ike" happy, stable image of America which dominated American and Hollywood culture from the beginnings of the Cold War until well into the 1960s had retreated into its last bastions, daytime television serials and cable tv repeats. Even so, *Vertigo* has so many subtleties and intricacies that much in it has multiple meanings. This allows for valid but different interpretations, starting with the title. Vertigo is usually used to describe some form of dizziness, but it can also mean suffering from a personal sense of movement or of things moving when they are not. This is a form of delusion and Scottie Ferguson suffers from vertigo in both senses, although that is not spelt out.

Hitchcock paces his story brilliantly, starting from the first shots with a fast paced high roof top chase as two police clamber after a criminal at night. We see Scottie's partner fall multi stories from Scottie's point of view – which is looking down while clinging to a flimsy guttering.



*Scottie's view looking down. It not only gives him vertigo, it could do the same for the audience*

The next scene appears as a total contrast;

Midge's office is a designer's airy, sunny San Francisco studio. Here Midge chats with Scottie. She is the well-balanced (pun intended) cheery and wise former fiancée of Scottie, doing her design work while hearing from him about how the roof top chase has left him with vertigo and so he has been prematurely retired. The banter between them reveals that she will be the normal, loyal, straightforward, caring and constructive centre of a film otherwise filled with characters who are just the opposite, and that includes Scottie. When she tries to cure him of his vertigo by getting him to go up a stepladder one step at a time, he falls in panic from a small height. Several things are revealed by this scene. As their previous banter suggests, Scottie is an uneasy, pessimistic man with

unspecified problems that existed before his vertigo. Midge's attempts will fail and Scottie is no self-confident hero who will win against adversity. Midge accurately predicts that he will have vertigo unless another trauma replaces the first.



*Barbara Bel Geddes in the 1950s*

The challenge emerges when Gavin Elster (Tom Helmore) an old college friend, hires Scottie to be his private detective and protector of his unstable and depressed wife, Madeline. As Scottie follows her around San Francisco she does seem obsessed with her great-grandmother Carlotta, an aristocratic nineteenth century beauty who committed suicide. She puts flowers on her grave and spends a long time staring at her portrait in a gallery. However as the days pass Madeline appears to be not the only obsessive. Scottie becomes just too relentless, too urgent in his enquiries and after he rescues Madeline from her first suicide attempt he falls in love with this enigmatic, troubled woman too fast. She responds in an equally odd way, going from suicidal depression to cheer.

Until Madeline's suicide attempt the scene's pacing, the editing and music are slow, subdued and match Stewart's performance in creating a pensive mood as troubled and pensive, he follows her around San Francisco. All this changes with the second suicide attempt and its rapidly filmed and edited aftermath, which leaves Scottie's mind and professional reputation in ruins. Even loyal Mitch is vexed and dismayed by him. All he has left is his obsession and his detective's

sense. Both tell him that something remains unresolved, that he does not have the full story (which I am not revealing here) so the film goes back to its slow pensive style as he wonders while wandering the city streets, an echo of his earlier search.



*Madeline preparing to drown herself*



*Kim Novak and James Stewart meet in a rescue.*

Even more than the first half, the remainder of the film says something pessimistic about love, self-interest and the high cost of believing delusions and trying to work out mysteries.

*Vertigo* still has not become one of Hitchcock's most popular films, but it has become recognised as being amongst his greatest works.

*Alfred Hitchcock 1899-1980*

