

# cinema

## Vertigo: The pinnacle of Alfred Hitchcock's art

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

**A**lfred Hitchcock must be deliriously happy. And Orson Welles dejectedly unhappy. Hitchcock's 1958 classic, *Vertigo*, about a private detective and a woman he is asked to trail has beaten Wells' *Citizen Kane* in the British Film Institute-published magazine *Sight & Sound*'s once-a-decade international critics' poll, conducted since 1962.

*Citizen Kane*, a 1941 American picture inspired by a newspaper magnate, William Randolph Hearst, had taken the top billing since the first poll, and it took half a century for Hitchcock to push Wells down to the No.2 slot.

Interestingly, *Vertigo* crept into the poll only in 1982, about 24 years after it was released, and it garnered the seventh position. The movie's rise to the very top this year may well be an indication of the master of the macabre's steadily rising popularity.

Nick James, the editor of *Sight & Sound*, says "*Vertigo* is the ultimate critics' film, because it is a dreamlike movie about people who are not sure who they are, but who are busy reconstructing themselves and each other to fit a kind of cinema ideal of the ideal soul mate. In that sense it's a makeover film full of spellbinding moments of awful poignancy that show how foolish, tender and cruel we can be when we're in love...This (poll) result reflects changes in the culture of movie criticism. The new cinephilia seems to be not so much about films that strive to be great art, such as *Citizen Kane*, and that use cinema's entire arsenal of effects to make a grand statement, but more about works that have personal meaning to the critic."

Change is always welcome, and it is quite likely that James desired it as well. As Todd McCarthy, *The Hollywood Reporter*'s movie critic writes: "The one thing James could do to skew the vote in a different direction was to vastly increase the voting pool. In the end, there were nearly six times as many voters this year than a decade ago, 846 to 145, which certainly meant that many bloggers and recent products of academia were included alongside the older established critics."

Watching *Vertigo* the other evening — for the nth time — I could not but feel a sense of exhilaration as I saw Hitchcock himself walk past on a street in an early scene — a trademark appearance of his in every film he makes. In a strange sort of way, this shot of the burly director, lasting for just a few seconds, seemed to set the mood for a great psychological thriller.

The movie opens to the haunting melody of Herrmann as the camera pans to a close-up of a woman's face. She appears anxious as her eyes dart from one side to the other, and then we are drawn into her very pupil, which could double up as a cesspool of intrigue.

Often termed Hitchcock's best creation (not *Rear Window*, not *Psycho*, not even *North by Northwest*), *Vertigo* is cinematically elegant, visually enriching and climax-wise brilliant. Each sequence has been conceptualised with wonderful imagination; the frames are so perfect. The scenes of San Francisco, where *Vertigo* was filmed, those of the woods where the lead couple "wander", and those in the graveyard or the museum are arresting beyond belief. The colours that Hitchcock chooses to tell us the story of love and betrayal are magnificent, and convey sorrow and joy, anxiety and confidence, as well as fear and courage.

Based on a French novel, *D'entre le morts*, by Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac, *Vertigo* was first called *From Amongst the Dead*, a literal translation of the book's title. But Hitchcock



✿ Alfred Hitchcock directs Kim Novak on the set of *Vertigo*. The British Film Institute's *Sight & Sound* magazine has named the classic as the greatest film of all time.

changed it to *Vertigo*, despite the annoyance of the production house executives. Also, the director took only the basic idea of the French plot, and Samuel Taylor's eventual screenplay was amazingly in sync with what Hitchcock had inside his head. The result was a "scenario of great beauty and subtlety", writes Donald Spoto in *The Art of Hitchcock*.

San Francisco detective John Scottie Ferguson (played by a Hitchcock favourite, James Stewart) is first seen chasing a criminal on rooftops, and he is accompanied by a policeman. As the three men jump from one roof to another, John slips and as he holds on to the edge of a bar, the policeman tries to help him up, but falls down to his own death. At that moment, Scottie realises — quite accidentally and to his horror — that he suffers from acrophobia or the fear of heights, which produce dizzy spells and vertigo in him. The movie ends with Scottie being cured of his vertigo!

Forced to resign from the force because of his condition, Scottie whiles away his time with an ex-fiance, Midge Wood (Barbara Bel Geddes), when an old schoolmate of his, Gavin Elster (Tom Helmore), seeks the sleuth's help. Gavin wants Scottie to follow his wife, Madeleine (Kim Novak), whom the husband feels is possessed by a dead relative. Worse, the relative is forcing Madeleine to kill herself.

Scottie resists his friend's request in the beginning, but finally agrees. Scottie keeps trailing the woman, and when she falls into the San Francisco Bay, he saves her, and finds

himself drawn to her. The couple meet often, and Madeleine continues to exhibit strange behaviour, until one morning when she runs up a church tower and throws herself down. Scottie is unable to thwart her suicide, because his dread of heights stops him from reaching the top.

Devastated by the loss of his love, Scottie suffers a mental breakdown, has to be admitted to an asylum. When he is cured, he meets a sales girl, who uncannily resembles Madeleine. But she says she is Judy. However, Scottie coaxes her into becoming Madeleine, even asking her to dress up like the dead woman.

Hitchcock's twist comes with a touch of excellence — and I would rather not reveal the end, hoping that many might not have watched *Vertigo*, hoping that this piece would arouse their curiosity to take a look at this superb, superb work.

Yes, if there was one dissatisfaction that Hitchcock had about *Vertigo*, it related to Novak's performance. The auteur was not happy with her, because he felt she had preconceived notions. And his first choice was Vera Miles, but she got pregnant during the delayed start of the shoot. But Taylor disagreed. He found Novak great. I quite agree with him. She essays two very different parts — sophisticated Madeleine and naive/simple Judy — with rare conviction. And together, Stewart and Novak help create a lovely piece of cinema.

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