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Falling Out of Love with Vertigo

I suppose it was inevitable. *Sight and Sound*, the British Film Institute's monthly magazine, releases a poll of film critics on the world's best films every ten years. Since 1962, *Citizen Kane* has topped the list as the greatest film of all time, an assessment that the majority of filmgoers, the unimpaneled jury, have amiably accepted. *Citizen Kane's* position at the top of the heap became almost predictable, and nothing galls a critic more than rendering a predictable decision. Imagine someone who thinks humanity can't properly grasp the significance of a movie without his guidance being forced to crown the same head, year after year. "And the winner for Best Religious Painting in History is, for the 500th time, the Sistine Chapel!" Sooner or later, critics will assert their independence with a surprise. Sooner arrived last year when *Sight and Sound* announced it had a new Greatest Movie of All Time: Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. The king is dead, long live the . . . what? For anyone not following the insider trading of critical reputations, the choice could only seem peculiar. While designating a book or song or movie "the greatest" is utterly meaningless, the urge to designate is fraught with meaning. Why Hitchcock? Why *Vertigo*?

The first question is easy. In a mass-produced society, ubiquity is the highest sign of success, and no director in history made himself more ubiquitous than Alfred Hitchcock. Not only did the man's name appear above the titles of his films with the proprietary apostrophe S, he made cameo appearances in each of his movies, a coy distraction not unlike a ventriloquist who refuses to restrain his lips. With the advent of television, only Walt Disney rivaled Hitchcock's use of his show to further his brand name and hawk his latest movie or anthology. Hitchcock surpassed even Disney in the belligerence of his narcissism; his physical presence became inescapable. When you add his pre-drama and post-drama monologues to his commercial introductions, Hitchcock absorbed a significant portion of the show's half hour. *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* presented little beside Alfred Hitchcock. The director's shtick was so elaborate and so specific it could be subject to

patent: the over-enunciated "Goot Even-ing!"— the droll British butler mannerisms that would make Jeeves seem flip. Never has deadpan appeared quite so mordant. The director was second only to Jimmy Cagney in the repertoire of amateur mimics because his persona was so easy to counterfeit; Hitchcock had been doing it himself for years. Like the opening of his TV show where the man's silhouette would walk into an outline of himself, Hitchcock was forever assuming the profile of his caricature.

It would take more than familiarity, though, to win the critical establishment, and the man had more than familiarity. Besides being a megalomaniac, Hitchcock was also a brilliant stylist who excelled at orchestrating tense scenes, often by providing the audience with a piece of information the cast didn't possess and then allowing the consequences to unfold at a deliberate pace. This could make commonplace objects like a key or a glass of milk or birds gathering in a playground seem fraught with danger. Virtuosity is always about the virtuoso, so Hitchcock tended to reserve the full force of his talent for high-profile set pieces like the shower scene in *Psycho* or the merry-go-round unmerrily spinning out of control in *Strangers on a Train*. The more outlandish the premise, the more the set piece (and, by extension, the director) would stand out. Is there anyone in the world beside Hitchcock who thinks an efficient way to assassinate Cary Grant is to have him strafed by a crop duster in downstate Illinois? Some have used the sheer preposterousness of scenes like this to argue that Hitchcock, like Kafka, possessed a vision of the modern world's inherent strangeness, but nothing could be further from the truth. Hitchcock worked in a plot-driven genre, which meant there was always an explanation why the Lady Vanishes or what the 39 Steps signify. The ludicrous inevitably resolves itself as the lucid. We don't live in an incomprehensible world, Hitchcock's movies assure us, just one that is momentarily distorted by sinister ends.

The panache of the set pieces tend to obscure how prosaic and even clumsy the connecting material (everything else) feels. Like Mark Twain, the bits are better than the books. Hitchcock acknowledged the flaw by denigrating it. One of the advantages of working in a narrow genre is that no one blames you for the narrowness. Houdini was never obliged to prove the existence of magic; he just did his

act. "MacGuffin" was the nonsensical word Hitchcock disdainfully coined to describe the central gimmick that drives the plot, the thing that all the characters are chasing after. He also referred to his actors as "cattle" and studded his films with farcical double entendre like the train rushing into the tunnel as the marriage is consummated in *North by Northwest* or Cary Grant's leering request for a breast when Grace Kelly offers him chicken in *To Catch a Thief*. Moments like these signal to the audience that it's all a lark and the director is in on the joke. In this respect, Hitchcock reminds me of Vladimir Nabokov. Both men had a rococo approach to art in which they used established and, to a degree, disparaged genres in their fields as vehicles for their virtuosic handling of detail. Both men possessed an autocratic and overweening sense of themselves, and, towards the end of their lives, they even came to physically resemble each other.

One area where the two parted company was in Hitchcock's devotion to Sigmund Freud. Psychology was a device Hitchcock resorted to frequently and mounted with a prominence that signaled belief. Its presence in *Spellbound* is obvious, but it can also be detected as a central factor in such "psychological" dramas as *Shadow of a Doubt*, *Marnie*, and *Rope*. Psychoanalysis would seem entirely incompatible with the escapist entertainment the director specialized in, but he maintained a commensal relationship with it throughout his career. In Hitchcock's genre, every mystery had to be explained in order to be banished. Similarly, psychoanalysis is less a cure than a process of identifying a cause; there's a reason why you dream your teeth are falling out or stammer when you say the word "vagina." Every pathology can be viewed as a mystery that the psychologist solves like a detective. Every mystery can be viewed as a pathology that the Id, in the form of the murderer or the secret agent, conceals and disguises from the elucidating Super Ego. In psychology, Hitchcock found a convenient source for reductive motivation (think of the "evil" gay characters in *Strangers on a Train* and *North by Northwest*); it also provided a way to tie up all the loose ends at the conclusion of the film (think of the tiresome lecture at the end of *Psycho* where the psychiatrist explains Norman Bates). For Hitchcock, Freud was the ultimate MacGuffin.

Which brings us to *Vertigo*. Before dealing with what it means, it's essential to establish what it does. Detective Scottie Ferguson (Jimmy

Stewart) has a near-death experience when he slips down a roof while chasing a criminal. A police officer attempts to rescue him, only to fall to his death, adding guilt to Scottie's trauma. Ferguson retires from the police force because the resulting acrophobia continues to cripple him. An old school acquaintance, Gavin Elster, asks him to trail his wife, Madeleine, who he thinks is possessed by someone from a past life. Scottie seems dubious, but Elster tells him to look her over that evening when they dine at a local restaurant. Scottie does and is instantly smitten. He accepts the case.

Scottie follows Madeleine (played by Kim Novak) as she drives to a flower store, visits a cemetery, sits before a portrait in a museum, and enters an old boarding house. A local history buff at a bookstore finds the common element in all the clues: Carlotta Valdes is the woman in the painting at the museum and under the tombstone at the cemetery. The boarding house was her home until her husband jilted her, then she went mad and committed suicide. Elster adds the final clue: Carlotta was Madeleine's grandmother.

Scottie continues to follow Madeleine. She throws herself into the bay and is rescued by Scottie. He takes her back to his apartment, unconscious, and removes her wet clothes. She runs off when he answers the phone, but comes back the next day to thank him for saving her life. They begin hanging out together. As Scottie tries to cure her obsession, he falls deeper in love. Madeleine has a recurring dream about a Spanish mission; Scottie recognizes it as a real place south of San Francisco, and he takes her there to confront her fears. "It's too late," she tells him, then runs to the top of the bell tower and throws herself off. Scottie, who tries to stop her, is paralyzed by his fear of heights.

Distraught by Madeleine's death, Scottie visits the places where he trailed her: the flower shop, the cemetery, the museum. He sees a woman on the street named Judy Barton (also played by Kim Novak). He asks her out and she agrees, then in a flashback and a letter we hear her writing to Ferguson, we learn Judy was only pretending to be Madeleine before so that Elster could throw his real wife's dead body out of the bell tower and have Scottie swear she committed suicide. Judy fell in love with Scottie during all this and hopes to hide her past so he'll fall in love with her again. Ferguson, however, only tries to turn

her into Madeleine by changing her hair and clothes. When they go out to dinner, Judy puts on Madeleine's broach and Scottie suddenly realizes the truth. He drags her back to the mission and up to the top of the bell tower to exorcise his fears. When she admits she loved him throughout the whole scheme, it seems as if all is forgiven. But a nun from the mission appears in the shadows and startles Judy, causing her to fall to her death like Madeleine.

A simple recitation of the plot (if anything so convoluted can be characterized as simple) shows the film's basic premise contains more holes than a colander. Elster risks Murder One on the assumption that Ferguson can't climb a flight of stairs? He assumes a man whom he hardly knows will fall in love with someone he has hired to play his wife (even though she isn't an actress), and then Ferguson will buy a cockamamie romance about possession by a dead spirit and testify this is all true at an inquest? Scottie never has to identify the body or even look at a photograph of the deceased and thus never discovers the woman he had been following was actually a different person? When Scottie rescues Madeleine from the bay, he takes her back to his apartment where he removes all her clothes. I don't know what the legal procedure for handling attempted suicides is in San Francisco; surely it doesn't include taking the victim back to your place and strip searching her. As a veteran police officer, wouldn't Ferguson think to report the incident, which would also help prevent it from occurring again? Wouldn't he even attempt to wake the comatose Madeleine before peeling off her underwear, if only to avoid her screaming "RAPE!" if she came to during the process? What exactly did Elster pay Judy to become his accomplish in murder? She sure looks poor enough when Ferguson stumbles across her later on. And why wouldn't she tell the authorities what Elster did? Surely she could plea bargain her way out of that one. And Elster, who supposedly thought of everything, leaves her behind knowing what she knows (she almost tells Scottie in the letter she wrote)? I'm curious how Elster hauled his dead wife's body up all those stairs in the bell tower, in a public building no less. Maybe he put her in a large canvas bag and pretended she was a soft bull fiddle? Judy tells Scottie that she and Elster waited until everyone had left after they threw the body from the bell tower and then they snuck away. The police who came to the scene of the crime

wouldn't think to investigate the place the deceased jumped from? And, as preposterous and illogical as all this is, Scottie sees Judy put on Madeleine's broach and immediately imagines the crime in all its ludicrous details? "He planned it so well," Judy writes of Elster's scheme. Really? Winning the lottery seems statistically more probable. A boxer can be thoroughly battered for twelve rounds and then deck his opponent with a lucky punch; a successful work of art, on the other hand, can't sustain such a large number of errors. Errors of course can be easily absorbed by a piece of piffle. One doesn't tax the absurdities of *North by Northwest* any more than they would a James Bond flick. A serious work, however, particularly one deemed "the greatest film of all time," must be more circumspect.

As if all this hackneyed nonsense isn't handicap enough, *Vertigo* is also hampered by Hitchcock's clumsy direction. It comes as a shock that a director notorious for his slick professionalism should produce such an awkward film. This could indicate the degree of ambition or sincerity the man brought to the project, but sincerity carries no dispensations. *Vertigo* is an excruciatingly slow film. An inordinate amount of its length is frittered away in watching people drive cars, stroll down streets, make minor purchases, prepare drinks. Another prominent feature that slows the proceedings is the number of characters who are explaining what something means, always a sign that an artist is forcing a scene to carry too much freight. We have not one but two psychiatrists explain Scottie's diagnosis. Midge, his old girlfriend, gives her own take on what ails him and how to cure it. Later, Scottie does the same thing to Madeleine, explaining her problem and how it should be cured. Then it's Judy's turn to explain the crime and what she was feeling throughout it. As if this isn't enough, Hitchcock superimposes meaning by giving signs like "One Way" and "Fire Escape" exaggerated prominence in certain scenes. He even lets his camera read all the captions on the cross section of an old sequoia tree. Much has been made of the resemblance Bernard Hermann's score has to the Love/Death music from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. Wagner, however, only used his theme in the opera's prelude and again in a fuller form at the very end of this five-hour work. Hermann's theme unfortunately is repeated over and over again and again in scenes where all we see is Jimmy Stewart shifting a steering wheel with a

look of petulant inquiry. The redundancy transforms even this music into part of the tedium as it becomes just another attempt to explain the film through a different medium. Hitchcock even has Scottie's dream didactically review all the film's triggers (the bouquet, the hair style, the broach) without the subterfuge dreams use to disguise their most potent symbols. These repetitions seem to signal an insecurity in the director; he's grasping rather than gripping, like a size 4 hand in a size 6 glove.

For a genre that allows enormous latitude in tying up plot strands, there are several large ends that remain loose. Scottie's old girlfriend, Midge, plays a prominent role as his sounding board during the first half of the film. Despite a lengthy discussion on the design elements of brassieres (this passed for racy repartee in the late fifties), a sexless camaraderie is quickly established between the two and finalized with a dose of pop psychology that is typical of this film (Scottie tells her "Don't be so motherly" and she later encourages him to confide in her with "Mother is here"). When she copies the painting of Carlotta and superimposes her face on the figure as a joke, Scottie leaves without responding, and Midge starts beating her head and screaming, "Stupid! Stupid!" Suddenly this minor, humorous character is transformed into the painful center of attention but for no purpose. We only see her once more, when she visits the comatose Scottie in the hospital after "Madeleine's" suicide. She announces that Mozart's music won't cure Scottie, and then, in a shot whose heavy-handed bathos is worthy of a silent tearjerker, we watch her slowly walk down the hospital corridor from behind. Her character vanishes from the rest of the film.

Another inconsistently used character is Elster. The audience only experiences him as a soft-spoken man of the world who melodiously expresses concern for his wife when he isn't patting Scottie reassuringly on the arm. Nothing, besides Judy's hurried confession as Ferguson drags her up the bell tower (she seems less worried about her life than not getting all the plot details out before reaching the top) indicates this character is even capable of murder. Certainly nothing has been established to make this change credible to the audience. As if to prove how perfunctory Elster's guilt is, Hitchcock doesn't even bother pursuing the malefactor with his storyline; certainly no jury would ever find the man guilty on the wobbly case the director makes against him.

The peremptory demands of the plot also trump logic in the pace of Scottie's infatuation. Ferguson at first comes across as someone who registers rather low on the libido scale. He laughs about a brief engagement to Midge when they were in college and gives no indication that any amorous adventure has emerged between that distant event and the present. Then, with nothing more than a backward glance at Madeleine in a crowded restaurant, he begins twitching like a methadone addict with an expired prescription. After he fishes Madeleine out of the bay, he goes to pour her coffee and immediately clutches her hand. Later, after casually walking with her beside Monterrey Bay, she runs towards the water and Scottie not only catches her but starts kissing her, even though they have exchanged nothing stronger than small talk up to this point. The expediencies of plot outrank love and hate as the main motivation here; we find ourselves on the corner of State and Van Buren not to savor the scenery but to catch the 4:19 bus.

Playing fast and loose with motivation is what ultimately undermines the film's psychological pretensions. As a discipline, psychology is far more nuanced and systematic than it appears in popular art forms. Neuroses evolve not in a void but from specific personality traits; the resulting behavior is as characteristic and defining as a person's fingerprints. How then to attribute psychological complexity to a character like Scottie Ferguson who lacks a consistent personality? One minute he is goofy and avuncular, the next he erupts as a cruel fiend. Instead of a unified character, Hitchcock gives us a string of unrelated reactions. This is not the coin of the realm; it's counterfeit money and it's freely spent. Two psychiatrists describe Scottie as a veritable Freudian cocktail, someone with inescapable acrophobia, acute melancholia, and a guilt complex, but this is a psychiatric profile rather than a personality. Like all postmortems, it merely substitutes What for Who. Judy Barton is just as featureless as her paramour; the crucial, defining explanation of why she would involve herself in an elaborate murder and perpetuate an elaborate ruse never materializes. In her frustration as Ferguson repeatedly tries to transform her into Madeleine, Judy asks, "Can't you love me for who I am?" and we see a glimmer, not of "the greatest film of all time," but of an effective little melodrama that could have been, but all this is lost in the murder mystery hokum that surrounds it.

Nothing demonstrates the flaws of this film more brazenly than its finale. Ferguson is dragging Judy to the top of the bell tower, spouting plot points like "I have to go once more in the past and then be free!" and "You're my second chance!" (evidently for viewers who have nodded off during the long car rides), while Judy tries to squeeze all the inane details of the murder into a thirty-second confession (Danny Kaye couldn't have recited this in less than twenty-nine). After a reconciliation so abrupt it can only be a directorial feint, a nun emerges from the trap door, and Judy inexplicably jumps out the window (the result of some parochial school trauma no doubt). "God have mercy," the nun intones and begins calmly tolling the bell, even though this is the second death-by-falling from the tower in a matter of months ("We lose more tourists that way"). And so the real Judy follows the fake Madeleine, a symmetry that is achieved at the expense of logic, consistency, psychological honesty, and credulity. The ending is so pat one can't even call it a denouement; this is the Old Switcheroo; this is O'Henry in a pretentious mood.

Is it too much to expect the Greatest Movie of All Time to be moderately good as well?

The fault for this lies less with the idol than with the idolaters; it is a group of film critics, after all, who conferred this elevated title on *Vertigo*. Democracy fosters the belief that truth resides in numbers; although I tend to side with Borges who felt that using numbers to make decisions is an abuse of statistics. Just because 82% of the inhabitants of an insane asylum believe they are Napoleon doesn't prove that the most famous resident of Les Invalides is an imposter. The critical establishment needs to marshal more than numbers to make their case.

Even a casual survey of the opinions of this electorate makes it clear why *Vertigo* has become their darling: nothing accommodates a pretentious critic like the opportunity to review a pretentious film. Most articles on *Vertigo* begin with an almost defiant use of hyperbole, less as a declaration of belief than an attempt to preclude a more temperate response. The always unreliable Dave Kehr writes, "That Alfred Hitchcock was one of the major artists of the 20th century no longer seems a matter of serious doubt," an assertion that characterizes anyone doubting this claim as frivolous. Kehr goes on to call the movie, "a supreme achievement in the history of cinema." Not to be outdone,

Robin Wood says, "Its profundity is inseparable from the perfection of form; it is a perfect organism, each character, each sequence, each image, illuminating every other." Sorry, for a moment I thought he was talking about *The Divine Comedy*. Jim Emerson calls *Vertigo* "one of the most ravishing Technicolor films ever made," simply because this visually drab movie has a few scenes shot with a red or green glow. He goes on to claim "To call the restoration/re-release 'the best movie of 1996' would be not only trite, but a laughable understatement." 1996 must have been one blighted year. Andrew Edward Davies calls the shot in which the camera simultaneously zooms and backtracks "one of the most innovative techniques in the history of film," even though it looks like one of those cheesy 3D gimmicks from the early fifties. The late Roger Ebert dismissed anyone who didn't subscribe to these hyperventilating claims as "insufficiently evolved as a moviegoer." For those who think Ebert was all thumbs, he occasionally produced a finger.

When the critical elite finally get around to addressing why *Vertigo* is so superior, their consensus splinters in disagreement. Thomas Leitch calls it Hitchcock's most profound meditation on possession; David Thomson says it's a movie about moviemaking; Ebert claimed it's Hitchcock's confession; David Sterritt says it's one of Hitchcock's deepest penetrations into dualities of authenticity and performance, while several feminist critics characterize it as a patriarchal power fantasy.

The more outlandish assertions are argued at book-length. Dennis Perry produced an entire tome attempting to establish a link between Hitchcock and Edgar Allen Poe. Coupling *Vertigo* with "The Fall of the House of Usher," he writes, "The desperate man in *Vertigo* is Gavin Elster, whose surname sounds suspiciously like Usher." Does it now? Later, he annotates a publicity still from *The Birds* that shows Hitchcock with a crow perched on his elbow with the insinuating caption "Perhaps his acknowledged debt to Edgar Allen Poe." Has this man never read *Pale Fire*? David Sterritt culls Hitchcock's oeuvre to justify his thesis that the films are all about duality, carrying the assumption so far as to assert that the horizontal ladder rung in *Vertigo's* opening shot is meant to offset the cane Ferguson is balancing vertically in Midge's apartment. He pushes this even further when he finds that the way the opening credits zoom out of the close up of a woman's eye "evokes the notion of birth." A critic with a single idea is like a child

with an open bucket of red paint: within ten minutes everything in the house, including the child, will be red.

Hitchcock's pop psychology only metastasizes among his followers; there is a whole subcategory of Hitchcockian critics who view *Vertigo* as a Rorschach test for the director. Ebert believed the film " . . . is 'about' how Hitchcock used, feared and tried to control women. He is represented by Scottie." Several critics, and even a few biographers (Donald Spoto), condemn Hitchcock's sexual blackmail of the actress Tippi Hedren with the validating insinuation that his films were dark because HE was dark. The fact that Hitchcock had an obsession for blondes gives the film a veracity that is entirely irrelevant. Another track of interpreting the film through the filmmaker invokes Hitchcock's religious upbringing. These critics (including our old friend Kehr) repeatedly point an accusing finger at "Catholic guilt" as if it were a precise medical diagnosis like diphtheria. Jonathan Freedman tries to finesse all this with a novel ploy: Hitchcock's inept handling of psychology was deliberate because he intends it as a critique of psychology. While it is true that the greatest indictment of tedium is to be tedious, this isn't enough to convict the indicted.

Then there are the critics who seem psychoanalytic simply because their remarks are rhetorically convoluted. "A final shot of the [bell] tower gives it phallic prominence, ironically stressing Scottie's impotence" (Sterritt); Scottie has "the fear of falling crossed with an unappeasable longing to fall" (Leitch); Judy is "literally a fallen woman who plunges to her death after being pulled by the man she loves to the heights of a church that might have sanctified their intimacy through an appropriate marriage" (Singer). "The dream of *Vertigo* — the dream of a love that leads to death, of a beautiful illusion that gives way to nothingness — is also a dream of the movies" (Kehr — who else?).

Surveying this far-fetched drivel convinces one not only that film reviewing is the lowest rung on the critical ladder, but it is also no job for a practicing adult. Projecting a picture on a plaster wall doesn't make it a fresco. Why? Because it doesn't adhere. Some people say they see the outline of the hunter Orion in seven stars that are millions of light years apart; if they do, it isn't much of a likeness. The greatest service that criticism provides is in separating the fanciful from the factual. The exegesis that swaddles *Vertigo* only obscures what it attempts to

venerate. When the arbiter becomes the advocate, criticism loses its objective proviso; it slips into the realm of theology where sacred texts are never questioned but endlessly justified in all their minutia. To adherents of the Hitchcockian creed, the objections I've raised can only seem like blasphemy, which is a shame since blasphemy, for all its minor pleasures, inevitably limits the discussion; like swearing in Ukrainian, it renders you incomprehensible to everyone except the people you offend.

In his book on love, Stendhal likens the experience to something he witnessed in the salt mines of Poland. A cut down tree would be tossed into the subterranean lakes that formed from the accumulating water, and, over time, it became a crystallized structure that was more salt than wood. Hermeneutics can perform the same metamorphosis. An explanation, even an accurate explanation, remakes its subject; it amplifies and distorts like a magnifying lens that transforms a hydra into a giant squid. Is it acceptable to maintain, as Dave Kehr does, that *Vertigo* is about making movies when movies are only mentioned once when Midge suggests, "Take me to a movie"? Is it critically legitimate for Paula Marantz Cohen to claim the audience's reaction to Ferguson noticing that Judy has Madeleine's necklace is "less . . . a desire to be deluded than . . . a postmodern recognition, which the film itself teaches, that experience is, by definition, constructed and hence delusionary" about a film that was made long before postmodernism existed for it to teach? At what point does an explanation exceed its subject and lose any connection to the initiating experience? At what point does the tree become a piece of salt?

A pitfall that trips up many film critics is the tendency to characterize a movie and then fall in love with the characterization. Defining a work by a few moments taken out of context while entirely banishing the qualifications of sentimentality and sensationalism is to invent the object you venerate. In this, they resemble . . . Scottie Ferguson. Perhaps we have stumbled on the true reason *Vertigo* enamors its advocates; Narcissus' favorite natural vista, after all, had nothing to do with Nature. To perversely ignore the flaws that populate a film while praising elements that only exist in critical interpretations of it is not unlike Ferguson's transforming the tacky Judy Barton into the enigmatic Madeleine Elster. "Can't you love me for who I am?"

Hitchcock's film might beg its cadre of admirers as they push it to heights it can't sustain. The greatest film of all time? Please! The old nun is tolling her bell for more than an accidental death. The decline in critical standards signaled by the deification of this tawdry melodrama and the intemperate blather it inspires is not just a vertiginous drop; it's a total collapse.

"God have mercy!"