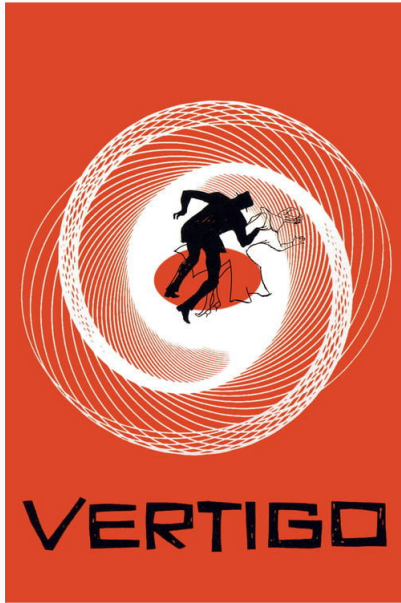




MYSTERY · ROMANCE · THRILLER

Vertigo

1958 · Directed by Alfred Hitchcock

Suspense

Classical Hollywood

Melodrama

Auteur Cinema

A San Francisco detective, retired after an incident that left him with a crippling fear of heights, is asked by an old friend to follow his wife, who seems to be haunted by something. What begins as a routine job becomes a slow, dreamlike fixation. Hitchcock's most personal thriller works as much as a love story as a mystery.

DIRECTOR	Alfred Hitchcock
YEAR	1958
RUNTIME	2h 08m (128 min)
COUNTRY	USA
GENRES	Mystery, Romance, Thriller
CAST	James Stewart, Kim Novak, Barbara Bel Geddes, Tom Helmore, Henry Jones
MUSIC	Bernard Herrmann
IMDB	8.2 / 10 (458,761 votes)
ROTTEN TOMATOES	94% (critics)
METACRITIC	100 / 100
TMDB SCORE	8.1 / 10 (6,525 votes)
WHERE TO WATCH	Stream (US): YouTube TV, TCM Rent: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, YouTube, Fandango At Home Buy: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, YouTube, Fandango At Home

Part one is spoiler-free. Part two, "After watching", reveals the story, scenes and ending.

Before watching

Spoiler-free

WHY WATCH THIS?

1 Hitchcock's most personal and most debated masterpiece

Many critics and filmmakers now regard *Vertigo* as the peak of Hitchcock's career. It turns the thriller into a study of obsession, and it rewards repeat viewings more than almost any other Hollywood film of its decade.

2 A thriller that works like a dream

Bernard Herrmann's swirling score, Robert Burks's saturated colour and James Stewart's unsettling performance make the film feel hypnotic. The pace is deliberate, and the mood matters more than the plot mechanics.

3 The film that made the dolly zoom famous

Its signature camera effect, tracking in while zooming out, now stands for dizziness and dread across cinema. Seeing it in its original setting shows why the technique is more than a trick.

WHY IT MATTERS IN CINEMA HISTORY

A late peak of the classical Hollywood thriller, made just as the studio style was loosening, and a key text for later auteur theory and psychological cinema.

WATCH WITH INTENTION

YOUR LENS

Watch it as a film about looking: who is watching whom, and what each person wants to see.

THREE THINGS TO NOTICE

- How often the camera follows Scottie's point of view, and how the editing makes you look at the same things he does.
- The use of colour, especially green and red, in costumes, rooms and lighting, and how it shifts the mood of each scene.
- How Bernard Herrmann's music circles and repeats rather than building to conventional climaxes, matching the film's spiral imagery.

ONE QUESTION TO CARRY WITH YOU

Is Scottie in love with a woman, or with the experience of following her?

CINEMA AT THE TIME

- **Industry:** Hitchcock made the film at Paramount, after a run of hits including *Rear Window*. By the late 1950s he was a brand name, and audiences expected polished, suspenseful entertainment.
- **Technology:** Shot in VistaVision and Technicolor on real San Francisco locations. Saturated colour and widescreen photography were marks of studio prestige, here used for psychological effect rather than spectacle.
- **Dominant styles:** Film noir had faded and Hollywood was moving toward glossy colour dramas. *Vertigo* borrows noir's obsession and doomed romance but places them in bright daylight and pastel interiors.
- **Director's moment:** Hitchcock adapted a French novel by Boileau and Narcejac, and cast James Stewart for the fourth time. The film pushes Stewart's decent-man persona into much darker territory.

WHERE IT CAME FROM

FILM

Rear Window (1954)

Hitchcock's earlier study of a James Stewart character watching others, which *Vertigo* takes into darker, more emotionally exposed territory.



MOVEMENT

Film noir

The doomed romance, obsessive male protagonist and fatal woman figure come from noir, though *Vertigo* reshapes them in colour.



TRADITION

Surrealism and dream cinema

Its dream sequences and uncanny repetition draw on the surrealist tradition, including Dalí's work with Hitchcock on *Spellbound*.



THIS FILM

Vertigo (1958)

NEW AT THE TIME *A mainstream star thriller that treats its hero's psychology as the real subject, with a dreamlike structure that made many 1958 audiences uneasy rather than thrilled.*

SOCIAL CONTEXT

Made in prosperous, conformist Eisenhower-era America, when Hollywood was a strong but changing industry and Hitchcock was at the peak of his reputation as a star director.

- **Country and moment:** Late-1950s America was affluent and Cold War-anxious. Suburban family life and conventional gender roles were widely idealised, and the film looks at obsession and identity in a polished, prosperous San Francisco.
- **Politics and censorship:** The Production Code still governed Hollywood. Sexual obsession, deception and morally troubling material had to be handled through suggestion and implication rather than being shown openly.
- **Society and audience:** Television had cut cinema attendance, so studios leaned on big stars, colour and name directors. Audiences expected Hitchcock thrillers to be glossy entertainment, and many reviewers in 1958 found this one slow and strange.
- **The filmmaker's situation:** Hitchcock was a British-born director long established in Hollywood. After a run of hits for Paramount, he was a brand name with unusual creative control, and he used it to make a deeply personal, risky film.

WHAT TO EXPECT

- **Pace:** Deliberate and hypnotic. Long stretches of silent pursuit and conversation replace action, so the suspense is mostly psychological.
- **Style:** Studio-crafted but dreamlike, with rear projection, painted effects and a stylised, symbolic use of San Francisco locations.
- **Performance:** James Stewart plays against his warm screen image. Kim Novak's controlled, layered performance carries much of the film's mystery.
- **Colour and format:** Technicolor, shot in VistaVision, so best seen in a restored widescreen version where the colour design registers fully.
- **Language:** English. The film is a slow-burning mystery rather than a fast thriller.

WATCH WITH KIDS?

12+

SUGGESTED AGE

US and GB rate it PG and France allows all ages, but Germany says 12. Its length, slow pace and adult psychological themes suit teens best.

Official ratings: US PG · UK PG · Germany 12 · France TP

- **Good for:** Older children and teens who enjoy slow-burn mysteries, striking colour and San Francisco locations, and who are curious about how film music and camera tricks create suspense.
- **May unsettle, peril:** Recurring scenes of heights and dizziness, with disorienting camera effects, plus some tense moments of danger and a few shocking beats.
- **May unsettle, mature themes:** Adult romantic and psychological themes, with an emotionally heavy, brooding tone. Nothing is graphic, but it is more unsettling than its PG rating suggests.
- **May unsettle, pace:** Long and deliberate, with extended stretches of quiet following and dialogue. Younger viewers may lose patience.
- **May unsettle, dated attitudes:** 1950s portrayals of women and relationships reflect the period, and some behaviour on screen is not meant to be admired.
- **Explain first:** It is a slow-building 1950s mystery, so the suspense comes from mood, music and clues rather than action.
- **Explain first:** The dizzying visual effects are camera tricks that put you inside a character's fear of heights.
- **Explain first:** Pay attention to details like colours, clothes and objects. Small things matter in this film.

Talk about it after: *How do the music and camera tricks make you share the main character's feelings, and did you always trust what you were shown?*

Cinespective's own guidance, a draft. Check it against the official ratings and your own judgement.

After watching

CONTAINS SPOILERS

THE FILM, UNPACKED

CENTRAL IDEA

The film explores obsession as a form of control: Scottie wants to rebuild reality to fit a fantasy, and the film asks what that costs both him and the person he projects onto. It can be read as Hitchcock examining his own habits as a director.

THEMES

- **Obsession and control:** Scottie's love depends on shaping another person to match an image. The film shows this as tender at first and then increasingly cruel.
- **Identity and performance:** Characters play roles, deliberately or not. The film keeps asking what is genuine in a person and what is costume, hair and make-up.
- **The male gaze:** The camera often shares Scottie's controlling point of view, then makes the viewer uncomfortable about having shared it. The film can be read as a critique of that gaze.
- **Fear and falling:** Heights, spirals and drops become emotional images for loss of control, grief and the pull toward the past.
- **Death and repetition:** The story loops back on itself, with places, gestures and images repeating, as though Scottie cannot move beyond a trauma.

Key scenes

Rooftop chase and the first vertigo

The opening sets up Scottie's trauma before any romance exists. It also introduces the dolly zoom, which turns a character's inner state into an image and fixes the fear that drives the rest of the film.

Ernie's restaurant, Madeleine's first appearance

Madeleine is shown only through Scottie's eyes, in profile against a red wall, to a swelling score. The scene teaches the film's method: desire made visual, with the woman presented as an image before she is a person.

Mission San Juan Bautista tower

The film's central emotional and plot turning point. It ties Scottie's phobia to his love and to his guilt, and it deliberately recalls the opening. After this, the film's mood and structure change decisively.

Judy's transformation in the hotel room

Scottie's fixation is shown as a physical act of remaking someone. The green neon glow, the slow reveal and the kiss with the swirling background bring the film's themes of control and illusion together in a single sequence.

Filmmaking

- **Camera and effects:** The dolly zoom, rear-projected dream sequences and spiralling title design by Saul Bass express psychological states visually. Technique is part of the meaning rather than decoration.
- **Music:** Bernard Herrmann's score uses repeating, circling motifs and a yearning, Wagner-like romanticism. It carries the film's emotion when the characters say little.
- **Colour and design:** Robert Burks's photography and Edith Head's costumes assign colours to moods and identities. Greens, greys and reds recur in ways that are hard to ignore on a second viewing.
- **Structure:** The film refuses to follow the usual thriller pattern. Its revelations come in unexpected places, and Hitchcock chooses to share information with the audience early so that suspense becomes emotional.
- **Performance:** Stewart builds Scottie from gentle charm to something frightening. Novak's performance depends on subtle differences of posture, voice and movement across the roles she plays.

THE FULL STORY

The full plot, including the ending.

Scottie Ferguson, a San Francisco police detective, develops acrophobia and vertigo after a rooftop chase in which a colleague dies. He retires and spends time with his friend Midge, a former fiancée. An old college acquaintance, Gavin Elster, then asks him to follow his wife Madeleine, who he says seems possessed by the spirit of an ancestor, Carlotta Valdes.

Scottie follows Madeleine around the city, rescues her when she plunges into the bay, and falls in love with her. Their relationship deepens, and he tries to help her face her fears. At Mission San Juan Bautista she runs up the bell tower. Scottie's vertigo stops him following her, and he watches her fall to her death. An inquest blames him for failing to act, and he collapses into a depressed breakdown.

Later he sees Judy Barton, a shopgirl who resembles Madeleine. He pursues her and begins to insist she dress and style herself like the dead woman. Judy gives in because she loves him.

When Scottie notices a necklace that Judy wears, he realises she was the woman he knew as Madeleine. Elster had hired her to impersonate his wife and had murdered the real wife, using Scottie as a witness to a staged suicide. Scottie takes Judy back to the mission tower and forces her to confess. This time he reaches the top. A figure appears in the shadows, startling Judy, and she falls to her death. Scottie is left on the ledge, cured of his fear but alone.

BEHIND THE FILM

- **Casting change:** Hitchcock originally planned the part for Vera Miles, but she became pregnant and was unavailable. Kim Novak, then a major Columbia star on loan, took the role, and her slightly guarded manner suited the film's central mystery.

- **French source:** The film adapts the novel *D'entre les morts* by Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac. Hitchcock reportedly wanted it after missing the chance to film an earlier work by the same writers; the script went through several writers before Samuel Taylor's version.
- **The dolly zoom:** The effect that evokes Scottie's dizziness was achieved by moving the camera along a track while zooming the lens in the opposite direction. It is credited to second-unit camera operator Irmin Roberts, and has been used in cinema ever since.
- **Saul Bass titles:** Bass designed the film's title sequence, with spiralling graphics inspired by mechanical drawings and a close-up of a face. It sets the film's mood and became one of the most admired title designs.
- **Real San Francisco:** Locations such as the Golden Gate area, Fort Point and the Spanish mission at San Juan Bautista were used heavily. The mission's bell tower was added through studio work, since the real structure lacked the needed tower.
- **Myth:** Vertigo was a flop that ruined Hitchcock's career. **Reality:** It was a modest earner, not a disaster, and Hitchcock followed it with *North by Northwest* and *Psycho*. Critics were divided at first, and its stature grew over later decades.
- **Myth:** Hitchcock disliked how the film turned out because Novak was wrong for it. **Reality:** There is no solid evidence for this. Hitchcock had wanted Vera Miles, but Novak's performance is now widely seen as essential to the film's effect.

LEGACY AND CONNECTIONS

Its place in the lineage before → after

FILM

Rear Window (1954)

Hitchcock's earlier study of a James Stewart character watching others, which *Vertigo* takes into darker, more emotionally exposed territory.



MOVEMENT

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TRADITION

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THIS FILM

Vertigo (1958)



FILM

Obsession (1976)

Brian De Palma's thriller reworks Vertigo's story of a man remaking a lost love, with a Herrmann score.



FILM

Taxi Driver (1976)

Scorsese's film, also scored by Herrmann, shares Vertigo's lonely male fixation on an idealised woman.



FILM

La Jetée (1962)

Chris Marker's short film, built around images, memory and a lost woman, echoes Vertigo's themes and spiral structure.



FILMMAKER

Auteur critics and filmmakers

Vertigo became a central text for critics who treat directors as authors, and for filmmakers who explore psychological subjectivity.

Reception and reputation

Reviews on release were mixed. Some critics enjoyed the visual flair and Stewart's performance, while others found the story slow and implausible. It earned a modest profit rather than the hit status of Hitchcock's other 1950s films. Audiences seeking an exciting thriller were often puzzled by its dreamy, melancholy tone.

After years out of circulation, the film returned to cinemas in the 1980s and was reassessed. Critics, scholars and filmmakers came to see it as Hitchcock's deepest work, and it is now among the most analysed American films, especially for its treatment of obsession and gender.

Awards Oscars and Cannes

Academy Awards: 2 nominations (Best Art Direction, Best Sound), no wins.

Cultural impact beyond cinema

- **Spiral as graphic shorthand:** Saul Bass's spiral title sequence and poster art turned the whirlpool motif into one of cinema's best-known graphic images. It is regularly echoed in posters, album sleeves, design homages and tributes, often with no connection to the plot.
- **Madeleine's look:** Kim Novak's grey suit, pinned-up spiral twist of hair and green-lit entrance, with costumes by Edith Head, became shorthand for the elusive, haunted woman. Fashion and photography features still cite the look as an homage.
- **San Francisco pilgrimage:** Fans visit the film's locations, including Fort Point beneath the Golden Gate Bridge and Mission San Juan Bautista. The film is closely tied to the city's image, and it supports location tours and screenings.
- **Parody and study:** Mel Brooks's Hitchcock spoof *High Anxiety* (1977) lampoons its bell-tower climax. Academics have also made it a staple of film-studies teaching, notably in feminist analyses of the male gaze such as Laura Mulvey's essay.

Its lasting influence

Brian De Palma, Martin Scorsese and many others borrowed its themes of voyeurism and obsessive love, and its dolly zoom became a shared language for disorientation. Its spiral imagery and Herrmann's score echo through later psychological thrillers.

WHAT NEXT?

CONTINUE THE DIRECTOR

Rear Window (1954)

Hitchcock's earlier thriller with Stewart, also about looking and voyeurism, shows how Vertigo develops those ideas. It is more playful and gives a clearer sense of his suspense craft.

SEE WHAT INFLUENCED IT

Double Indemnity (1944)

A classic noir about a man destroyed by a seductive woman and his own weakness, useful for seeing the tradition Vertigo reworks.

COMPARE ANOTHER APPROACH

Citizen Kane (1941)

Another film about a man's desire to possess an image of the past, and another work that rose to the top of critics' attention.

JUMP FORWARD

2001: A Space Odyssey (1968)

A very different film that likewise treats images, music and structure as the main carriers of meaning, rather than conventional storytelling.

EXPLORE THE ERA OR MOVEMENT

La Dolce Vita (1960)

A European art film from the same moment, showing how cinema was moving toward ambiguous, psychological storytelling.

FULL CAST AND CREW



Alfred Hitchcock
DIRECTOR



James Stewart
ACTOR
as Det. John 'Scottie'
Ferguson



Kim Novak
ACTOR
as Madeleine Elster /
Judy Barton



**Barbara Bel
Geddes**
ACTOR
as Marjorie 'Midge'
Wood



Tom Helmore
ACTOR
as Gavin Elster



Henry Jones

ACTOR

as Coroner



**Bernard
Herrmann**

COMPOSER

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