

Alfred Hitchcock's *VERTIGO* (1958)

Obsession as Art

When I heard that Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* replaced *Citizen Kane* as the number one movie of all time after 50 years of *Kane*'s undisputed reign on the top of the list, I was both shocked and disappointed. Shocked because, even before I was born, *Kane* was *The Movie*. Basically, throughout my entire life, Orson Welles' work of genius radiated its light from the Olympus of cinema. Disappointed, because – although I admired Hitchcock and regarded him as a very influential filmmaker - I never thought of him as being capable to generate masterpieces. Moreover, *Vertigo* surely wasn't the first title popping up in my mind when I thought of the little funny guy who astutely amused himself by scaring people to death.

The first time I watched *Vertigo* I was in my late teens. Since then this movie was mixed in my memory with Hitchcock's other films: *The Birds*, *Psycho*, *Rear Window* etc. I reminisced *Vertigo* as just another great thriller; no more than that. Then the news came up this year that *Vertigo* was crowned number one, replacing *Citizen Kane* at the top of the list. Understandably, I immediately included *Vertigo* as a must-see for our Club. Two weeks ago we watched it and after 25 years or so I rediscovered this film: it was a revelation.

The whole movie floats in a sort of mystical mist - pardon the alliteration. Everything is eerie, like in a dream. Nothing is what it appears to be. James Stewart drives his car around the town over and over again, slowly and stubbornly with an unforgettable lost look on his face. Things are happening at a slower rate than normal and after twenty minutes or so in the movie the viewer is caught in this ghostly web of people following various trajectories in an apparent Brownian way. I said "apparent" because Hitchcock's genius brings everything together in the end with impeccable logic. However, unlike most of his movies, *Vertigo* is not about the plot or about surprising twists, not even about the thrill. All these features are implicit; they result from the whole atmosphere of the movie; they are collateral boons. *Vertigo* is all about ambience, an ambience charged with the heavy flavour of obsession. The whole movie breathes, disseminates and instills the intoxicating incense of a passionate fixation which evolves from benign interest to malignant *idée fixe*. This overwhelming feeling gives the viewer a state of surreal dizziness. Furthermore, this subtly induced mood may generate a second interpretation – metaphorical, this time - of the very title of this movie. Bernard Herrmann's music contributes greatly to this ambience. His composition has a circular, mesmerizing structure in which the same musical motives are returning with a hypnotic uniformity. Herrmann's score is memorable because it is orbicular, exactly in

the way human obsession works – residual thoughts never escaping a close range trajectory forever caught into the gravitational field of one single hypothesis.

Supporting James Stewart in this movie is Kim Novak in one of her best performances. Novak adds to the movie's unearthly tone her portrayal of a character almost devoid of emotion. Madeleine /Judy seems to act in an almost 'androidal' way – her emotions, displayed from time to time, feel unreal, fake, like carefully and painfully practiced acts of a mannequin. Her stunningly beautiful face has an inner immobility almost throughout the movie. This bizarre immobility permits the facial parts to move without an actual true-felt expression. Novak's remarkable performance adds to this movie a touch of surrealism that brings it closer to the canvasses of Salvador Dali and the early works of Luis Buñuel.

I am still not overly comfortable with *Vertigo* replacing *Kane* at the top of the list. Nevertheless, I am now certain it deserves to tie first place with *Kane* or, at the very least, be ranked the second best movie of all time. Undeniably, *Vertigo* is a masterpiece, an exceptional artistic experience, an absolute must-see for any movie aficionado.

One last word. Hitchcock's masterpiece is absolutely NOT one of those abstract and cryptic works of art which leave the viewer unsettled and perplexed. It does not have an obscure and infuriating open ending. As previously stated, it is a film about obsession; obsession always takes two. Consequently, in the words of Madeleine: "Only one is a wanderer; two together are always going somewhere". *Vertigo* definitely goes somewhere. It masterfully leads the viewer to a place where the most awaited climax happens in the usual Hitchcockian unexpected way, to everybody's full satisfaction.

Dr. Phil M. Ovie

NOTE: There is a plethora of polls out there. They emphatically come in and anonymously go away daily following various group interests or market trends. For clarification, this is the one I always use and trust. Each decade since 1952 **The British Film Institute's** magazine *Sight and Sound* asks between 800-900 critics, programmers, academics and distributors to vote the **best ten movies of all time**. For 50 years *Citizen Kane* topped the list. In 2012 another vote was called. Here are the results:

1. *Vertigo*, 1958 by Alfred Hitchcock
2. *Citizen Kane*, 1941 by Orson Welles
3. *Tokyo Story*, 1953 by Yasujiro Ozu

4. *La Règle du jeu*, 1939 by Jean Renoir
5. *Sunrise: a Song for Two Humans*, 1927 by F. Wilhelm Murnau
6. *2001: A Space Odyssey*, 1968 by Stanley Kubrick
7. *The Searchers*, 1956 by John Ford
8. *Man with the Movie Camera*, 1929 by Dziga Vertov
9. *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, 1927 by Carl Théodore Dreyer
10. *8 ½*, 1963 by Federico Fellini

All these masterpieces are included in our Movies Club viewing list.