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There are few films that possess a terrible beauty equal to that of *Vertigo*—haunting in the way of a remembered dream that recalls radiant, frightening images slightly out of control. Death, and the courtship of death, is the unspoken kin of obsession; and *Vertigo* is a gorgeous nightmare of romantic love feeding on itself into nothing—passion unreconciled, hope broken.

It's become gratuitous to call *Vertigo* Hitchcock's greatest film, and though the description is probably accurate, it really doesn't do justice to the movie or to Hitchcock himself. The truth is there is nothing else like *Vertigo* in the director's career—it is the consummation of ideas and feelings hinted at many times earlier, and finally developed in a love story that brushes the edges of experience.

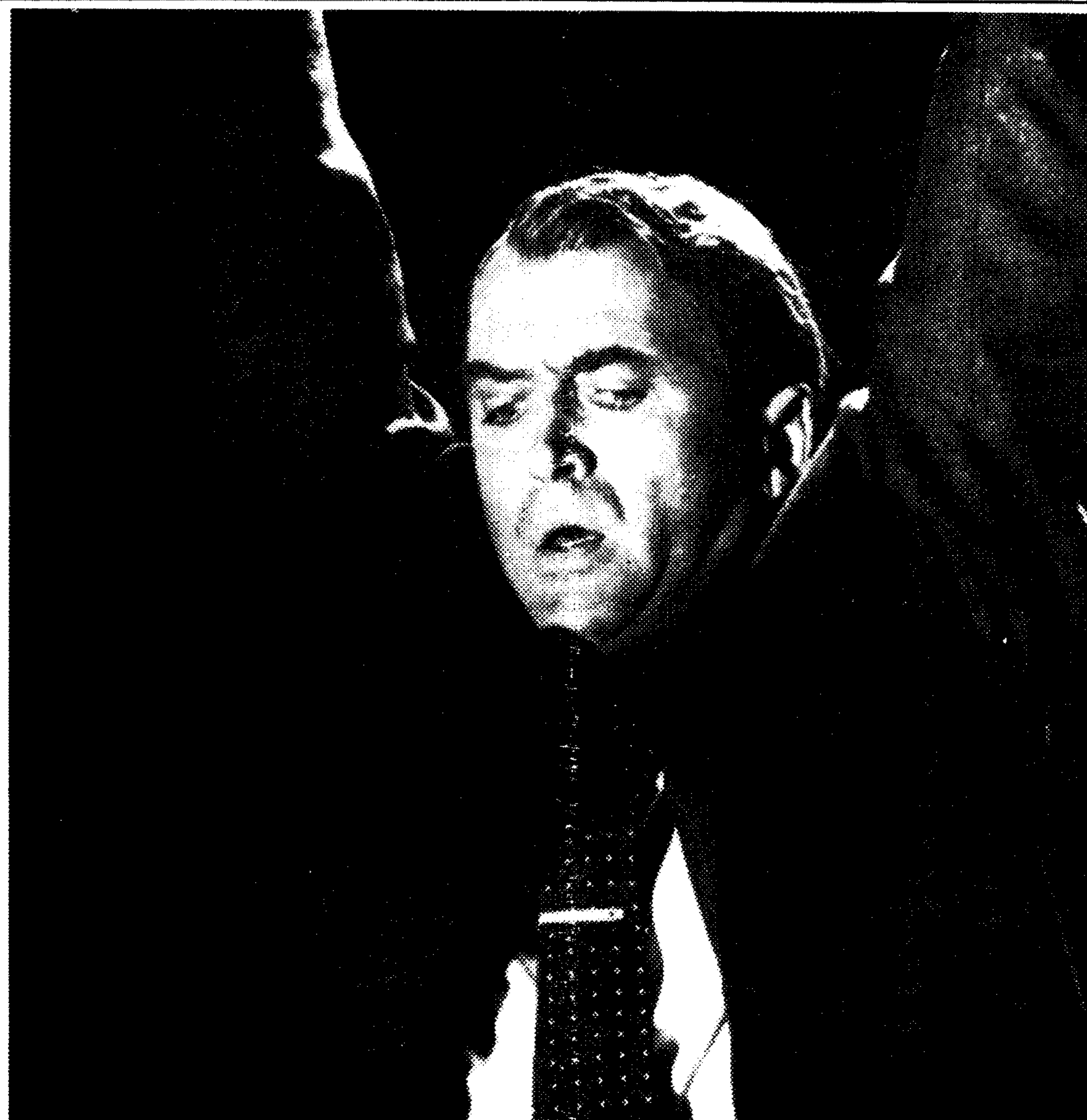
Love, and the memory of love, has a reality of its own, with high points and weighted moments that compress passion into bits of time. *Vertigo* is essentially constructed out of moments like those, and that may explain the elliptical, dream-like quality it has when it is remembered—there is often a sense of dangling lapse between scenes, and many incidents in the plot are left unexplained. Yet there is nothing illogical about the structure of the film; if anything, it seems as mysterious as it is because its logic is so intricate and profound.

Night: John Ferguson, a detective (James Stewart), chases a criminal across the rooftops of San Francisco, and in a moment of miscalculation, slides off a piece of slate. When the policeman who tries to rescue him falls to his death, Ferguson has his first experience of agrophobia—the world becomes both elongated and squeezed; he is left hanging from the edge of a gutter.

There is never any expalnation given for how Ferguson is rescued from his predicament, and in a sense he never is—the rest of the film is a cycle of loss followed by recovery, bound by decisions and moments from which there is no escape at all. When Ferguson is hired several months later to follow Madelaine (Kim Novak), a friend's wife who appears to be going mad, he falls in love with her, and is more than half in love with the idea that she may be possessed by the ghost of a beautiful ancestor. When she climbs a convent tower to committ suicide, he follows her, is stricken by the vertigo-effect of agrophobia and looks up in time to see her body falling from the roof.

The true and perverse love story only begins once Madelaine is dead. After Ferguson is broken, then recovering, he re-visits the places he had been with her, and recognizes with greater and greater immediacy, bits of the woman he has lost in the gestures and looks of passing strangers. What had begun as a kind of ghost story becomes a literal one of memory overtaking the present.

"Acquaintances call me Scotty:" it's ironic that the woman who Ferguson cared for most knew him by his most superficial name, yet it's an appropriate indication of the nature of their love. A year after Madelaine is buried, Scotty follows a similar-looking woman to her room, asks her out, and in a series of steps begins to remake her into the woman he lost. New clothes, new make-up, yellow hair—these are the things that recall his passion, and cosmetic as they are, they're more important to him than the woman they dress.



The effect of his love is a profound involvement with superficial impressions, a romantic death-in-life of suspended animation. That is the heart of the movie—the conflict between human love and imagined love, a breathing woman and the idea of one—that, and the corrosive effect of re-making the past in every moment.

It's become common to call many accidents tragedies, and perhaps they are, if they represent some structural flaw in what is essentially a human idea or system. The crash of a plane is surely a sign of the times and a pain unique to it; so is the idea of love. *Vertigo* is a tragedy of romantic love and the masks it places over the heart—it is also a tragedy in what used to be called the "old sense," the drama of a single character destroyed by an overriding flaw or virtue. The obsession of Scotty Ferguson in *Vertigo* is what changes him into an evil man and destroys everything he cares about.

The suspense in a movie is a function of how much an audience cares about its characters, and they care according to how well imagined the characters are. It's to Hitchcock's credit that in *Vertigo* he sacrifices the surprise in the plot in order to develop Scotty and Madelaine more fully, and make the anticipation of their fate all the more moving. Two-thirds of the way into the movie its story is sabotaged with a twist that effectively breaks everything that has happened before; what will happen, and the motives behind it, become horrible and dark. The questions underlying it all aren't only where attraction begins and ends, but the extent to which the narcissism within a romantic obsession becomes necrophilia that smothers imperfect love.

Scotty is on the edge; Madelaine falls—he recovers, and tries to recover her. Although *Vertigo* is Hitchcock's wildest film in the extremes of experience it touches, it is also his most carefully designed. The use of red in the film and the darkness of the color has the look of an environment in which passion is both present and an echo of itself. The structure of *Vertigo* is essentially circular, both in the movement of its plot and the arrangement of shapes within it; the effect is one of endless whirlpools within whirlpools, a world in which everything becomes a mechanism of obsession feeding upon itself. Scotty

re-lives moments in order to recover them, but discovers only that guilt and regret are bottomless. His predicament is like that of Milton's Satan, who realizes "Myself am Hell" and beneath any imaginable remorse is only greater suffering.

A successful film is really a successful collaboration, and Hitchcock was lucky to be working with Bernard Hermann at the time he directed *Vertigo*. Hermann is celebrated in his own right, and justly so; but the score he wrote for *Vertigo* is easily his most memorable. The structure of its motifs mirror the pattern of images in the film; its haunting fragmented melody only become complete when Scotty appears to have consummated his dream. Of course the

other great collaborator in *Vertigo* is James Stewart: his performance in the film and the complexity and emotional depth of his character are what make the movie much more than a *tour de force* or set piece of wonderful shots. After watching him in this and *Rear Window* one can understand why Hitchcock considered him the most extraordinary actor he ever worked with. The performance of Kim Novak in the film—and this is being exacting—while not as proficient as Stewart's, is exactly what it should be, and the beauty and vulnerability she brings to the role makes Scotty's obsession with her understandable, if not really excusable. Though *Vertigo* is a film with minor glitches, the power and progression of its scenes is spellbinding.

On the bill with *Vertigo* Thursday, October 2 at the Castro, *Rear Window* is Hitchcock's technical *tour de force* with an unsettling moral texture. A photographer (James Stewart) recovers in his apartment from an injury by observing, at first casually, then methodically, the lives of his neighbors. When he sees what appears to be the clues of a gruesome murder across the way, he risks the lives of his girlfriend (Grace Kelly) and therapist (Thelma Ritter) in a attempt to sieze the moment and study it. The photographer begins to deal with life as if it were a movie he were both watching and directing, and he is as helpless as the audience when the events he sets in motion touch the woman he loves and relentlessly come back to himself. *Rear Window* is about how the fascination with evil can become transformed into evil itself; and how the violation of another's privacy makes one somehow responsible for the victim's life.

Rear Window is scheduled for 7:15, *Vertigo* at 9:15, though call the Castro (621-6120) to confirm the times.

—Darick Allan