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Unframed version

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## Losing It (C):

A Vertigo Restoration Comedy by Ray Davis  
1998

Comments by Robert Harris and James Katz in a film archivists' mailing list:

*The film is meant as pure (U) entertainment. Again (A), the original surviving elements (T) (which are few) have been retained. Where possible, original Foley (O) and efx were used in the stereo mix. The question (R) should be...*

*Does the film work as modern (D) entertainment? Do viewers experiencing the film for the first time (or seeing it (N) again) get more (or less (K)) enjoyment or understanding of the multi-layered film or do tracks (S) detract from the pleasure of the film. Our feeling (after spending two years working (K) to make this as true as possible to Hitchcock's intentions (E)) is that the entertainment (J) value is heightened (C).*

The hilarity soars at *Bright Lights Film Journal* .

Visted links not updating their colors in this frame? Navigational help (H) is now available for exasperated Netscape and Internet Explorer users.

for original hypertext version, see:

<http://www.dnai.com/~raydavis/laffs/>

## Her key (Q) is on the rack

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I remember my ex-mother-in-common-law asking two questions after we saw the 1984 revival of *Vertigo* :

1. Why don't they make movies like that anymore?
2. Why does the lady putting olive oil on her rubber plant leaves insist that Carlotta Valdes hadn't come into her hotel that day?

I had no answer (R). In fact, I hadn't even remembered that plot point, I was too swept away (T) -- but the small scenes, the fragments of the mirror (L) -- I remember those.

## "Boids. Dirty filthy boids."

B

The bird songs introduced by restorers into *Vertigo*'s Muir Woods scene establish a refreshing outdoorsy atmosphere which contrasts with the surrounding scenes, as well as with:

Documentary	Style	Dialogue	Biography
Redwood forests tend to stifle non-redwood life	"The music and the sound effects are elusive and lonely, fragile and ghostly...." -- Donald Spoto	Madeline closes the scene by begging to be taken somewhere where it's light, indicating a claustrophobic mood	In interviews and in his work, Hitchcock often expressed a fear of birds

### Genealogy

From the shooting script:

MADELEINE

(Simply)

Knowing I have to die....

She looks up at him with a shy embarrassed smile. Then, seeing the wondering look in his eyes, she brightens quickly.

MADELEINE

But I like the stream! It's a lovely stream!

She leaves him and moves quickly out onto the bridge and leans on the railing to watch the water (T) rippling below. And then, as he approaches her, she turns and looks at him, wide-eyed.

MADELEINE

But it makes no sound! Listen!

She listens intently for a long moment, and looks at him anxiously.

MADELEINE

Do you hear anything (C)?

SCOTTIE

(Shaking his head)

Only silence (R). It's always like this.

MADELEINE  
(Wondering)  
And no birds sing.

SCOTTIE  
No birds live here.

MADELEINE  
No.

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## Is the Entertainment Value Heightened?

I found it hard to judge. My companions told me that the revival's audience was the most intrusively ticklish they'd ever had to listen over, but, for myself, the laughter seemed no more raucous than at *Vertigo*'s previous long-awaited revival back in '84 (A). There were still entire minutes which passed without contemptuous comment. And at the end, there were still a few of us (L), stirred and shaken (G), left behind the rising dashing (T) crowd.

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## Was it a ghost? Was it fun?

Harris and Katz would've achieved much more "pure" "modern" entertainment by adding the Energizer Bunny to every scene. They did not, and so *Vertigo* remains an embarrassing failure as entertainment. Audiences who *seek* entertainment must noisily make do with the entertainment of embarrassment. In other words, camp (J).

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## "as true as possible to Hitchcock's intentions"

It's true that Hitchcock's stated intentions always stressed cold professionalism. But "profession" must be permitted its double meaning; when placed against the evidence (U) of his films, these statements seem only the habitual disclaimers of a fat boy trying not to get beaten up.

**Explicit insincerity is the essential first step towards mature socialization.**

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## Let's make that movie some other night

The few intentional jokes include Wood's return to her "first love (K), painting," and Ferguson's joshing with a wooden horse which would "have a little trouble getting in and out of the stall (R) without being pushed." Both jokes are "not funny" according to the characters (although audiences are loudly delighted with the former): In *Vertigo*, humor is a despicable and ineffectual grab for power, an unwelcome attempt to re-establish shared unspoken assumptions over the unspeakable void, and the only joke sincerely endorsed is "Who was that lady I saw with you last night?"

# Music for Dipsomaniacs

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"Drink this down: just like medicine." "I just thought if I gave you a drink, you'd be so grateful you'd take me to a movie." "I *need* this." "Hey -- wait a min-blub." Solitary drinkers have a bad rep, but social drinkers are the ones who cause damage.

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Shaking nausea, odd shifts in focus and depth of vision, inarticulatable desires uncoupled from the power to satisfy, bouts of bullying and self-loathing -- aren't these symptoms of alcoholism rather than acrophobia? And is there anything funnier than a solemn drunk?

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# From Among the Dead

4

INT. THE JAGUAR - (DAY)

Madeleine is at the wheel, her eyes intent on the road, a soft happy smile on her lips. Scottie is at her side, relaxed. He keeps looking at her as often as he can without seeming obvious.

SCOTTIE

(Finally)

Do you know where you're going?

MADELEINE

Of course not! I'm a wanderer!

(Pause. Then brightly)

I'd like to go somewhere I've never been!

SCOTTIE

How can you be sure?

MADELEINE

If I've been there? That's silly!

Either you've been to a place or you haven't.

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*Netscape 3.01 bug report courtesy of the shooting script by Alec Coppel and Samuel Taylor*

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## You shouldn't have been that sentimental



Film history tells us that audiences often react abusively towards the "overwrought": heckling similar to that directed at *Vertigo* leveled the emotional peaks of *Rules of the Game* and *The Magnificent Ambersons* after their own previews. Cry and the world laughs at you; laugh and you blow the joke. As Homer Simpson noted while viewing a driver's education (S) film, "It's funny because I don't know them."

If "art" is defined as that which is in excess of the utilitarian, then the distinction between overwrought entertainment (e.g., Sirk) and perfectly wrought entertainment (e.g., Spielberg) may become clearer.

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## The Chinese say that once you've saved a film, you're responsible for it forever.



*Vertigo*'s reputation is not based on its entertainment value but on its value as a fetish object for obsessives (Q). Its restoration was essential not for maximizing of entertainment but to complete the story: to play out the threatened destruction of the fetish object by obsessives who desire its salvation.

It stands to reason that we less active (S) obsessives must then criticize (B) that obsessive attempt at protection. After all, the original is always better (M) than the restoration: not only the clothes and the hair, but the looks and the manner and the words....

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Judy tossed from the window, a silenced Punch dangles, emptied, limp, unmanipulated. We (P) feeble Punches and flattened Judies respond in kind.



As for the rest of the audience? There was no way for them to understand. You and I know who killed Madeline.

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## You were a very apt pupil



Ferguson's rage is at his own comparative failure: The object of desire was more skilled and more willing with her earlier partner. He doesn't seek revenge on Gavin Elster, because such a revenge would not circle back on Ferguson himself. Instead he attacks the desired one, seeking to restore (K) the emptiness he lost.

Elster is the successful Pygmalion; Ferguson is closer to Icarus. And even closer to an unsuccessful and rebellious puppet (L) who's got no strings to hold him up.

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## It's an Easy Color, Sir



I've heard speculation that the brightened colors may be an artifact of naive restorer enthusiasm, but *Vertigo* always used the most deliriously Sirkian of Hitchcock's palettes, and the lush score and lush colors only slightly appreciate the lushness of a film which has always been lush (G) in every sense.

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## In Praise of Foley



Glaring sound effects are just too difficult to squeeze into such a quiet film. The restorers can make the drop of a hat sound like a gunshot, but they can't quite bring themselves to make it sound like the THX-style gunshots which, alas, only occur in the opening scene. Though the dubbing of bird twitters is wrong-headed(B), it's hardly wrong-headed enough to add noticeably to the camp value, which has always been the film's most obvious entertainment value.

Patching such works is a waste of time: best to leave them to the appreciation of the humotess (F) few (P).

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## **I thought I detected an undercurrent (T)....**

(F)

Stendhal's Happy Few are only defined by their being sneered at by the Even Happier Many.

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## **I'm committed. I have to know.**

(Q)

"If I could just find the key, the beginning and put it together."

"So you could explain it away(U)? There is a way to explain it, you see. If I'm mad, then that would explain it, wouldn't it?"

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## **Please Don't Ask Me, Please Don't Ask Me**

(R)

Is there a more comically hoary melodramatic (or dully hoary comic) plot device than the motiveless delay of a speech which would close the story down? Is any other story to be found in *Vertigo* ?

*Vertigo*'s relationships are based entirely on what's not said -- or rather on the tense *assumption* that something very important is not being said. The characters are correct to fear expression, since their unspoken thoughts would wither and vanish if exposed to air:

- Marjory Wood's "saving herself" for Ferguson, and her attendant jealousy, are clearly products of fantasy.
- Madeline Elster's fears remain explicitly unexplored, perhaps to avoid pushing her playacting (or her script) past their limits.
- Judy Barton's secret actually finds an expression -- but one which is immediately destroyed after trailing off into a consideration of its own consequences.
- Once John Ferguson discovers that Gavin Elster isn't the failure he pictured, he reneges on his promise of a relaxed drink(G), and, for the rest of the film, alternates between lies and silence. Both his investigation and his passion are not only ineptly hidden, but (as hinted by both Ferguson and Wood) are absurd in themselves.

The lovers of the void insist that it unveil itself ("Try for me," Ferguson begs Madeline Elster, and, in turn, Wood begs Ferguson), but are never willing to reveal their own truths. Ferguson's (and Hitchcock's apologists' -- that is, our(Q)) most laughably transparent lie is "You see? There's an answer(A) for everything."

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## **The law has little to say (R) about things left undone**

(S)

In *Vertigo*, phantom vacuity must triumph over the assertion of self. Without personality or interests or past (she has a family history but no personal history), Madeline Elster exists only as an abstractly anguished void from

whom the lens shields itself as it never would from Marjory Wood or Judy Barton.

One is defined by what one does, and Madeline Elster and John Ferguson are defined by their lack of direction: they "wander." "There's nothing you must do," and nothing is what all three major characters devote themselves to.

To be aimless is not to avoid an end, but merely to miss the chance for an *intended* end. "Two are always going somewhere," and if they don't go "necessarily," then their slow drifting float will eventually lead to a slippery ride down the falls: "The mission? That's Skid Row, isn't it?"

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## First muss me a little

(E)

The presence of water consistently cued the audience that hilarity was at hand. They chuckled at "Madeline Elster"'s drop off Fort Point, they hooted at the very un-Bay-like calm (B) she so carefully floated on, they jeered "She still has her shoes!" when she was carried out, and they pert near bust a gut when a wave crashed behind the first kiss of the film.

*Vertigo*'s water is an odd substance. It touches without mussing; softens but doesn't melt; it ruins (and by extension removes) the clothing but leaves the face on.

It operates like sex in soft-core porn.

John Ferguson (and Alfred Hitchcock) desire the impossible vacancy of mainstream media sexuality; Marjory Wood and Judy Barton are punished when they can't provide it; in turn, Ferguson and Hitchcock's overly explicit desires are punished, by storyline and by the audience's laughter, respectively. That saturation-coverage fantasy of inviolability and desecration (K) curls in embarrassment when touched too sincerely and too publicly.

As for the shoes (U), they simply seem to be a tight fit: only one is jolted loose by Madeline Elster's fall.

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## If I could just find the key (Q)

(Q)

The impeccably lay *Bay Guardian* reviewer describes *Vertigo* as "a standard Hitchcock whodunit" -- meaning what? In this particular film, the existence of a crime is revealed only at the very same moment that its perpetrators are revealed: the "who" and the "dun" collapse together. In fact, I can't think of *any* Hitchcock films that could possibly be viewed as setting a standard for whodunits.

No, Hitchcock as large body-of-work is not defined by any professional genre, but instead by personal obsessions. It would be more accurate to describe *Vertigo* as, for example, "a standard chance for Hitchcock to ensure that the top of a woman's foot (T) is scraped while she's dragged upward."

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