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Lost in Space

If you've never seen Alfred Hitchcock's rhapsodic and perverse *Vertigo*, you are invited to stop reading and get on line at the Ziegfeld. And if you have seen *Vertigo* and wonder whether the new 70mm restoration is all that it's been hyped—you don't really have to ask. *Vertigo* is a mystery that only improves with knowledge of its "solution," not to mention projection in its original format on a huge screen.

Indeed, it seems nearly redundant to be promoting the film in these pages. Back in the auteurist heyday of the late '70s, the *Voice* film section voted *Vertigo* the greatest American movie of all time. (As a callow, fifth-string, part-time reviewer, I topped my ballot with the Oscar Micheaux film, *God's Step-Children*, but that's another story.) For more than a few people, *Vertigo* is the ultimate movie—a movie that is, after all, concerned with being hopelessly, obsessively, fetishistically in love with an image. Or, as *The New York Times* reported in June 1958, it is "all about how a dizzy fellow chases after a dizzy dame."

Back in the day, *Vertigo* was received with genial condescension. *Time* called it a typical "Hitchcock-and-bull story." Hitchcock was then heavily involved in television, and although "Hollywood's best-known butterball" (*Time*), he was perceived to be stretched a mite thin. Knowledgeable reviewers noted that *Vertigo*, adapted from a novel by the same French authorial team that provided rival director H. G. Clouzot with his hit thriller *Diabolique*, was a form of catch-up. Since it was less successful with audiences than *Rear Window*, *To Catch a Thief*, and *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, only *Cahiers du Cinéma* and the mavens who wrote for the Hollywood trade papers took the movie seriously.

A three-year, frame-by-frame restoration by James C. Katz and Robert A. Harris (the team responsible for the restorations of *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Spartacus*, and *My Fair Lady*), the re-release uses 70mm wide-screen to re-create the VistaVision version seen by *Vertigo*'s first-run audiences. (A clever wide-screen process, VistaVision was produced by positioning the movie camera horizontally to expose the equivalent of two

Vertigo
 Directed by Alfred Hitchcock
 Written by Alec Coppel
 and Samuel Taylor
 A Universal Pictures release
 At the Ziegfeld

Microcosmos
 Written and directed by
 Claude Nuridsany and Marie Perennou
 A Miramax Film release
 At Film Forum

L5: First City in Space
 Produced, written, and directed
 by Toni Myers
 At the Sony IMAX Theatre
 Opening October 11

BY J. HOBERMAN

ing the ghostly jade green Jaguar driven by Novak's Madeleine through SF's hilly streets.

Vertigo bogs down more than once in tedious exposition. But, although literal-minded critics continue to knock Hitchcock's implausible narrative, this seems a bit like complaining that *Un Chien Andalou* is too discontinuous or the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice lacks the necessary verisimilitude. It would be tempting to call *Vertigo* the last masterpiece of movie surrealism were it not that Buñuel ended his career by making a comic analogue with *That Obscure*

humor but it is an intensely, almost shockingly, romantic movie: like bereft Heathcliff in the second half of *Wuthering Heights*, shell-shocked Scottie pleads with his lost love to haunt him. And once she does return from the dead—her kiss obliterating time and space as Herrmann works variations on Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*—the movie's own current resurrection becomes secondary.

There'll never be a better opportunity to see *Vertigo*. Still, when its drama is distilled to overwhelming desire (and the desire to be desired), when its narrative is vaporized by the force of mutual (and mutually exclusive) longings, this movie could cast its spell from a nine-inch black-and-white TV set.

Elsewhere on the F/X front, we have the insect lifestyle doc *Microcosmos* and the latest IMAX 3-D attraction, *L5: First City in Space*. Although considerably less lurid than the scurrilous old *Hellstrom Chronicles*, *Microcosmos* does purvey its share of G-rated sex, violence, and sound effects: Honey bees make love to flowers and snails tenderly mate to trilling lieder; stag beetles clash to a martial fanfare. There are some awesome scenes of living scarabs bludgeoned off a leaf by a torrent of crystal raindrops, but the tone of the movie is basically

soothing, perhaps too much so. (*Microcosmos*, the press notes explain, "has a calming effect, accompanied by smiles, 'wows!' 'oohs,' and 'aahs,'" and possibly, I fear, even snores.)

L5, which has the advantage of being a mere 35 minutes long, opens in the simulated depths of a simulated rain forest but quickly cuts to the confines of an earth-orbiting extraterrestrial city: "a world of perfect harmony and balance." Spectacular as the 3-D is (particularly when putting us inside a comet or zooming inches over the surface of Mars), the movie needs no narrative—it nevertheless clings to a cloying little story about a child growing up on a space station. (The most imaginative touch: her virtual play-date in toddler cyberspace.) With less than five years to go, it's amazing how many of 2001's futuristic tropes are still being projected. The next time someone gets the nostalgic urge for a restoration that never was, perhaps they'll translate Kubrick's masterpiece into IMAX 3-D. ❖



Vertigo: drama distilled to overwhelming desire

35mm frames. Few theaters were equipped to project the larger image, however, and *Vertigo* was soon reduced to regular 35mm.) While the original Technicolor is no longer available, Katz and Harris have remixed the soundtrack—thus burnishing Bernard Herrmann's hypermoody score to an almost disconcerting brightness.

Quintessential film modernist though Hitchcock may have been, he was also a dedicated Pop Artist—the master not only of suspense but of self-promotion and gimmickry. (*Vertigo* was promoted with a party on the 29th floor of an unfinished East 42nd Street skyscraper.) Stars Jimmy Stewart and Kim Novak aside, the movie's main attraction was understood to be its wide-screen "travelogue" treatment of San Francisco. Thus, the restoration's major visual revelation is the additional weight given the prolonged, gliding, all but wordless automotive chase that made the *New Yorker's* critic complain he was carsick: Stewart's Scottie pursu-

Object of Desire—another movie about a man obsessed with a woman who does not exist. *Vertigo's* evocatively imminent, emptied-out world has the melancholy solitude of the de Chirico city just as Madeleine's uncanny movements in and out of frame suggest Maya Deren's montage.

There is a sense in which *Vertigo* sums up 30 years of Surrealist (and Surrealist-into-advertising) imagery. With its long late-afternoon shadows, pervasive anxiety, terrifying intimations of the void, frozen immobility, feeling of elastic time, charged symbols, uncanny portraits, and general sense of weirdness in broad daylight, *Vertigo* could have been subtitled after de Chirico (*Nostalgia of the Infinite*) or Deren (*Meshe of the Afternoon*). Taking the term that Joseph Cornell applied to the somnambulant star Hedy Lamarr, Madeleine describes herself as a "wanderer." Like the Surrealist heroine Nadja, Madeleine lives out her dreams—or are they Scottie's?

Vertigo is not without its dark