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VERTIGO



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Now for something a little bit lighter, as a break. Did you know the synonym of vertiginous is “bluff”? Something to think about.

This movie from 1958 is one of only a few rated 100 at Metacritic. It has an 8.3 rating at IMDB and is [listed as the 11th greatest movie of all time there](#). So I just rewatched it. I saw it many years ago, though I didn't remember much about it. I remember not being too impressed even then, but that's about all I remembered. It is very well shot and paced, as you would expect from Hitchcock, but the script is garbage, being so full of holes it is laughable. To start with, we are supposed to buy that this stunning girl is going to fall for a policeman living in a cheap flat—a guy who is old enough to be her father and then some? In what parallel universe does that happen?

We will come back to that, but let's look at the plot. The entire thing hinges on her rushing to the top of the tower alone and him not being able to follow. So to set that up she simply tells him to “let me go into the church. . . alone.” When he asks why, she just kisses him to rising music, and he stupidly watches her walk off slowly. He gives her a huge headstart, to explain why he couldn't catch her, even though she is trying to run up stairs in 5-inch pumps. But remember, if he had refused to let her go alone, or had caught her, the plan would have failed. Since that is what would have happened nine times out of ten, the plan was the opposite of brilliant.

Furthermore, the plot relies on her being a perfect actress, fooling this pretty savvy detective with her story about being half mad and suicidal. She even jumps into the bay, allowing him to save her, as part of the play. So if you figured out the con in the first half of the movie, like I did, you would assume she was the rich guy Elster's mistress, some very talented actress he had been making time with on the side and had promised to take to Europe with him to help him spend the stolen money. You would expect the second half of the movie to be about our hero finding a clue and stopping them before they got away, or tracking them down in Europe. Instead, we discover she was just some poor girl Elster

pulled off the street because she resembled his wife, and then he paid her a small amount for her part and threw her back on the streets. Less than a year after the murder she is living in some seedy place called the Empire Hotel. That would never happen because she could so easily finger him later or blackmail him. Europe and most other places you would want to live have extradition agreements with the US, you know.

And it's stupid for another reason: even if we decide to accept that the rich guy would have done that, thinking he was safe in South America or somewhere, the girl wouldn't have remained in San Francisco. As an accessory to murder she would want to relocate immediately, precisely because she might be seen by our hero.

Then we are supposed to believe our hero spotted her on the street, but didn't realize it was actually her until she wore a certain necklace. Even when she dresses exactly as she did before and wears her hair in the same way, he still doesn't realize it is really her. . . until he sees that necklace. It is so idiotic it passes belief.

Then we have the whole subplot with his girl-next-door galpal, which I still can't make sense of. He just walks into her flat without knocking anytime he likes, though they aren't lovers and aren't dating. I thought at first she was his sister, but she isn't. When he is in the sanitarium, she says "mother is here". What? I don't think she is his mother, since she is young enough to be his daughter. We are told earlier that he had proposed to her but she had refused, though it clear she loves him. So what is that about? And there's that scene where she paints a portrait **overnight** of herself dressed like the woman in the painting. She sure works fast. She went to all that trouble just to tease him? And then she threw a fit when her tease backfired? None of that makes a lick of sense. Not even the perfect camera work and lighting and pacing and editing can save that scene.

Another scene that makes no sense is the one where he took Madeleine back to his apartment after pulling her out of the bay. You would expect him to either take her to the hospital or take her to her husband, but instead he undresses her down to nothing and puts her in *his* bed. Really? And the husband on the phone had no problem with that? She doesn't have a problem with it either, which makes even less sense. When he tells her his name is John Ferguson, she says, "That's a good strong name". So he didn't think it was kind of strange this gorgeous woman, rich wife of his old friend, was flirting with him just out of the drink? He really thought that much of himself?

Another scene that bombs is an earlier one, where he follows her into the old hotel where she has a room, and talks to the landlady. Although he just saw her in the window with his own eyes, the landlady tells him she isn't there, and they go up to the room and she isn't there. You would think he might want to follow up on that big clue, since it would have blown the whole story, but he just stands there stupidly and the scene ends. All he had to say is, "Look, I know you are lying, since I just saw her walk in here myself and saw her in the window. But if you want to keep up the act, you can tell it to the guys down at the station." She would have caved and the whole plan would have failed right there, which is why the scene has to be shot as if our hero is losing his sanity. But why would he be losing his sanity? *Vertigo* has nothing to do with sanity, or with losing your ability to trust your eyes or think straight.

Then we have the scenes where he is dressing the "new" girl as the dead woman, which are extremely creepy even knowing what we know: it is the same girl. It just reminds us how cringe this relationship was from the start, or would be under any possible circumstances. When Novak gets rid of the platinum wig and we see her with auburn hair, it just increases the obvious age difference between

them. The actual age difference was 25 and 50, though he looks older. To even begin to make this work he needed to play 40, but he doesn't. They don't even bother to color his hair, leaving him gray. And that still wouldn't address the fact he is a poor detective with zero style. He is not a 50-year-old Cary Grant or Rock Hudson or Roger Moore, with money, cars, fancy suits, a pretty face, and a golden tongue. He is some dowdy old detective with average looks and charisma driving a DeSoto. So it is not a matter of ageism. I actually have a "French" opinion of these things, as you may know, but even the French wouldn't buy this relationship.

Finally, we have the ending, which is just as ridiculous as the rest of it. Even after finally penetrating the con, there is no reason for him to take her back to the tower, unless he was planning to throw her off it. You would expect that either 1) he would forgive her because he loved her. She didn't murder the wife, Elster did that. For all he knew, Elster had blackmailed or otherwise threatened her into the role, but he didn't even ask for an explanation. He had found her after thinking he lost her, falling in love with the same woman twice, but when it came down to it that was all out the window. 2) He would hear her out and then tell her to hit the bricks. 3) He would cuff her and drop her off at the police station, immediately going to work trying to locate Elster. Instead he takes her to the tower only as a hamhanded plot device, to manufacture some sort of heavenly justice and cure his own vertigo. A nun just happens to be hiding in the shadows all the time they are screaming at each other, and has no problem with our hero dragging Judy through the hatch and throwing her against the wall. She just silently glides out of the murk like a ghost, and Judy leaps to her death. So convenient. But again, that was completely out of character, since Judy wasn't haunted by ghosts. It was her character Madeleine that was haunted by ghosts, remember? Judy was a tough cookie, since she had worked with a murderer and fooled this detective not once but twice. Why would the appearance of a nun or even a ghost drive her to immediate suicide? In fact, our hero had been the unstable one, spending time in the bin and acting like a madman about half the time. We would expect him to jump, not Judy.

Plus, it wasn't heavenly justice. Justice would have been the husband Elster falling to his death. I doubt anyone in the audience through the years has thought justice was served by Judy jumping for no reason. I suspect they were just as confused by the whole thing as I was.

So why is this movie rated so highly? Do real people think it is so great? I doubt it, though I guess I will hear from some who loved it. It is undeniably stylish and gives us a great view of period San Francisco. But at 100 and #11 it is highly overrated. For me, I think *Vertigo*, like a lot of other ranked movies, is promoted as the continuing promotion of Hitchcock, Stewart, and various others. It is the Phoenician Navy continuing to promote their own. It is what they do, and if you rank highly enough you get promoted even after death. That would also explain *Citizen Kane* at #6, *Sunset Boulevard* at #15, and *The Silence of the Lambs* at #23. Though I am not sure who is the ranking Phoenician in that last one, Foster or Demme. I don't think it is Hopkins, since he was under-promoted for years. My guess it is Foster, since she royally stunk the place up. It is one of the worst major performances of all time, Hopkins making her look like Keanu Reeves or somebody. The most highly promoted Phoenicians tend to be the least talented.

Of course [I previously trashed *Apocalypse Now*](#), which comes in #31 on the same list. The success of that one is definitely due to promotion from the Pentagon. I would say the same for *Notorious*, another Hitchcock film that has a score of 100 at Metacritic. It is a very stylish film, sure, but isn't anywhere near as tight as *Rear Window*. *Rear Window* also has its problems, such as the fact the whole conceit is ridiculous: people leaving their shades up and prancing around in plain sight to their neighbors all day and night. But if you decide to accept that just for fun, everything else is pretty entertaining.

And now for a tack-on about . . . falcons. Why falcons, you may ask. Because a question about them came up in a pub quiz recently. We were asked what the fastest bird was. I answered gyrfalcon, but the correct answer was peregrine falcon. So I looked it up when I got home. Decades ago, we were taught the gyrfalcon was the fastest bird, since it had been clocked in a dive at around 180mph. As it turns out, that is now outdated information, since more recently somebody had taken several peregrines to 20,000 feet and dropped them out of a plane. They had been clocked at way over 200mph in a steep dive. But of course that begs several questions, such as, did they drop any gyrfalcons? If not, how do we know they wouldn't fall even faster?

It also begs this question: Did they try dropping a clam, or maybe a turtle? My guess is a turtle with his head and legs in the shell could fall faster than the peregrine, perhaps reaching 500mph. Would that make him the fastest bird? No, which shows this idea of dropping birds out of planes is just silly. When asked what the fastest animal is, we aren't asking which animal reaches the highest terminal velocity when dropped from an airplane. We don't care whether a gazelle is more streamlined in a head-down position than a cheetah, when dropped from an airplane. So with the bird question, we should disallow clocking them in dives. They should be clocked on a level. As far as I know, the gyrfalcon still wins that contest.