

Brian Light

At a 1948 awards banquet in Paris honoring Thomas Narcejac (Pierre Ayraud’s *nom de plume*) with the Prix du Roman d’Aventures, given to the year’s best work of detective fiction—French or foreign, the author was introduced to the 1938 winner, Pierre Boileau. Both of their acclaimed novels were “locked room” mysteries, a subgenre of crime fiction originating from Edgar Allan Poe’s 1841 short story “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” Boileau and Narcejac shared an immediate connection, not only through mutual admiration—both writers felt trapped in their formulaic “locked rooms.” Neither was inspired by the American “hardboiled” school of fiction, which had infiltrated

the European market in the 1940s. In collaboration, they instead created a new strain of mystery fiction focused on the victim or collaborator in a crime, exploring the psychology, motivations, and actions as that character struggles through dire circumstance. Boileau would construct the diabolical plots and Narcejac would craft the complex characterizations. The partners had one *règle de jeu*: the protagonist must never wake from the nightmare.

Their first collaboration was *Celle qui n’était plus* (*She Who Was No More*) in 1952. In his landmark interview, *Hitchcock/Truffaut*, Truffaut suggests that when Boileau and Narcejac learned Hitchcock had tried to acquire the rights to their first book (adapted by Henri-Georges Clouzot and released in 1955 as *Les Diaboliques*) they wrote their third, *D’entre les morts*

(*From Among the Dead*) with the director in mind. Hitchcock was quick to dispute this: “No, they didn’t. The book was out before we acquired the property.” Dan Auiler confirmed this in an interview with Narcejac for his exhaustively detailed book, *Vertigo: The Making of a Hitchcock Classic*. Narcejac said they never intended to write a story for Hitchcock; the idea was sparked in a French cinema as Narcejac watched a newsreel and believed he recognized someone he’d lost touch with during the war.

“After the war,” he explained, “there were many displaced people and families—it was common to have ‘lost’ a friend. I began to think of the possibilities of recognizing someone like this. Maybe someone who was thought dead. ... and this is where *D’entre les morts* began to take shape.” The novel came to the attention of Paramount, and



Alfred Hitchcock consults with the authors of *D'entre les morts*— Thomas Narcejac (left) and Pierre Boileau (right)

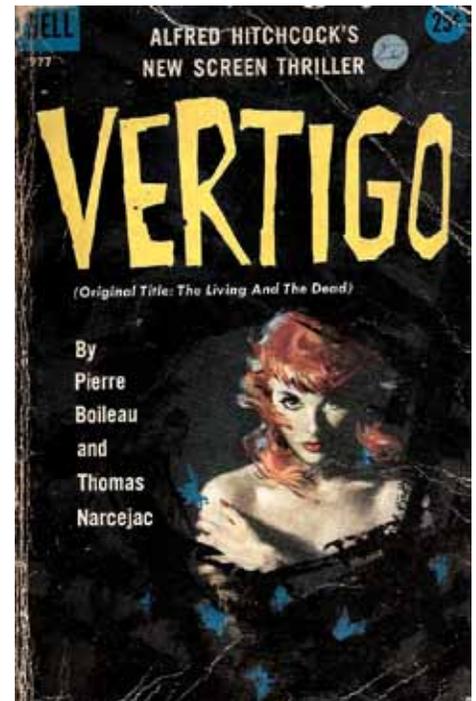
Hitchcock, in the form of a plot synopsis in November 1954. When *Les Diaboliques* became a movie-house sensation in 1955, Paramount acquired the rights to *D'entre les morts*. Hitchcock told Truffaut what drew him to the story: “I was intrigued by the hero’s attempts to recreate the image of a dead woman through another one that’s alive.” The English translation of the novel *D'entre les morts*, retitled *The Living and the Dead*, released in the U.S. in April 1957.

The director already had Vera Miles in mind for the role of Madeleine. He had recently directed her in the debut episode of his television series, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. “Revenge” was a taut tale of a woman who becomes emotionally unstable after being raped. Hitchcock was so impressed by her performance he cast her again the same year opposite Henry Fonda in his underrated neo-realist thriller *The Wrong Man* (1956). Hitchcock was convinced his next feature would make her a major star...but it was not to be. During preproduction, Hitchcock was beset with health problems and twice went under the knife, each recuperation period pushing back the film’s schedule. In the interim, Miles, who was married to *Tarzan* hunk Gordon Scott at the time, became pregnant with their son Michael. After some deliberation, Kim Novak was cast, even though she was under contract to Columbia. A deal was struck in which Harry Cohn agreed to lend the actress for *Vertigo*’s production in exchange for Stewart starring (again with Novak) in *Bell, Book and Candle* (1958).

Hitchcock was famous for so thoroughly storyboarding each scene he rarely (if ever) looked through the camera viewfinder on set. But for this film, his preparation and meticulous attention reached new heights of fervency. Prior to the creation of a shooting script, Hitchcock and associate producer (and all-around right-hand man) Herbert Coleman scouted locations in and around San Francisco, a city Hitchcock loved. The shift in period and location were the first



An early test photo of Vera Miles, Hitchcock’s first choice to play *Vertigo*’s Madeleine Elster



significant variations from the source novel, which begins in 1940s France as German forces threaten its borders. The movie eliminates the book’s oppressive cloud of conflict and wartime occupation by shifting the story to the late-1950s California. Hitchcock dismissed an early draft by playwright Maxwell Anderson and hired Alec Coppel (already under contract to Paramount) to take a fresh crack at it. Coppel had adapted his own novel for the claustrophobic Brit-noir *The Hidden Room* (aka *Obsession*, 1949), one of two films directed by Edward Dmytryk in England during his U.S. blacklisting. Together, Coppel and Hitchcock devised the opening rooftop chase to explain the source of the detective’s titular phobia.

Having already made three films with Hitchcock, Jimmy Stewart was the obvious choice to play Roger Flavières (renamed Scottie Ferguson in the film). Stewart—a creative partner on the film—expressed concern about the surreal tenor of the developing script and felt that it was essential to have at least one aspect of the plot rooted in reality. Hitchcock hired a native San Franciscan, Sam Taylor, to further retool the script. Taylor created Midge (played with sly reserve by Barbara Bel Geddes), an old college friend to whom Scottie was previously engaged. There is no such character in the novel. Midge is a warm but overly maternal companion, a pointed contrast to the mysterious, alluring Madeleine. She is the film’s grounding touchstone. Hitchcock’s typical *modus operandi*



Vertigo's opening credit sequence by Saul Bass draws the viewer in through the "mind's eye"

was to extract the essence from the source material and weave his own distinctive story around it, making it very much his own (e.g.: *Rear Window*, *Strangers on a Train*, *Psycho*). But in this case, he followed the novel with unwavering fidelity. His imprimatur for this film—its visual texture—directly referenced silent movies, which he considered the purest form of cinema. “Dialogue should simply be...something that comes out of the mouths of people whose eyes tell the story in visual terms.” He typically employed to great effect what he referred to as the “subjective treatment,” an alternating pattern of shot/reaction shot, which he used to heighten suspense. In *Vertigo*, this technique forms the principle structure of the narrative, intensifying our identification with Scottie’s obsession, which ultimately leads to psychosis.

The film immediately pulls the viewer in with a title sequence designed by Saul Bass. Hitchcock began his career designing intertitles for silent movies, and he always displayed a keen eye for film’s graphics. The first image that appears on-screen is an isolated mask-like face (no less than seven of the titles originally suggested for the film contained the word “mask”). The title—*Vertigo*—slowly emerges from the pupil of the eye. In her essay *Woman as Death: Vertigo as Source*, Barbara Creed connects this image to two René Magritte paintings, *The False Mirror* (1928) and *The Eye* (1932/35). In *Hitchcock on Hitchcock*, the director acknowledged surrealism as “An influence that I experience myself, if only in the dream sequences and the sequences of the unreal in a certain number of my films.” Then a series of swirling spirals—a pattern replicated throughout the movie—emerges from

and then fades back into the pupil, drawing us into “the mind’s eye.” Bass incorporated original images from French mathematician Jules Antione Lissajous for this sequence. His collaborator, avant-garde filmmaker John Whitney, skillfully set them in motion, creating the hypnotic effect. As Jennifer Bass and Pat Kirkham detail in *Saul Bass: A Life in Film & Design*, Bass wanted to convey the vertiginous disequilibrium associated with obsessive love. Of the forms themselves, he elaborated:

I did not invent them, they already existed, but were not fully recognized



On the set, Alfred Hitchcock deadpans for the crew while Bernard Herrmann catnaps



Designer Saul Bass in his workshop

for their aesthetic potential since they were mainly seen as scientific expressions. You could say I was obsessed with them for a while—that I had fallen in love with them—so I knew a little of what Hitch was driving at.

Adding another layer of emotional complexity is Bernard Herrmann’s score, which references Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*, specifically the *Leibestod*, or love-death passage of the tragic opera. As Steven C. Smith notes in *A Heart at Fire’s Center, The Life and Music of Bernard Herrmann*: “*Vertigo* is Alfred Hitchcock’s most uncompromising film,



and Bernard Herrmann's fullest realization of his favorite themes: romantic obsession, isolation, and the ultimate release of death." Paramount initially hired Jay Livingston and Ray Evans to compose a theme song for the film—which Hitchcock wisely discarded.

There follows an abstracted image of a ladder's rung—suddenly gripped by the hands of a criminal pursued by a uniformed policeman and Scottie. Cut to a wide shot of the rooftop, revealing the nocturnal skyline of San Francisco. The "City by the Bay," imbued with nostalgia and romance, is more than a mere backdrop. An underlying motif of dominant men and discarded women will run throughout the film, suggesting the "power and freedom"—a phrase invoked at key points throughout the film—that men enjoyed in the bygone days of early San Francisco.

In addition to establishing the source of Scottie's vertigo, there is another striking facet to this sequence: the lack of a resolution—how does Scottie survive his precariously dangling predicament? As Robin Wood theorizes in *Hitchcock's Films*: "We do not see, and are never told, how he got down from the gutter: there seems no possible way he *could* have got down. The effect is of leaving him, throughout the film, metaphorically suspended over a great abyss." In the novel, there is a parallel scene recounted in flashback by Flavières, but it's already been determined that he has acrophobia. After this establishing scene, the film follows the

book to the letter, right down to the novel's bifurcated structure.

Flavières/Scottie meets with an old college friend, Paul Gévigne/Gavin Elster (Tom Helmore, though Everett Sloane was briefly considered for this role). Flavières/Scottie—retired from the police—reluctantly agrees to shadow his pal's potentially suicidal wife, Madeleine, who is obsessed with her great grandmother (Pauline Lagerlac/Carlotta Valdes). Flavières/Scottie trails Madeleine, at first curious and protective. Gradually, a fixation develops and an idealized love takes

root. In the novel, the reader is trapped in the confines of Flavières' internal monologue, as he sinks in deeply: "...he had made up his mind to follow Madeleine week in, week out, for months if necessary. ... he wouldn't recover his peace of mind until he got to the bottom of the mystery." At night: "He had thought about her and heard her footsteps in his dreams."

Scottie's emotional involvement is more gradual, but no less consuming. Hitchcock's languid pacing, the selective use of fog filters by DP Robert Burks, and the absence of dialogue—for a total of roughly 18 minutes—creates a dreamlike ambiance. This somnolent mood is ruptured when Madeleine plunges into San Francisco bay (the river Seine in the book). After she's rescued, it's the first time we hear her speak. With the hook now in deep, Flavières/Scottie unwittingly takes a more active role in this elaborately choreographed deception—though the protagonists of book and film have different motivations.

Flavières has developed disdain for Gévigne, whom he regards as a wartime profiteer not worthy of Madeleine's affections. He fantasizes that she shares his contempt "... as though there was some common bond between them, as though they were united in a common hostility to Gévigne." He calls her his Eurydice (Orpheus' wife, rescued from the underworld) and he surrenders himself completely: "...he realized the extent to which he was in her clutches. She absorbed literally all his strength. He was a blood donor.



Scottie (James Stewart) struggles to navigate the vertiginous bell tower, which was built for the film on a set. The original tower of California's Mission San Juan Bautista was demolished in 1949 due to dry rot



Hitchcock used storyboards and production sketches to lay out every scene in the film before a single frame of *Vertigo* was shot

Scottie's tenuous link with reality, gradually fade to black.

The second section of the novel begins with Flavières' return to France (now liberated) after four years in Africa. He discovers the scars of war, and his own past, are ever present:

He hardly recognized this Paris, still plunged in the mists of winter, these great empty spaces, these broad avenues along which hardly anything passes but bicycles and jeeps. He hurried along quickly like everyone else. The Arc de Triomphe loomed up distinctly in the grey mist. Everything was the color of the past, the color of memory. What feast of the dead had he come here to celebrate?

No, that wasn't the word. A soul donor."

Scottie's emotions are less complex. He feels he's wandering aimlessly through life and he quickly becomes seduced by Madeleine's offer to "wander" together. Continually distracted by reveries from the past, Madeleine leads Flavières/Scottie to an old, isolated church with a conveniently high tower (at Saintes in the book, San Juan Bautista in the film) and her staged suicide plays out in precisely the same manner on-screen as on the page. In the novel, there is an inquest and Gévigne is suspected, but Flavières refuses to appear, concealing the fact that he was with Madeleine when she died. Flavières is bereft, and a deep melancholia sets in. As the war intensifies, he struggles to conjure memories of Madeleine:

Yes, it was good to wander through those shadows. The land of the living was far away. Here were only the dead, solitary figures slinking through the streets, haunted by the bright days of long ago, tortured by a remembered happiness. Some stopped for a moment to look down at the dark river licking its banks, then slunk on again. Were they preparing themselves for the Day of Judgment?

The first section of the novel ends as Flavières "...with death in his soul, boarded a motor-coach bound for Toulouse."

Hitchcock provided a sharp contrast to the book in the way he concluded the "front story," as he called it. Scottie *does* appear at the inquest and is raked over the courthouse coals for failing to prevent Madeleine's death. After visiting her grave,

Scottie experiences a harrowing nightmare. This sequence—which Hitchcock and Coppel worked out in precise detail—was designed with special effects by John Ferren, a contemporary abstract expressionist who had previously consulted on and supplied paintings for *The Trouble with Harry* (1955). He was heavily influenced by artists such as Matisse and Kandinsky, and more specifically their use of color, which he drew from to great effect. Scottie is not simply melancholy, he is broken enough to be institutionalized. In her final scene in the film, Midge comes to visit him—reinforcing her maternal instincts, she soothingly says, "Mother's here"—but even she cannot reach him. As she slowly walks out of the psychiatrist's office and down the corridor, she, and

Flavières discovers that Gévigne was killed in the war; on-screen, Elster disappears to Europe with his wife's money. Flavières eventually drifts into a movie theater and during a newsreel spots a girl bearing a striking resemblance to Madeleine—Narcejac's real-life impetus for the story. In the film, Scottie has been released from the hospital to resume his solitary wandering, and his chance encounter occurs on a street corner. How Flavières and Scottie pursue this mystery woman provides a sharp distinction between French and American (and Hitchcock's) mores of the time. When



Kim Novak, as *Vertigo*'s Madeleine Elster, periodically struggled with Hitchcock's taciturn directing style



Flavières meets Renee (Judy in the film), she’s keeping company with a black marketeer. When he “turns her out,” Flavières seizes the moment and moves in with her, although he takes little pleasure in the carnal aspect of their relationship. By contrast, Scottie courts Judy in the chaste manner proscribed by the Hollywood Production Code.

Judy’s confession—delivered to the audience in voiceover two-thirds of the way into the film—is the most significant change from the novel, which saves this revelation for the climax. Hitchcock asserted sole responsibility for this change, but Dan Auiler gives the credit to Sam Taylor. “It’s really a Hitchcockian thing,” Taylor told the director, pitching the earlier “reveal.” “I said ‘This is not pure Hitchcock unless the audience *knows* what has happened,’ and he agreed.” This is the first time we are liberated from Scottie’s POV, making us complicit in Judy’s deception in a way the novel does not. This creates a second level of engagement; we now also empathize with Judy.

Drawing inspiration from Edgar Allan Poe, whom he greatly admired, Hitchcock infuses this final section of the film with a chimerical rationale:

I try to put in my films what Poe puts in his stories: a perfectly unbelievable story recounted to readers with such a hallucinatory logic that one has the impression that this same story can happen to you tomorrow. (*Hitchcock on Hitchcock*)

Scottie becomes increasingly disillusioned with Judy because she is *only* an illusion...

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not Madeleine. Their physical interactions have a palpable awkwardness; unlike Flavières with Renée, he can barely bring himself to touch her. As with Flavières, Scottie’s need to recreate Madeleine is deeply obsessive and unrelenting, a “pathological Pygmalion” as critic Andrew Sarris described him. A process that Hitchcock likely identified with as “*Vertigo* has been seen as a mirror of Hitchcock’s own insecurities and his desire to manipulate the beautiful women he loved and feared.” (*The Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock*, Donald Spoto.) Scottie dresses Judy in the same wardrobe as Madeleine, as Flavières does in the book; Hitchcock even lifts from the novel the tapered gray suit and the hairstyle (bun at the nape of the neck). When Renée models different ensembles for Flavières, he observes, “Perched on high heels...she looked another person, almost ethereal.” This description resonated with Hitchcock, who later bathes Judy’s transformation into Madeleine in an ethereal green light. Symbolic of rebirth and eternal life, the color green has been referenced in the earlier scene in the Redwood forest, when Scottie defines *Sequoia Semperviva*—“evergreen,” ever living—for Madeleine. This haunting sequence is charged with an undercurrent of forbidding longing—there is no corresponding scene in the novel.

In the film, Scottie struggles to free Madeleine from the specter of Carlotta, thus saving her from the same fate. Flavières’ attraction, however, is darker and more complex. He is seduced by Madeleine’s preoccupation with death: “Madeleine



The Portrait of Carlotta, painted specifically for the film by American artist John Ferren (1905 - 1970)
Inset: Madeleine’s corresponding hair style

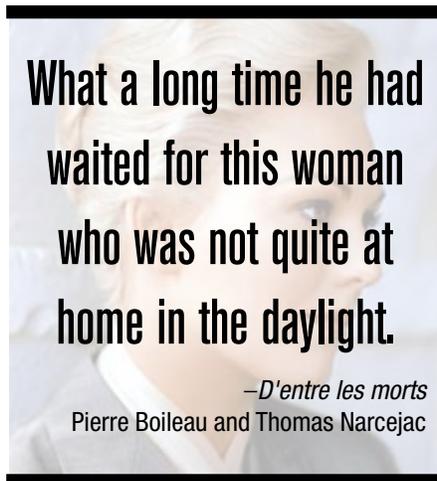


This scene in Scottie's apartment required over a week of shooting and endless retakes until Hitchcock was satisfied with the tone and pacing

dreaming in front of Pauline's tomb.... Homesick! For the grave! ... No, it was impossible. But who really knew what was possible or not?" Even the perfume she wears reminds Flavières of freshly dug earth, and the decay of withered flowers.

What a long time he had waited for this woman who was not quite at home in the daylight. Since the age of twelve, to be exact, when he had first penetrated into the heart of the earth, exploring the shadows, the country of phantoms, of the dead...

Flavières becomes increasingly invested in the notion of reincarnation. First, Pauline Lagerlac renewed as Madeleine, and now Madeleine in the process of renewal as Renée. "It was all very well for her (Renée) to swear she wasn't Madeleine: he knew she was." In the first of two instances, the authors foreshadow the inevitable, "He would have liked to throw his arms around her, to embrace her: yes, perhaps to suffocate her." In the second instance, Flavières grimly reflected, "For their love was something monstrous, foredoomed to death...To death," an indirect reference to the *Liebestod*. In the film, Hitchcock's reference to this concept is more overt. Scottie can only make love with Judy after her transformation into Madeleine is fully realized—after death comes love. In later interviews, Hitchcock



glibly described this as a form of necrophilia, which only serves to attenuate the emotional complexity of Scottie's mental state.

On both page and screen, the incriminating necklace appears accidentally, but for Flavières, this is just another link to Madeleine, whose spirit he believes resides deep inside Renée. He continues to sink deeper into his own myopic (mental) morass as he struggles to convince Renée she really is Madeleine, and who, like his "little Eurydice," has returned from the grave. "He still had a host of questions to ask her. They writhed in his brain like worms. ...He must coax her (Madeleine) back, little by little

to the threshold of life. Then...the moment would come when she would remember." When Renée finally reveals the deception, Flavières cannot accept that the woman he loved never existed. Murmuring Madeleine's name beseechingly, and believing she was trapped inside Renée, he strangles Renée to death and is arrested.

Scottie, however, once onto the hoax, puts the duplicitous pieces together himself. He drives Judy to the scene of the crime and literally drags her back up into the bell tower. But he, too, is hopelessly consumed by his own illusive reverie, exclaiming to Judy, "Madeleine, I loved you so." The sudden appearance of a ghostly nun startles Judy, who this time falls from the tower accidentally—and fatally. Scottie finds himself back where he was at the beginning of the film, on a ledge, staring down from a great height—only now his arms extend in a gesture of supplication, as he struggles to comprehend what he has done.

An alternate ending was filmed which showed Midge listening to a radio report indicating that the French police are closing in on Elster. She snaps it off as Scottie walks in to her apartment. She makes him a drink, which he takes to the window, gazing out at the San Francisco night skyline. This coda would have provided a closed loop, leading back to Hitchcock's beloved city, but the director clearly felt he had already expressed a sentiment more crucial, and personal: the impermanence of idealized love. ■



A publicity still which fosters the illusion that Madeleine and Judy are two different women