

Vertigo: a loose interpretation of *Bruges-la-Morte*

Extract from *Le secret de Bruges-la-Morte* on www.bruges-la-morte.net

by Joël Goffin

Alfred Hitchcock (1899-1980), the master of suspense, filmed *Vertigo* (*Sueurs froides* in the French version) in 1958, with James Stewart and Kim Novak starring in the leading roles. The script was written as a loose adaptation of Boileau-Narcejac's¹ detective novel, *D'entre les morts*. Its biblical-sounding title makes one think of Christ (Corinthians 15:20) or Lazarus (John 11:43) "risen from the dead". Culturally British and having spent his childhood in London, Hitchcock probably knew the works of Rodenbach, which started being translated into English in 1903. Pierre Boileau (1906-1989) and Thomas Narcejac (1908-1998), both of French nationality, were almost certainly acquainted with them. One must bear in mind that Korngold's opera, *Die tode Stadt*, had been the one to put *Bruges-la-Morte* in the spotlight again (1920). Also, the Argentinian Hugo del Carril had adapted the novel for cinema in 1955 under the name *Más allá del olvido*.

Here are the key elements of film's plot. John Ferguson (played by James Stewart), nicknamed "Scottie"², was a former police officer suffering from vertigo, hence the English title *Vertigo*. He sees his childhood friend, Gavin Elster³, again after a long time. The latter is now a shipbuilding business owner thanks to his marriage and hires Scottie to investigate his wife's (Kim Novak) morbid behavior. She seems to be losing her mind. She is fascinated by her grandmother, Carlotta Valdes, a woman from San Francisco's high society, who ended her life in unclear circumstances. Scottie follows the young woman and quickly falls in love with her. During a stakeout, he manages to save her from an attempt to commit suicide by drowning on the Golden Gate Bridge. One day she goes to the Spanish Mission where Carlotta is buried. After a long period of mourning at her grandmother's tomb, she climbs the bell tower and throws herself into the void. Unable to follow her because of his



vertigo, Scottie can't do anything to prevent the tragedy. He feels guilty for her death and falls into a deep depression. He begins to wander the old labyrinthine streets of San Francisco, like the melancholic Viane had done in Bruges. He does that until the day he meets a slightly vulgar young office worker with red hair. Judy⁴ strongly resembles the deceased wife Scottie believes he has found again. He follows her to her hotel room and manages to seduce her. Little by little, he makes her dress, dye her hair and wear it the same way the woman he loved did, like Viane had done with Jane in *Bruges-la-Morte*. A close-up lingers on her spiraled bun, identical to the one the heroine used to wear. The theme of the spiral or the vertigo is pervasive in this film:

¹Sueurs froides (*D'entre les morts*), Gallimard, Folio Poche, Paris, 2006.

²Scottie means "Little Scotsman". A John Ferguson, who was passionate about alchemy, really existed.

³"Gavin" is an anglicized version of "Gauvain", King Arthur's knight who fails in his quest for the Grail because his senses mislead him. "Elster," the name of Madeleine's husband, makes one think of Elsa, Lohengrin's, the Knight of the Grail's, beloved, and the English "Else", the "other" with the "ster" suffix. A certain Ely Star, an eminent occultism professor, was a member of the mythical Golden Dawn.

⁴A variant of Judith, it is a biblical name. It shows the woman as castrator and liberator at the same time. It is worth mentioning that Mary Magdalene is often deemed to be the new Judith, this first name meaning "Jewish".

thus the spiral staircase gives access to the fatal tower where the suicide takes place⁵. Looking at the positives, the shape of her hairstyle could be a symbol of ascension towards (divine) knowledge, of immortality, of eternal rebirth thanks to the power of transfiguration of the chosen one who contemplates it⁶. But according to the interpretation of Jean-Pierre Dupuy, the French philosopher, *Vertigo* "depicts circles that fail to close on themselves, degenerating into a descendant spiral, a swirling dive into the abyss"⁷. The spiral staircase could also evoke the descent itself, in search of a truth hidden in the deepest depths of the being. In any case, the two interpretations complement each other. Finally, *Vertigo's* ladylove is most often gloved with white or black during crucial moments, just like an initiate.

At one point, Judy makes the mistake of choosing to wear a piece of jewelry that belonged to the "deceased", and it's how Scottie discovers the trickery⁸. Turns out he actually served as a cover for his friend's wife's murder, as Gavin wanted to inherit her fortune. Assuming, with good reason, that the detective would not climb to the top of the bell tower because of his phobia, Elster threw the body of his murdered wife into the void to make it look like a suicide: Scottie would be the perfect trusted eyewitness as he used to be a former police inspector. To confound the victim's doppelganger, Scottie takes her back to the Spanish Mission. Cured of his vertigo, he manages to accompany her to the top of the tower and tells her that he has discovered the adulterous couple's machinations. But as he goes to embrace his beloved in spite of everything that has happened, a silhouette of a nun appears. Horrified, Judy falls into the void in the same spot as Gavin Elster's wife. The two women now merge into death as it happens at the end of *Bruges-la-Morte*.

Several coincidences between the two works, too specific for them to be fortuitous, need to be highlighted. Bruges and San Francisco lost in the mists in sad and monotonous tones – hence the beloved woman wearing a gray suit on the day of her death – preserve an important religious heritage from the Spanish period that significantly affects the psychology of the two cities and the destiny of the main heroes, Scottie and Viane. Like the Flemish city, San Francisco is a web of streets that resemble each other and disorient the rash, uninitiated visitor. Midge⁹ (played by Barbara Bel Geddes), the policeman's former fiancée, seems to play the role intended for Barbe in *Bruges-la-Morte*. Intrigued by the secrets that haunt Madeleine, Scottie goes to the Argozy bookstore to learn more about San Francisco's old history. Hitchcock was inspired by a bookstore that still exists, the

5The same ambivalent theme of the regenerative belfry tower that then becomes the place and instrument of a suicide can also be found in *Le Carillonneur* (Georges Rodenbach, *The Bells of Bruges*, Dedalus, 2007).

6A symbol of Life and Time, the spiral reminds us that everything that is manifested is in motion and incomplete at the same time. It evokes the infinite or God himself, but also (like the "Flaming Star") the Golden ratio, divine proportion, universal harmony, strength, beauty, wisdom. Love through regeneration and the cyclical passage from one state to another that is superior to it.

7Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *La marque du sacré : Essai sur une dénégation*, Carnets Nord, Paris, 2009.

In the 18th century Masonic tradition, the Companion accessed the Middle Chamber, the Holy of Holies where the Masters met, through a spiral staircase.

8The theme of the piece of jewelry worn by the lookalike appears in *Le Mirage*, the theatrical adaptation of *Bruges-la-Morte*.

9"Midge" is also the name of a famous mosquito that rampages through the Highlands. Scottie's friend would be a sort of goad that moves the plot forward, as is the case of Barbe, the maid in *Bruges-la-Morte*, who refuses to support Jane Scott's intrusion at the Quai du Rosaire (Bruges).

famous Argonaut Bookstore. Its logo evokes the Golden Fleece and Jason, the leader of the Argonauts, whose mythical quest serves as inspiration for *Bruges-la-Morte*.

The adaptation was entrusted to the writer Alec Coppel for a little while, but it ultimately fell to Samuel Taylor. By his choice, he refused to read the original text written by the two Frenchmen. Hitchcock thus had a significant effect on the loose interpretation of the plot devised by Boileau and Narcejac. It became his own, he appropriated it: "What interested me most were the efforts made by James Stewart to recreate a woman using the image of the deceased," the Master of suspense would comment on the matter.

In her enlightening article called *De la ressemblance: Georges Rodenbach-Alfred Hitchcock*¹⁰, professor Ana Gonzalez Salvador explained that the framework and symbolism of *Vertigo* owed more to the universe of *Bruges-la-Morte* than to the novel by Boileau and Narcejac.



The "wife's" attempted suicide in the waters of San Francisco, where she has just thrown a handful of rose petals, reminds of the Fernand Khnopff frontispiece drawing in *Bruges-la-Morte*, itself inspired by John Everett Millais' *Ophelia*. Even more conclusive, as far as my study is concerned, is the fact that the story's main character is called... Madeleine¹¹. In the Vanities, a pictorial genre in vogue in the 17th century, the motifs of the hair, tied up or free, the necklace, the mirror, the hourglass, the candle, the spring flowers, even the bubbles, are frequently associated with the iconographical universe of Mary Magdalene. In the critical scene that has Scottie discover Judy's imposture, she's wearing the pendant that belonged to her "grandmother", Carlotta Valdes. It is made of rubies set in gold. Is it a Trinitarian symbol, a sign of spiritual legitimacy usurped by Judy, the emblem of Dante's "Perfect Love" or alchemical transmutation? In any case, the piece of jewelry looks surprisingly similar to the headdress of Marie de Bourgogne painted by Anton Boys, known as Waiss, and by Niklas Reiser. This sovereign so often likened to Mary Magdalene...¹²



10Jean-Pierre Bertrand, *Le Monde de Rodenbach*, Labor, Bruxelles, 1999, p. 105-117.

11When she attempts drowning, "Madeleine" is wearing a black dress and white gloves, like an initiate.

12The piece of jewelry also appears in the works of Ghirlandaio (1449-1494) which evoke an anonymous "Lady". The Lady of Love? A *Mary-Magdalene playing a lute* in the *Master of the Female Half-Lengths* also wears it. The Trinitarian rubies are replaced by pearls.



A close-up in the thriller shows the wife's white grave. There is a name written in capital letters, with no other mentions, such as it happens in the case of sacred or divine appellation: MADELEINE¹³. John Ferguson spends a long time mourning there. Alfred Hitchcock intentionally emphasizes this first name of mystical significance, as if he's understood the profound meaning of *Bruges-la-Morte*, although, let's

admit it, it is already obvious in Boileau and Narcejac's novel. In that vein, the Spanish religious missions that play a decisive role in the film bear the name Dolores for Nuestra Señora de los Dolores (Our Lady of the Seven Dolors) and San Juan Bautista (Saint John the Baptist), where the final scene is set. The director also turns a nun into an element that generates drama, as is the case of the scene with Robert the Devil's nuns and Sister Rosalie's decisive intervention at the beguineage, that helps open the servant's eyes regarding Hugues Viane's depraved situation. Finally, the tower, which was rebuilt for the film, is part of the conventional and patronymic iconography of Mary Magdalene. It is the focal point of the story's tragic denouement. Like in *Bruges-la-Morte*, the last ringing of the monastery's bells marks Scottie's rebirth: he overcame his vertigo, overcame his harmful hallucinations and rediscovered his primordial unity.

As for the fascinating soundtrack, it was written by Bernard Herrmann: it reminds of *Tristan and Isolde* by Wagner. Lastly, *Vertigo's* chromatic scale revolves around red, and even more around green, Mary Magdalene's trademark colors in religious iconography.

"Madeleine" appears to Scottie surrounded by a fluorescent green halo in the hotel room (pictured below). It evokes the Astral Light, a favorite of the 19th century occultists. This light that is often associated with the color green (the Grail Emerald, the Green Snake, the Secret Fire, etc.) would be the necessary factor that leads to the success of the Great Work. It is regarded as a "universal" energy that fills everything, like the Shekinah, the Sophia or the heavenly Virgin. Of the wife in *Bruges-la-Morte*... She is first and foremost the Central Fire, the Immortal Soul, the Light of the world which shines in the deepest darkness of Gospel of John's prologue or even the Sophia our lady of the seven dolors - a poor copy of this Sophia in Judy's case -, the spotless mirror of God's activity, the resplendence of the eternal light, as evidenced by this quasi-Johannine response given by a tormented "Madeleine" (or the fallen Sophia) to her distraught lover:

*I were walking down a long corridor that once was mirrored, and fragments of mirror still hang there, dark and shadowy, reflecting a dark image of me... and yet not me... someone else, in other clothes, of another time, doing things I have never done... but still me... And I can't stop to ask why, I must keep on walking. At the end of the corridor there is nothing but darkness, and I know when I walk into the darkness, I'll die.*¹⁴

¹³In this story, it is Madeleine who rises "from the dead", making her a female Christ-Sophia. Jacob Boehme evokes Sophia in these words: "Christ turned Adam away from the vanities while he slept and gave him back his angelic image" in that he created Eve "using his essence", the feminine aspect of his being". "She is the matrix of Adam, of heavenly nature (Sophia)". And she's destined to save him. Alexandre Roob, *Hermetic Museum: Alchemy and Mystique*, Taschen, Cologne, 1997, p. 460.

¹⁴The English script is available at www.weeklyscript.com/Vertigo.txt

Vertigo or *Sueurs froides* and, through it, *Bruges-la-Morte*, continued to inspire many filmmakers. First of all, let us mention Brian De Palma (1940), who would direct a variation based on the cult film, which he called *Obsession* (1975). In this case, the anthropomorphized city is Florence, a place that is much more similar to Bruges when it comes to its past and its Catholic heritage than San Francisco. Bernard Herrmann was once again entrusted with the score. But what should we really think of the deceased wife's tomb? In De Palma's case, it becomes a... colossal mausoleum that turns out to be the replica of the San Miniato al Monte church in Florence! Was the young director one of those who had understood the symbolism of Alfred Hitchcock's film, itself inspired by *Bruges-la-Morte*? It seems we can answer in the affirmative: the dead woman's name is Sandra Portinari, which was the surname of Beatrice, Dante's Beloved and mystical muse. In the film, the heroine restores Bernardo Daddi's *Madonna (Virgin and Child)*. Masaccio's *Eve* and Botticelli's *Venus*, two other archetypal references to the universal feminine principle, appear at some point in the plot. Nevertheless, the curators of the *Hitchcock et l'art: Coïncidences fatales* exhibition, which was hosted at the Centre Pompidou in 2001¹⁵, found it essential to hang Khnopff's original drawing on its walls. It's his drawing that opens Rodenbach's masterpiece.



Cf. The Gospel according to John : *The Light shines in the darkness; and the darkness did not comprehend it.* Madeleine is convinced that she will die at the age of twenty-six, just like her grandmother, who haunts her. 26 is equal to the sum of letters that compose God's sacred name in Hebrew, YHWH, 10 + 5 + 6 + 5, and GOD, 7 + 15 + 4.

15Hitchcock et l'art: Coïncidences fatales. Exhibition at the Centre Pompidou (Paris), from June 6th to September 24th, 2001.