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The Many Faces of Judy Barton: Contemporary Retellings of Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*

Abstract

This analysis of Wendy Powers & Robin McLeod's 2011 novel The Testament of Judith Barton*, a retelling of Alfred Hitchcock's* Vertigo *(1958) from the point of view of its female lead, argues that the shift in perspective makes space for the inner life and personhood of a character who has been objectified by the film's male gaze and flattened by its cultural legacy. As a work of adaptation,* The Testament of Judith Barton *demystifies* Vertigo*'s mysteries by closely following Judy from early childhood through to her performance of Madeleine within the film's plot, removing the distance imposed by the male protagonist's point of view on-screen. It is a contemporary retelling of a classic film that uses the conventions of the novelization genre to interrogate Judy's place in film history from a feminist angle. By flipping the script and approaching this well-known narrative from Judy's first-person perspective, the novel alternatingly explores and reinvents her complex motivations in ways that cannot be addressed by the film itself, thereby creating a more fully rounded character and breathing new life into the Hollywood classic.*

When Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* overtook Citizen Kane to claim the top spot in *Sight & Sound*'s "Greatest Films of All Time" poll in 2012,[1] it seemed inevitable. The film had been steadily climbing the ranks for decades, and had landed in second place in the previous poll ten years earlier. *Vertigo* has dramatically risen in esteem since its release in 1958 when, as Charles Barr describes in his monograph on the film, it received reviews ranging from lukewarm to outright negative: "Common to all of these reviews is a lack of sympathy with the basic structure and drive of the picture. Even the friendlier ones single out for praise elements that seem, from today's perspective, to be marginal virtues and incidental pleasures" (13). Despite this early negative reception, it has risen to the position of a classic of the American film canon and has been widely influential, with films as varied and praised as Brian De Palma's *Obsession* (1976), Christian Petzold's *Phoenix* (2014) and Park Chan-wook's *Decision to Leave* (2022) echoing and expanding upon its psychosexual vision of obsession and replacement. It has also inspired works which more specifically grapple with its themes, characters, and aesthetics, with the most straightforward of them being Wendy Powers & Robin McLeod's 2011 novel *The Testament of Judith Barton*, a self-published retelling of *Vertigo* from the perspective of its female lead.

Adapted from Boileau-Narcejac's mystery novel *D'entre les morts* (1954), *Vertigo* follows retired detective John "Scottie" Ferguson (James Stewart) as he tails Madeleine (Kim Novak), the wife of his old college friend Gavin Elster (Tom Helmore), at Elster's behest. As Scottie follows Madeleine and tries to solve the mystery of her increasingly strange behaviour, he falls in love with her. Afflicted with a debilitating fear of heights, however, Scottie is unable to save her when she throws herself from the top of a bell tower. Scottie

1. In the 2022 edition of the list, it has fallen to second place, overtaken by Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975).

continues to be haunted by Madeleine, seeing her at every turn, until he sets his eyes on Judy Barton, a shopgirl who looks strikingly like her. The film's paradigm-changing twist is this: the Madeleine that Scottie fell in love with was Judy all along, hired by Elster to impersonate his wife in his plan to assassinate her. Judy cannot resist falling into a relationship with Scottie, and finds herself subject to his obsessive drive to transform her (back) into Madeleine.

Approaching the same story from the opposite perspective, *The Testament of Judith Barton* follows its titular character from early childhood through to the end of the film's events, where she meets the same fate as the real Madeleine and falls off the tower of the Mission San Juan Bautista. In their Authors' Note, Powers & McLeod write of their motivations:

> Anyone bothering to ask why she participated in Gavin Elster's plot—and few do, most viewers being satisfied with objectifying Judy like Scottie does—will be told, "It's obvious. She's his mistress in the source novel," and they'll agree, dropping the subject. One night, watching the film, and Judy in particular, very closely, we could no longer drop the subject. (459)

The result is a novel that fits into a lineage made up of works like Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and Gregory Maguire's *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* (1995),[2] retellings of classic novels (Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*, respectively) from the point of view of the mysterious women at their hearts. I argue that *The Testament of Judith Barton* is a contemporary work in deep conversation with the original text of *Vertigo*, as well as with its legacy as a canonical work in film history. Its retelling of the film's narrative from Judy's point of view proposes an alternate reading, countering interpretations which have been offered in the decades since its release: it calls for renewed attention for the objectified figure at the heart of the story.

Powers & McLeod adopt a very literal approach to *Vertigo*'s narrative, particularly when compared to the more interpretative perspectives that many critics and scholars have taken on. For example, one prevailing analytical framework applied to the film is psychoanalysis. Through this lens, the film's main theme is that of scopophilia, or "the erotic basis for pleasure in looking at another person as object" (Mulvey 806). Long sequences in the first half of the film have little to no dialogue and consist entirely of Scottie driving through the streets of San Francisco, following Madeleine from location to location and watching her every, silent move. In her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," published in 1975, film scholar Laura Mulvey uses *Vertigo*—and other Hitchcock films—to exemplify what she defines as the male gaze, which draws the (presumed male) viewer into the film by having him identify with the male lead in his voyeuristic capacity (814). Scottie, and by extension the spectator experiencing the film through his point of view, watch Madeleine, and continue to watch as Scottie transforms Judy into his "perfect image of female beauty and mystery" (814). In contrast, Judy-as-Madeleine spends the first half of the film passively being looked at by both Scottie and the spectator, before then allowing herself to be transformed by Scottie. In 1987, in response to Mulvey's interpretation of Vertigo, Karen Hollinger proposed an alternate analysis that makes space for the female spectator through acknowledging the shift from Scottie's perspective to Judy's, which takes place

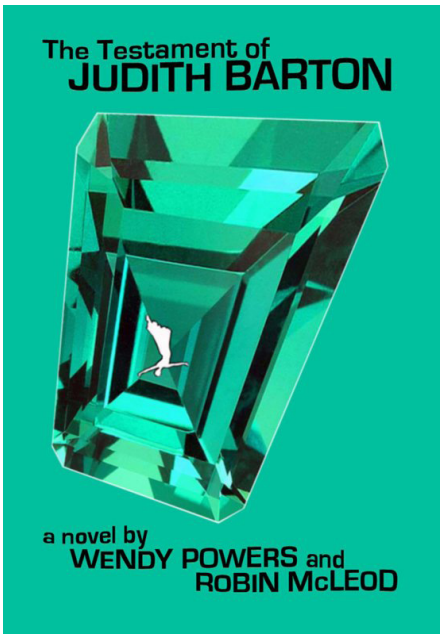

Figure 1. The book cover for The Testament of Judith Barton.

at the moment of her flashback (24). However, Hollinger's analysis remains psychoanalytical, as she maps the narrative of the film and the crises of each character onto classical Oedipal structures.

The Testament of Judith Barton foregoes such analysis, and instead narrows its scope onto the emotional life of its protagonist. By following Judy from cradle to grave, the novel fills in plausible explanations into the places where the film basks in ambiguity. The advan-

2. The comparison to Wicked is made directly on the "Preview" page of the promotional website for *The Testament of Judith Barton.*

tage of presenting Gavin Elster's contrived plan through the eyes of his reluctant accomplice, rather than those of his mark, is the clarity that this alternate perspective affords. Whereas Scottie is under the spell of Elster's story and Judy-as-Madeleine's performance, and is only able to pull back the curtain at the last moment, Judy is herself behind that curtain the whole time. By following her point of view as closely as the first half of the film follows Scottie's, the novel transforms *Vertigo*'s eerie sense of mystery into something more akin to a thriller. For example, Elster takes on a much larger role, becoming the novel's chief antagonist. Though his plan consists of manipulating Scottie through the performance of Judy-as-Madeleine, in the novel, Judy is also being manipulated by Elster. What he asks of her is help in protecting his vulnerable wife from a stalker:

> "You don't think she's in danger, do you?"
>
> "Well, that's just it, I don't know this man or his intentions. I can't tell if he's just infatuated with my wife, quite innocent, or if he means her harm. He may even be a kidnapper — my wife's family is rather wealthy. If he knows that."
>
> "How frightening for her!"
>
> "She doesn't know."
>
> [...] It was a disturbing story. How unsettling, I thought, to be watched and not know it. (Powers & McLeod 222-223)

In the afterword, the authors pointedly note how this is a crucial change from what is revealed in the Boileau-Narcejac novel: "*D'entre les morts* does indeed flesh out Renée Sourange, the Judy Barton character. Boileau and Narcejac's Renée is fully complicit in the Elster character's plot to kill his wife because she's his mistress and wants to marry him" (433-434). By filling in the narrative with the explanations Judy frantically gives Scottie during their final confrontation in the film's climax, rather than going back to draw from the well of the original novel, Powers & McLeod commit to creating a tragic, sympathetic character that is not wholly defined by the way the detective character perceives her. In other words, they attempt to release her from the confines of the male gaze that has constrained her in previous iterations.

The literal approach taken by Powers & McLeod is all the more apparent when compared to *The Green Fog* (2017), another, more recent retelling of *Vertigo*. Directed by Guy Maddin, Evan Johnson, and Galen Johnson, this hour-long experimental film takes the opposite approach to the canonical Hitchcock work, and embraces complete abstraction by reconstructing the plot of the film with clips taken from other films and television shows shot on location in San Francisco. *The Green Fog* is similar to *The Testament of Judith Barton* in that a prior knowledge of the original text imbues it with greater meaning. The film recreates *Vertigo* in broad gestures, capturing its emotions and themes more than the nitty-gritty of its complex plot machinations:

> As one actor turns into another several times in a single sequence, and yet some kind of narrative coherence persists, the effect is like listening to a symphony created by cut-and-splice from a hundred different recordings [...]. The basic "melody" continues to be recognizable as Vertigo, although the orchestrations and even the individual instruments change every few seconds. (Romney)

Though the tragedy of Judy's fate reverberates through the ending of *The Green Fog*, heightened by the liberty its experimental nature affords it, she nonetheless remains an abstraction: both a symbolic figure for the tragedy of an *amour fou*, and herself symbolically rendered through other actresses playing other characters.

The Testament of Judith Barton, by contrast, centers Judy and her inner life at the heart of the narrative. By doing so, the authors make this retelling a reclamation project for a character who, in their opinion, has never been given her proper due, despite being the subject of some of the film's most iconic images. "The film itself treats her as an image," reads the Author's Note, "just as Scottie does. Like him, the movie doesn't much care about who Judy is, why she does what she does, as long as she looks the part. We thought it was time someone cared" (Powers & McLeod 434-435). The authors present *Vertigo* through a feminist lens, but they do so by expanding on elements already found in the film itself. It is not that *Vertigo* does not care about Judy; nor is it, as Mulvey's psychoanalytic approach would have it, that the film represents her as a wholly passive character objectified by the male gaze. As Hollinger suggests, as soon as Scottie leaves Judy's apartment for the first time and she turns to face the camera—instigating a flashback to events we have previously experienced from Scottie's point of view—the film shifts to following her perspective much more closely than his. After this scene, Judy essentially takes Scottie's place as the protagonist until the film necessarily circles back to him at the very end, after Judy has fallen to her death. In the novel, this perspective shift is the baseline from which it begins, allowing more time to be spent developing Judy as a character, as well as closely and empathetically tracking the slow erosion of her control over her life as the story progresses.

More than the actual text of the film, *Vertigo*'s reception and cultural legacy are what flatten Judy to what she represents for Scottie—and for the film's

overall meaning—rather than digging into her complexities as a character. As Powers & McLeod point out, spectators and critics often assume the obvious: Judy was Elster's mistress, and her pleading defenses against Scottie's accusations are not to be believed. Elsewhere, she is viewed as "a harsh-voiced common shopgirl, with untidy hair and careless rainment [*sic*]" (Moffitt), compared to the more refined Madeleine. This can even be seen in Hollinger's analysis of the film, where she states that, "the character of Judy appears to provide a new figure of identification for the female spectator, but again it is an uneasy identification because Judy is a vulgar, cheaply provocative, and seemingly unintelligent department store clerk" (24). Much of the writing on *Vertigo* does not go past the surface of Judy's character, with the focus largely being on Scottie's descent into a mad obsession with the figure of Madeleine. When, in his maniacal grief, he strong-arms Judy into becoming the object of his fetishistic obsession, much of the writing and analysis follows suit, and Judy has thus remained a symbolic object or plot device.

Figure 2. Meeting Judy Barton.

By contrast, *The Testament of Judith Barton* narrows the focus onto Judy, and organizes all of its recurring motifs around her. The book can be categorized as a novelization, which, as Kate Newell defines, is a work that "[contributes] to a work's adaptation network [...] by expanding or establishing new significations for its existing lexicon" (26). Though not a tie-in novel, as is the case with most novelizations, its *raison d'être* is to be a retelling of the film, particularly in its second and third acts. When it is not following the onscreen narrative of *Vertigo*, it is filling in the backstory of its protagonist by extrapolating from character details present in the film's text. Though mostly made up by the authors, Judy's childhood in the first section of the novel is based on the few details present in the film. This becomes particularly clear in the scene where Judy and Scottie first meet, and she shows him her driver's licenses and family pictures: "That's my father. He's dead. My mother got married again ... I didn't like the guy. So ... I decided to see what it was like in sunny California. I've been here for three years" (Powers & McLeod 380). From these nuggets of information, a fully-realized character is created, and the motivations behind her actions in the film are given depth. For instance, her father owns a jewelry repair store, and in her youth she develops both interest and skill in the field. When asked what her favourite gemstone is, she carefully considers the question before landing on the emerald. This is a recurring motif throughout the novel, becoming doubly important as the story progresses: Judy-as-Madeleine falls into the San Francisco Bay not as a part of her performance, as one would assume from the filmic narrative, but rather in a frantic attempt to retrieve an emerald bracelet gifted to her by her late father.

Another crucial example is the metatextual throughline of performance: when Judy first arrives in San Francisco, she begins taking Method Acting classes.

This introduces a fascinating wrinkle into both her prior interest in the stage during her childhood, as well as her future performance as Madeleine. Her acting teacher Ben Phillips serves almost as an oracle figure: "Real acting is not about speaking rote lines in a cultured voice while striking some classic pose," he says in one of his classes. "It is about organically communicating the human condition. [...] This can rattle your sense of self—you can get lost in a role. Completely becoming that other person moment to moment will take discipline, and courage" (Powers & McLeod 189). Later on, when Elster is preparing her for her performance as Madeleine, Judy remarks to herself that "despite his professed disdain for "the pictures," Elster fancied himself quite the director, though unlike Ben Phillips he wouldn't risk letting an actress find her own way" (Powers & McLeod 253). The inclusion of a character like Ben Phillips, and Judy's constant referral back to what he would think or say about her performance as Madeleine, effectively foreshadows the novel's ending.

Though the novel brings in a lot of original material, its main flaw is its reliance on the film's text, which is a characteristic common to the genre of novelization in general. In her writing on the novelization, Newell quotes Robert Leedham of *The Guardian*, who argues that it is akin to "join-the-dots puzzles, with passages of description linking together the bits of dialogue supplied by the scriptwriter" (qtd. in Newell 34). In *The Testament of Judith Barton*, this only increases as the written narrative begins to run parallel with that of the film, and even more so when Judy-as-Madeleine and Scottie begin interacting face-to-face. Indeed, as it progresses, the novel often falls into the motions of repeating the film's dialogues and merely describing the characters' on-screen actions, as Leedham describes. Once in a while, Judy's third-person narration provides asides explaining her motivations for what she says and does. The strengths of these more constrained scenes, then, are when Judy finds herself straying from her expected performance as Madeleine, either needing to improvise or spontaneously reacting as herself rather than as Madeleine. But this is the tension at the heart of any novelization: the balance between newness and familiarity.

This familiarity does not, however, begin and end with the film itself. Powers & McLeod are sometimes playful in their writing, adding in winks to the well-informed reader. For example, in the last section of the novel, when Judy and Scottie have begun seeing each other, he takes her to a theater production of *Picnic*. During this date, they discuss the performance as well as the play's film adaptation:

> Scottie leaned over to ask if I enjoyed it. I was about to tell him how much it meant to me, that he took me to the theater; I was about to tell him about my acting, but he didn't wait for my answer.
>
> "It was alright," he said. "Though, to be honest, I preferred the movie a couple years ago. They got the casting right—that blonde was a real looker."
>
> I still caught him looking at blondes, and wondered—if I went back to that cheap salon in Oakland, would he want to kiss me then? (Powers & McLeod 395-396)

This is, of course, a tongue-in-cheek reference to Kim Novak, who plays Madge in the 1955 adaptation of *Picnic* along with Judy in *Vertigo.* Powers & McLeod play with

Figure 3. Behind-the-scenes photo of Novak in Picnic *(1955).*

layers of characters and contexts for the same face: in a universe where these fictional characters exist simultaneously with the very real adaptation of *Picnic* they are discussing, it would make sense that Scottie, after having had his brief affair with Madeleine, would be drawn to Novak as Madge. Beneath this metatext, the scene establishes that Scottie is not attempting to hide his fixation on blondes, and that Judy is already willing to consider changing herself (back) into the image of the woman he desires—at the expense of her own personhood.

The Testament of Judith Barton recenters the narrative of one of film history's most celebrated works onto the perspective of its objectified female lead, allowing her just as much—if not more—interiority than Scottie gets as the main character of the film. The difference between reading a novel and watching a film is stark; as the authors point out, one's experience of each version will undoubtedly be affected by their experience of the other. Watching Kim Novak as Madeleine, ghostly and refined, and then seeing her as Judy, made-up and full of nervous, combative energy, is a shocking twist as well as an impressive feat of performance; but one that does not necessarily translate to the written form. Instead, the experience of spending hours reading Judy's per-

spective allows for a look behind the curtain of Novak's performance, which, contained in a runtime of 128 minutes, cannot luxuriate in as much detail. By reading the novelization, we are no longer voyeurs alongside Scottie, but rather firmly aligned with the one being looked at. To a reader who is already intimately familiar with the film, *The Testament of Judith Barton* may read as a slow march towards inevitable doom, a tragedy from its first pages. To one who has no prior knowledge of *Vertigo* and its bitter ending, the novel plays out as more of a classically-structured *bildungsroman*, one in which its heroine repeatedly loses herself in the desires of others.

The novel has remained little-known since its publication in 2011, and there has been little writing on it and its relationship to *Vertigo*. Despite its small readership, it is a fascinating example of how the Hollywood canon can continue to be rediscovered and conversed with in new and inventive ways. Though some novelizations may fail to provide additional insights that could not already be found in the source film, in the case of *Vertigo*, such an adaptation has the distinct advantage of being able to go beyond the limited perspective of its protagonist, who spends the bulk of its runtime in the dark about the machinations of the plot. If Scottie is the one whom the film's plot is happening to, then Judy is the unsung driving force behind that same plot. *The Testament of Judith Barton* not only expands Judy as a character, but also offers a different angle on Scottie himself. Indeed, one of the novel's strengths is its rendering of Scottie and his obsession. For Judy, Scottie initially offers a degree of comfort—even from afar—as the love and affection he feels towards Madeleine is a love she herself craves. This makes Scottie's sudden shift to cruelty towards her just as shocking as it is in the film, if not more so. In the last act, when he is dragging her up the stairs of the bell tower, it is clearer than ever that in every format, the story's greatest tragedy is that the Madeleine that consumed Scottie was only ever Judy: "Elster had supplied the props and scraps of an identity, but so much of Madeleine had been my creation—couldn't Scottie see that what he loved in her was me?" (Powers & McLeod 428). By retelling Vertigo through Judy's eyes, Powers & McLeod craft a new lens through which to experience the classic film and its complex characters: a lens that sharpens the images onscreen and fills in the void between them.

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