

'Fall' Review: A Don't-Look-Down Thriller That Will Have You Clutching Your Seat

Two women climb an abandoned TV tower in the desert, and we're with them every shivery step.



Courtesy of Lionsgatenone

"[Fall](#)" is a very good "don't look down" movie. It's a fun, occasionally cheesy, but mostly ingeniously made thriller about two daredevil climbers, Becky (Grace Caroline Currey) and Hunter (Virginia Gardner), who decide to scale the B67 TV tower — an abandoned 2,000-foot communication tower that juts up in the middle of the California desert. It's based on an actual structure (the KXTV/KOVR Tower outside Sacramento), which is used like the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, the skyscraper that became the pedestal for Tom Cruise's you-are-there stunt sequences in "Mission: Impossible — Ghost

Protocol." And if, like me, you loved that movie in part because of how deviously it toyed with your fear of heights, "Fall" is likely to hit you as an irresistible piece of vertigo porn. It's for anyone who ate up "Ghost Protocol," as well as the awesome rock-climbing documentaries "Free Solo" and "The Dawn Wall," and wants to continue that shivery vicarious high.

Critics, for some reason, now like to mock the visual sleight-of-hand that goes into a thriller like this one, as if the CGI involved were all too easy to see through. But in this case I couldn't disagree more. "Fall" was shot in the Imax format in the Mojave Desert, and there are moments when I honestly don't know how the director, [Scott Mann](#), the cinematographer, MacGregor, and the two actors did it. Were they actually on a tower — and, if so, how high up? Were there stunt people, or was every bit of this brought off with computer trickery?

The abandoned TV tower, like the KXTV/KOVR Tower, is the fourth highest structure in the U.S. It has a photogenic vermilion finish (imagine the Golden Gate Bridge as a rusty hypodermic needle), and it turns out to be the perfect setting for a movie about climbing into the sky. As the two women ascend, the desert below looks like something viewed from an airplane. The trick is that the elements of the image are all visually united: tower, horizon, climbers.

Without a cut, the film will glide from close-ups to vertically angled drops to death-defying panoramas; the light and shadow are always just right. You know how it feels when you watch an old movie with rear projection that's laughably fake? "Fall," by contrast, represents a totally credible and innovative use of CGI. Watching the movie, we believe our eyes and, therefore, our raised pulses.

The two women have agreed to make this climb as a way to wrest Becky out of her funk. In the film's opening sequence, we see the two ascending a vertical rock face along with Becky's husband, Dan (Mason Gooding), who winds up plunging to his death. A year passes, and Becky can't let go — of him, or of the anxiety that has calcified around the tragedy. Facing her fear, scaling that TV tower along with her best friend (they plan to scatter Dan's ashes when they get to the top), is the only thing that will purge the demon.

As terrifyingly tall as the tower is, it doesn't strike us as something that would offer that much of a challenge to highly experienced climbers. There's a ladder on the inside of the caged needle that goes up for 1,800 feet. For the remaining 200 feet, the ladder is outside the structure. I wouldn't want to climb 30 feet of it, but these two aren't scared of heights, and the feat they've laid out for themselves looks a hell of a lot easier than shimmying over the smooth plunging rock faces they're used to. That's why

they succeed pretty quickly. Half an hour into the movie, they've ascended to the small circular platform up top.

But along the way the whole structure has been quivering, with telltale shots of a nut or a bolt coming undone here and there. It's the outside ladder that's getting loose, and as they take the last steps, a chunk of it falls out from under them, the weight of that chunk pulling the rest of the ladder down with it. Just like that, they're stranded. The cylindrical pole that's left is too smooth to climb down. The rope they have isn't long enough. And though they've got their phones, they're up too high to get service. There is nothing up there but the two of them and their do-or-die ingenuity.

At the start of the movie, Hunter is all giddy enthusiasm, like a Reese Witherspoon go-getter from the '90s, and Becky, lost in her malaise, is all po-faced misery and dread. But the two actors show you how these women come alive, and connect, by climbing. It's through their expressive skill that we believe in what we're seeing. "Fall" was made for just \$3 million, and it's good enough to remind me of another perilous small-scale thriller centered on two people doing all they can to survive: "Open Water," the scary 2003 indie that basically extended the opening sequence of "Jaws" over 80 minutes. Movies like these come with built-in narrative devices — like, for instance, the soap-opera revelation that comes up between Becky and Hunter. There are moments

when the script overdoes the millennial effrontery, especially when it's focused on Hunter's identity as a YouTuber who wants to document the whole climb for her 60,000 followers ("This bad boy is over 2,000 feet tall, and your homegirls are going to be climbing to the tippy tippy top!").

Mostly, though, we're with these two, living through every vulture attack and sudden drop that involves something like hanging from a rope and trying to grab a stranded backpack. Is there a pedestrian below who could save them? The movie deals with that possibility in a way that recalls the Robert Redford-stranded-at-sea movie "All Is Lost." "Fall" is a technical feat of a thriller, yet it's not without a human center. It earns your clenched gut and your white knuckles.