Stairs in Cinema: a Formal and Thematic Investigation

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Abstract

Stairs in Cinema: A Formal and Thematic Investigation

Dan Babineau

Stairways have appeared with great regularity throughout film history, often in scenes of tremendous intensity and significance. As a complex element of architecture, and an equally complex signifier, the stairway offers filmmakers rich possibilities of expression. This thesis investigates the appearances of stairways and explains the multi-layered nature of their role in narrative cinema. Following an outline of the repertoire of possibilities signified by the staircase as an element of mise-en-scene, movement, and symbolic registers, the thesis turns to a series of case studies. Focusing on the classical Hollywood cinema, the investigation is divided into chapters on the musical, the melodrama and the films of Alfred Hitchcock. A dream element in the Hollywood musical, a dramatic site of confrontation, spectacle and expressive mise en scene in the melodrama, and an evocative recurring detail in Hitchcock's cinema, the thesis demonstrates the prevalence and dramatic importance of stairways. Concluding arguments point to the multiple ways that stairways have served the needs of various genres at different periods of film history, and how they have played key roles in the work of different international directors.

STAIRS IN CINEMA:
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INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of cinema, stairs have been the settings for many memorable moments, from the confrontation on the Odessa steps in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) to its many copies (most notably the staircase shootout in Brian De Palma's *The Untouchables* (1987)), from the fantastical stairway sets of Busby Berkeley musicals to the ballroom in James Cameron's blockbuster *Titanic* (1997), where lower-class Jack is introduced to upper-class society on the grand staircase. Think how many times we've watched gangsters tumbling to their death down stairs, protagonists of thrillers and horror films pausing momentarily before climbing the dark stairs to their fate, melodramatic heroines making dramatic entrances down garish curved stairways. Taking advantage of their perilous qualities, both comedy routines and action sequences have been staged on stairs. In John Woo's Hong Kong action film *Hard-Boiled* (1992), the good guy slides on his back down the bannister of a long staircase, both guns blazing, disposing of all the bad guys before he hits the bottom. In Disney's *Mary Poppins* (1964) the magical nanny sits on the bannister and slides improbably *up* to greet the children. In Roman Polanski's *The Tenant* (1976), after a failed suicide jump, the protagonist must drag himself, injured legs and all, up the long spiral staircase of his apartment building to try again. In Robert Aldrich's *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962), a terrorized and crippled Joan Crawford must leave her wheelchair and drag herself *down* the stairs to reach a telephone and call for help.

Once we stop to think about it, the scenes come flooding back. It's true: many filmmakers have an affinity for, and get more creative around stairways. And the scenes

produced are often vivid and highly charged.

Interestingly, this association of stairways with memorable cinematic moments exists throughout film history, across national boundaries, and in the work of many directors working in many different genres. And while it seems to have been most pronounced in the spectacular set designs of Hollywood during the studio years, it shows no sign of abating. There are significant 'stairway scenes' to be found in the recent work of Bernardo Bertolucci, Pedro Almodovar, Francis Ford Coppola, Roberto Rodriguez, Todd Haynes, and others.

I propose to look at this phenomenon, first of all, to answer the simple and obvious question which arises: Why does this particular architectural feature—stairs—recur with such regularity in scenes of tremendous power, and so often in moments of high intensity—crisis, revelation, transformation, reversal, death?

In order to adequately answer this question, I will explore the way stairs have been used in film, outlining the range of their functionality and their commonality. I will show how stairs are used on a practical level within the constructed set, contributing to basic photographic requirements as well as those of choreography or staging. On a deeper level, I will examine the role stairs can play in supporting character, clarifying or intensifying narrative moments, and articulating deeper themes. I will indicate the significant way in which stairs, even outside of the cinema, can relate to human psychology. Finally, I will show how staircases function as symbols of universal significance, helping filmmakers express some of the basic human impulses which underlie almost all art.

It is my contention that stairs are a complex architectural element offering filmmakers equally complex staging and shooting possibilities. Since stairs are essentially *vertical* passageways in otherwise largely *horizontal* architectural space, they open up a wide range of options, including movements of both actors and camera, within the mise-en-scène. Narratively, their role as a 'passageway' is significant, since characters will use them at moments of passage or transition—typically crucial moments within any given film. At the same time, stairs are also complex and powerful cultural signifiers, often representing hierarchical notions such as the superiority of royalty over commoners, success versus failure, or other up/down dichotomies. These thematic possibilities enrich many films, particularly within those genres where hegemonic or hierarchical orders have particular significance.

Therefore, I argue, *stairs recur in the cinema with great regularity and in scenes of great intensity and significance specifically because of the richness of their layers of inherent spatial and symbolic power.*

Of all the visual arts, cinema is alone in being able to show motion on stairs, in an ever-changing array of perspectives. Photography, painting, and even theatre may represent stairs in similar ways, but not with such a plethora of possibilities. Marcel Duchamps' well-known Cubist work, "Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2" (1912), is in fact an example of a painting specifically attempting to recreate the motion of cinema—its canvas a blurring of overlapping 'frames' which follow the figure down the stairs. The potential of motion gives the cinema an interesting advantage: characters can be shown not just *on* stairs, but while in the act of climbing or descending. And more

importantly, they can be photographed in either activity by a camera above or below, or which follows them as they step.

What do these possibilities imply about what the cinema can do with stairways? As I will show, stairs are subsequently not just representations of space, but in film can be experienced temporally as well. Operating as vertical axes in horizontal space, they relate visually to the affective plunges—or 'emotional ups-and-downs'—experienced by film characters. Operating as passageways which link higher and lower levels, the known and the unknown, the public and the private, the rational and the irrational, success and failure, power and weakness, stairs are thus inextricably linked to those characters during the trajectory they follow through the narrative. Narrative, in fact, in a classical sense, is viewed as an upward climb, from its opening "incident" through a series of steps which are termed "rising action" to a climax or "peak moment", and then down again in a "denouement".

Others before me have taken note of and remarked upon the recurrent uses of stairs in film. Charles Affron, for example, in *Sets in Motion*, makes a broad overview of the field of set design, first looking at its significance within the cinema, then proposing that sets can be "narrativized", or made to contribute to the narrative. He outlines five levels of design intensity, ranging from a set as purely background or *denotative*, through levels of *punctuation*, *embellishment*, *artifice,* to *narrative*, a set's most extreme status as a dominant element carrying the story. Affron makes many references to stairs, having recognized their particular impact and usefulness; in fact he uses examples of stairway scenes where ever possible, not just in the text, but in illustrations, and in quotes from set

designers. Affron points out the power of stairs within a narrative, suggesting that a staircase "invites a dynamic of passage for characters who may also be displayed in attitudes of presentation, usually suspended above or below the plane of the lens," and that as a result, stairs are "a frequently exercised site of narrative crisis."[1]

Film historians—and others—have written about stairs within particular film genres, such as the classic Hollywood musicals. Beverly Heisner, in *Hollywood Art*, describes how a grand staircase was a useful "architectonic device" in the musical, listing some of its multiple contributions to style and theme;[2] Barbara Klinger, though she's writing about Douglas Sirk's melodrama *Written on the Wind* (1956), quotes Universal Studios' publicity material which links stairways and sex appeal, then goes on to explain that "This association was credited to Flo Ziegfeld, who discovered 'the entertainment value in a set of circular stairs... for the sole purpose of exhibiting breathtaking showgirls to their best advantage.'"[3]

Even writers outside of academic or film circles have noted the use of stairs in musicals. Nancy Friday, for example, in *The Power of Beauty*, wistfully recalls the movies of her adolescence, remembering the "flights of stairs" which heroines danced up

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[1]Charles Affron and Mirella Jona Affron, *Sets in Motion: Art Direction and Film Narrative* (Rutgers University Press, 1994), 60.

[2]Beverly Heisner, *Hollywood Art: Art Direction in the Days of the Great Studios* (McFarland & Company Inc. Publ., 1990), 85-87.

[3]Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama & Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk* (Indiana University Press, 1994), 60.

and down;[4] in her history of stairs, architect Eva Jiricna talks about the dream-like associations produced by the fanciful stairs of the Busby Berkeley movies of the 1930's.[5] Cleo Baldon, in *Steps and Stairways*, points out that

> Both Fred Astaire and Shirley Temple tap danced their way up and down countless elegant stairs... In the ultra-lavish film musicals of the forties and fifties, monumental and spectacular flights of stairs usually dominated the climactic scenes, often with hundreds of gorgeous show girls parading up and down the steps.[6]

In terms of film genres, however, it is in the classic Hollywood melodrama that stairs seem to have received the most concentrated attention. This is not surprising, since the set designs (along with every other visual and aural component) are put to work as an expressive element in melodrama, more than in most other genres. Many who have written on the melodrama have pointed this out. In her introduction to *Imitations of Life*, editor Marcia Landy writes that "The external landscape is a correlative for an internal landscape of hysteria, schizophrenia, depression, obsession-compulsion, and misdirected desire."[7] According to David Rodowick, "the highly expressive mise-en-scène of the domestic melodrama did not so much *re*produce as *produce* the inner turmoil of the characters..."[8] And Thomas Elsaesser notes that "Melodrama is iconographically fixed by

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[4]Nancy Friday, *The Power of Beauty* (Harper Collins Publishers, 1996), 132.

[5]Eva Jiricna, *Staircases* (Calmann & King, 2001), 8.

[6]Cleo Baldon, *Steps and Stairways* (Rizzoli, N.Y., 1989) 244-246.

[7]Marcia Landy, editor, *Imitations of Life: a reader on film and television melodrama* (Wayne State University Press, 1991) 15.

[8]David N. Rodowick, "Madness, Authority, and Ideology in the Domestic Melodrama of the 1950s", *The Velvet Light Trap*, no. 19 (1982), 40-45.

the claustrophobic atmosphere of the bourgeois home and/or the small town setting..."[9]

Within this iconographic landscape, stairs play a pivotal role. As Barbara Klinger's observations suggested, there was a clear association between stairways and a display of female sexual appeal both in musicals and in melodramas. Mary Ann Doane, in *The Desire to Desire*, speaks at some length about this association, pointing out the conflicting images which use staircases both as a source of danger for an "active, investigating" female character, and as a kind of stage on which they are displayed:

> It is on the stairway that she (a female character) is displayed as spectacle for the male gaze (and often the icon is repeated, as though it were nonproblematic, within the same films--think of Hazel Brooks, the "other woman" in *Sleep My Love* (1948), descending the stairs in her scanty lingerie or the woman in *Dragonwyck,* dresssed in her best clothes, who poses on the staircase when her future husband comes to call.)[10]

Stairs in melodramas are not only limited to displays of female sex appeal, though. Thomas Elsaesser goes on to detail the tremendous iconic power of stairs, particularly in the work of Nicholas Ray and Douglas Sirk, remarking that "extreme, vertiginous drops in the emotional temperature" are "almost invariably played out against the vertical axis of a staircase."[11] And Charles Affron explains, writing about melodramas, "The structure of a staircase is conventionally used to indicate relationships

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[9]Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," *Monogram* no. 4, (1972), 2-15; reprinted in *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Women's Film*, edited by Christine Gledhill (BFI Publishing, 1987), 62.

[10]Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940's* (Indiana University Press, 1987), 135-136.

[11]Elsaesser, 60.

of domination and subordination; it may also provide a narrowing, energizing, concentrating frame."[12]

The use of stairs in the films of Alfred Hitchcock has received some attention, with Leslie Brill pointing out Hitchcock's use of up/down dichotomies[13], William Rothman mentioning the association of stairs to serial killers[14], and Jean Funck taking a more detailed look in an article entitled, "Functions and Significations of the Stairs in Alfred Hitchcock's Cinema". In Hitchcock's films, writes Funck, "This construction that, in a building, leads from one space to another, inevitably brings its users towards disaster." Funck claims that "Hitchcock, along with Fritz Lang, was one of the foremost Hollywoodian adaptors of psychoanalytic discoveries", going on to link Hitchcock's stairway scenes with Freud's interpretation of a stairway in a dream, and citing the "phallic nature" of the handrail. Funck suggests that characters on stairs in Hitchcock's films are always driven by curiosity or desire but at the same time "ignoring the interdiction, implicit or explicit, that the place is stricken with."[15] He concludes that this creates a feeling of anguish or dread in the spectators which they strongly share with the character on screen.

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[12]Affron, 64.

[13]Leslie Brill, *The Hitchcock Romance: Love and Irony in Hitchcock's Films* (Princeton University Press, 1988).

[14]William Rothman, *Hitchcock—The Murderous Gaze* (Harvard University Press, 1982), 352.

[15]Jean Funck, "Fonctions et significations de l'escalier dans le cinéma d'Alfred Hitchcock", *Positif* 286 (Dec. 1984), pg. 31. Translation: Francois Lamirande.

With regards to Hitchcock, Charles Affron again has astute comments about the role of stairs:

> Conveying ordeal and moral change, the staircase punctuates crucial narrative elements: the playboy Johnny (Cary Grant) carrying an ominous glass of milk up to his rich wife Lina (Joan Fontaine) in *Suspicion*; the double nature of Uncle Charlie in *Shadow of a Doubt*; Alicia (Ingrid Bergman) slowly climbing when she realizes she has been poisoned in *Notorious*; the spectacular identity games in the bell tower at the conclusion of *Vertigo*; the death of Arbogast (Martin Balsam), falling backwards, in *Psycho*; the camera tracking down and backwards during one of the murders in *Frenzy*.[16]

While all these authors have briefly mentioned stairs, few other than Affron or Funck have chosen to go much deeper than the remarks I've quoted here. Since the specifics of their work took them in other directions, their examination of the use of stairways was limited. For example, within the writing on musicals, much attention is paid to the impressive formal aspects, but rarely is the relationship between form and theme discussed. The melodrama, on the other hand, has attracted sophisticated theoretical analysis. Stairs are discussed from an ideological or thematic standpoint, but their practical uses in terms of filmmaking realities—staging, camera movement and placement, and so on—are rarely considered. Even in his detailed consideration of stairs in Hitchcock's film, Jean Funck is profound about psychological implications, but barely concerns himself with Hitchcock's filmmaking realities—or the formal strategies that Hitchcock employed.

My intention will be to bring together both formal and thematic aspects, looking at the subject first in a broader, then in a more detailed way, to provide as complete an

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[16]Affron, 65-66.

understanding as possible of the opportunities created by stairways, the particular uses to which they are often employed, and their lasting impression.

My study will take the following shape: After a brief background segment on stairway history and design, I will first of all provide a repertoire of formal and thematic possibilities offered by staircases in film. This will be illustrated with examples from the width and breadth of cinema, partly to indicate the importance of stairs within the set design, and also as a means of indicating the wide range of their usefulness.

Then, using this repertoire as a kind of foundation, I will narrow my focus to three topics. First, I will look at two Hollywood genres which I am convinced use stairs in the most interesting and multi-layered way: the musical and the melodrama. Within this corpus is the work of some of the premier practitioners of mise-en-scène—in particular set design, performance and camera movement—and a broad range of narrative effects from straightforward to self-reflexive and highly complex. In addition, there are a number of particularities about the two genres that are also interesting: a) both tend to be 'set-intensive'—set-bound and set-dependent; b) they both allow overt stylistic manipulation and push the limits of reality in interesting ways; c) they are about social or family relationships; and d) they tend to use *space* in an integral way, often in a metaphoric manner—musicals defining the separation between 'onstage' and 'backstage', for example, or creating fantasy environments taken directly from characters' imaginations, and melodrama matching domestic interiors to psychological interiors and relationships. Last but not least, I would suggest that these genres continue to inform narrative cinema in important ways, and the visual iconography (including the use of

stairways) established by the early works is now part of contemporary film language.

After these two chapters, a third chapter will examine the work of Alfred Hitchcock, a single, auteur director whose recurrent use of stairway imagery is striking and rich. Hitchcock, attracted to stairways from the very beginning of his film career, systematically explored their spatial and metaphoric potentials, often photographing them with elaborate and technically sophisticated strategies, until stairs became a highly personal and useful symbol.

Finally, looking at this small segment of the whole—the detail of stairs within the overall set design or environment of the film—should provide an interesting perspective on how the sets can serve the multiple needs of a film. Moreover, it will serve as an indication of the complex relationship of filmic (or metaphoric) space, to architectural or real, physical space.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF STAIRS

Before the first constructed stairway, there were simple footholds in naturally sloped terrain, what are referred to as "land stairs". These can be found all over the world, in hilly or mountainous regions, and in prehistoric cultures where they simply took advantage of the existing features of the terrain, which developed through repeated usage into a pattern of rough steps. In other words, the spaces between steps were completely irregular and users were forced to adjust their steps according to the individual features of the terrain. The first evidence of *modified* land stairs is in the Hellenistic world, where land stairs were a regular feature, and were sometimes specifically designed to fit the gait of human beings.[17]

Early civilizations, making use of structures above the ground, began using ramps, climbing poles, ladders, or foot-and-hand holes cut into walls or cliffs. Eventually these contributed to the development of the first archetypal stair. This was a straight flight of equally-spaced steps, as has been found in excavations of cultures as early as Egypt and Mesopotamia. Structurally, a straight flight is the simplest stair to build and accomodate within a structure, as it requires little in the way of support. It remained the only type of staircase in use around the world until well into the Medieval period.[18]

The invention and subsequent spread of the *helical* or spiral stair seems to have been facilitated by the existence of the craft guilds of the Middle Ages. Spiral stairs take up less space than a straight flight and therefore can be squeezed into a narrow space such

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[17]John Templer, *The Staircase: History and Theories* (MIT Press, 1998), 5.

[18]Catherine Slessor, *Contemporary Staircases* (Mitchell Beazley, 2000), 9.

as a tower. However, they require considerable more building skill.[19] Even Leonardo da Vinci tried his hand at helical designs, and his double spiral design at Chambord is sometimes considered the first instance of a stair achieving its artistic potential.[20]

During the late Renaissance, composite forms of stairs began to appear, combining straight flights with spirals, and sometimes using landings to make right angle or 180 degree turns—what are called *dogleg* stairs. Stairs had long been thought of as utilitarian in nature, a necessary but annoying detail which architects tried to downplay or hide. Now they were recognized as an important architectural device and one which need not be minimized, or relegated to a purely functional status. The discovery of the stairwell, writes Catherine Slessor, "prompted dramatic new ways of experiencing space, connecting vertical floors and enhancing a sense of continuous spiralling progression.[21]" By the Baroque period, stairs had reached a sort of zenith of design eminence, and, inspired by theatrical sets, were used to stage courtly ceremonies.

Today, all varieties and combinations of stairs are to be found, despite the fact that elevators and escalators have all but eliminated our need for them. Obviously, stairways offer more than simple vertical passage and their aesthetic qualities still play a large role.

These aesthetic qualities are varied, as this thesis will go on to show. They include formal concerns, such as the creation of scale or the interplay of masses, planes,

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[19]Ibid, 9. Slessor points out that these stairs were built primarily of stone cut in an intricate geometry, obviously requiring considerable skill, technology and manpower.

[20]Michael Spens, *Staircases* (Academy Editions, 1995), 7. Da Vinci's design fits twin-parallel spirals into a single stairwell.

[21]Slessor, 10.

and lines within a building's composition, and ceremonial functions (entrances are still thought important and therefore often given a monumental approach). In aesthetic terms, one of the primary functions performed by a staircase is something very simple—it leads our eye upward.

Mankind's upward aspirations have often been represented visually by our constructions. The mythic Tower of Babel was built in order to "reach God", an idea embodied later in the tall slender architecture of Gothic cathedrals. Towers and forts had practical origins, but their height, besides serving the obvious strategic requirements (being able to see one's enemies from a distance, being 'unreachable', and above the threat of flood) was also meant to inspire awe. Similarly, high rise buildings may have been largely motivated by the rising prices of urban real estate, but their size also made them "cathedrals to commerce". Throughout modern history a competitive spirit has pushed corporations and developers to build higher and higher.[22]

Stairways embody this feature of architecture, this verticality, which can be said to symbolize the upward striving of the human race. Something of this is reflected in civic buildings—police stations, libraries, courthouses, post offices, universities, and the like—many of which are built a half-story off the ground, to place them above the ordinary and to add a broad stone stairway to their imposing entrances. When average citizens enter these buildings, they are meant to feel as though they are ascending, moving up to the more pure, or idealized vision of an ordered society.

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[22]At least until Sept. 11, 2001. It will no doubt take some years to ascertain whether the terrorist destruction of the World Trade Center towers will have a permanent 'dampening' effect on this spirit.

Likewise a grand staircase is often a central feature in a home or public building, placed centrally for practical reasons but also put on view in order to impress visitors. Since staircases are, of course, expensive and complex constructions, it is only natural that they will be used as an architectural focal point, displaying the wealth, power, or style of the home owner or organization.

These are no doubt some of the reasons that within the architectural community, stairs seem to exert a powerful fascination, and are often written about with an almost mystical reverence. For example, Eva Jiricna introduces her book *Staircases* with these notions about the potential of stairs:

> Amongst all of the other architectural elements, staircases occupy a special position and can--and very often do--totally overshadow the building of which they are a part. The skill with which some stairs, past or present, have been built very often stretches the limits of human imagination. Sometimes it is the technical knowledge which sweeps us off our feet, another time the appearance, the form, materials, or specific detailing. Staircases are an integral part of daily life, as much as a special event or a memorable experience. The associations connected with the stairs of the Paris Opera or those sweeping sets in the Busby Berkeley movies of the 1930s fill an important place in our memories, where reality meets dreams.[23]

The transcendent nature of stairs which Jiricna seems to be getting at, this merging of dream and reality, is a quality I will attempt to uncover in this thesis.

John Templer, whose *The Staircase: History and Theories* is perhaps the seminal text on staircases, has more to say on the multi-faceted personality of stairs:

> ...the staircase, chameleonlike, disguises itself to match the interests of the viewer; it is art object, structural idea, manifestation of pomp and manners, behavioural setting, controller of our gait, political icon, legal

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[23]Jiricna, 8.

> prescription, poetic fancy, or the locus of an epidemic of cruel and injurious falls. Each disguise is a fragment of its nature that reveals a character but still leaves its essence concealed or fragmentary. To be seduced by only one or two of its masks is to miss the whole play of meanings, contexts, and potentialities.
> ...It seems fruitless to try to understand architecture, or a piece of architecture, from a single vantage point... The stair offers an extraordinary opportunity to try the opposite approach. To apprehend it, one can probe it from many directions...[24]

The kind of morphological approach suggested by Templer seems to me to be a particularly useful method, and one which I will employ. In the next section I will begin my look at stairways in the cinema, and before narrowing my focus to a specific genre of film, I will attempt to list the broad range of functions played by stairs, 'probing from many directions' in order to outline a full spectrum of possibilities.

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[24]Templer, x-xi.

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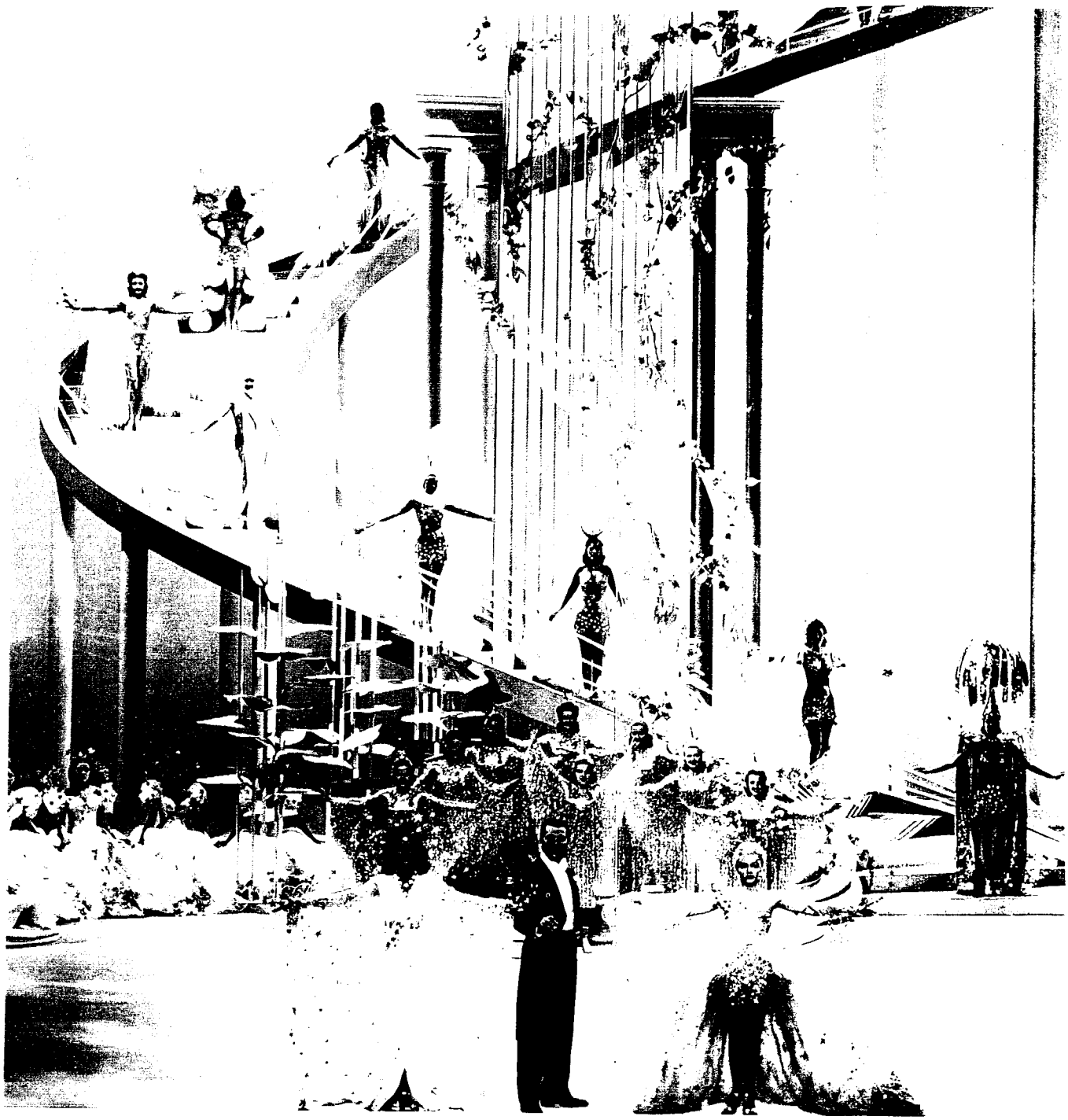

Ziegfeld Girls, 1941

A REPERTOIRE OF POSSIBILITIES

CHAPTER TWO: A REPERTOIRE OF POSSIBILITIES

Staircases are often very prominent details within their overall sets, and may be used to fulfill a large number of functions. It will be useful at this point to offer a foundation on which my later chapters will build. Here then, is a mapping out of the roles played by a staircase within a movie set. I shall first list the *formal*, or more technical functions, followed by what I will term *thematic*—the way stairs will help to generate meaning. Naturally, there will be some overlap, since form is most often determined in the service of meaning, and the two can not easily be separated.

FORMAL

1. SPATIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Within the visual design, stairs contribute to the illusion of three-dimensional depth, since they create a diagonal or z-axis line and their parallel lines will recede according to linear perspective. Thus, whether it is used for practical purposes within a scene or not, a staircase can be an attractive rear-ground object within the composition, and staircases have appeared in set designs since the beginning of film history, even those early years when 'the set' was simply a painted dropcloth. This visual property is not limited to two-dimensional representations like cinema, photography, or painting; even in real-life buildings, stairs play a similar role. Windows, doors, and other elements of a building can vary greatly in size, therefore when looking at a building, especially in the absence of cars, people, or other surrounding objects, it is often difficult to get a sense of its size. On the other hand, although a staircase can be made wider, the tread and riser proportions cannot comfortably be enlarged or diminished beyond a few inches without

affecting human comfort; they are, after all, determined by ergonomic principles. Therefore a staircase will often be the most reliable indicator of scale and may be used by the architect to help create perspective. John Templer points this out, in fact, in *The Staircase: History and Theories*, adding that the word "scale" shares the same etymological roots as the Latin for stairs—"scala".[1]

In terms of choreography or staging, stairs in a film set will allow maximum exploitation of space in all directions, and so might be incorporated into a design to permit free and full movement of characters and camera. Raised levels, balconies, and staircases of various shapes and sizes are a familiar sight in a number of genres, where dynamic movement is required.

2. ABSTRACTION

The series of lines produced by stairs are often used as a semi-abstract visual element. This can be seen in many modernist films such as Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Conformist* (1970) and *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), Godard's *Alphaville* (1965), Jacques Tati's *Mon Oncle* (1958) and *Play Time* (1967), and many others. Eisenstein's classic Odessa Steps sequence from *Battleship Potemkin* uses the sharp diagonals and repeating lines of the stairs to help create the rhythmic montage effects, relying on their abstract qualities as much as their true status as a kind of processional entrance into the town. Many of the 1930's Hollywood musicals also use the repetitions of dark and light and the simple lines of stairs within their stylized art deco compositions.

Treating a building as a visual composition, architects might also take advantage

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[1]Templer, 42

of the dynamic qualities of stairs to interact on a purely formal level with the other masses and planes. A staircase can lead the eye upward, and the zigzags or diagonal lines of stairs will break up or cast into sharp relief the otherwise exclusively horizontal and vertical lines of buildings. Templer writes that "the nature of the diagonal is a forceful dynamic movement that may threaten the tranquility of the usual order and orientation. It has shock value; it surprises us and rivets our attention and is often used deliberately for this reason..."[2]

Sometimes filmmakers will make deliberate use of the diagonals of staircases to create unbalanced compositions, as in horror films, or the crazy angles of German expressionism. In Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* (1951), for example, when Guy Haines (Farley Granger) finds out that the psychopathic Bruno (Robert Walker) has murdered his wife, Haines is stopped on his way up the stairs to his brownstone apartment. Hitchcock cants the angle to match the slant of the stairs, producing an off-kilter shot of Haines which matches his emotional state.

3. PRIMEVAL IMPRINTS

Apart from all their denotative and connotative values, stairways function at bottom line as a familiar *shape* within the composition. The receding lines, curves and diagonals associated with staircases resonate within us; they are a recognizable pattern and seem attractive as a result. The "S" curve produced by many of the stairs in musicals or melodramas, for example, is not unlike the curves of Art Nouveau, the shape of a flower, a serpent, a wave, a woman's body.

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[2]Ibid, 28

These basic, familiar shapes elicit responses, like the emotions engendered by colour, or music. Ultimately, these responses seem connected to the question, "What do we like about art?" When we look at an image, we connect with it in complex ways. Lurking beneath all our learned responses relating to content and style are more fundamental or primeval responses influenced by visceral or elemental aspects: shape, colour, texture, and so on. We enjoy the patterns, repeated and varied, in Norman McLaren's animated films, *Dots*, *Lines*[3], etc., even though they have no "content" other than the patterns and shapes themselves. We find one image more "attractive" than another if it is composed according to the rule of thirds. We find one colour restful, another agitating.

I suggest that a stairway falls into this domain. Yes, it creates depth and allows for a broad range of movement. Yes, it signifies—carrying powerful meaning thanks to years of significance in architecture as well as theater and cinema. But beneath all this, the shape of a stair itself seems to be a trigger of profound human responses. It touches a nerve within us.

4. ARCHITECTURAL STYLE

Typically, film sets are conceived in a specific architectural style to evoke a period, place, or class of character. Architect Robert Mallet-Stevens, writing of film sets, said that "the set must present the character before he has even appeared. It must indicate his social position, his tastes, his habits, his life style, his personality. The sets must be

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[3]McLaren produced numerous "abstract" films by painting or scratching shapes directly on the film stock, from 1933 to 1978. He began this while attending the Glasgow School of Fine Arts and continued during his tenure at the Canadian National Film Board.

intimately linked with the action."[4] And production designer Leon Barsaq describes the research process which precedes the construction of a set: "the designer has to look through photographic references, or at real buildings... to find typical details that will place the set precisely in its country, its town, and even its district, as well as in the period and naturally, its class."[5]

Stairways, as a fundamental architectural detail, often play a large role in defining those particularities. Medieval castles will have spiral steps of stone, without railings, while modernist houses might have glass or metal steps floating unsupported in the middle of a room. Art Nouveau railings with amorphous, curved wrought iron balustrades are typical of Paris, while straight steep wooden steps with turned finials might suggest an early American locale. When a staircase is highlighted in the set, its form and detailing will deliver important narrative information.

5. *CAMERA HEIGHT*

Photographically speaking, high angle shots create foreshortening, making characters appear smaller than they are. Low angle shots create the reverse effect, making characters seem bigger.

Thus it is a commonly recognized and accepted truth of cinematography that a feeling of power can be added to or taken from characters by placing the camera above or below eye level. This can be done modestly without the audience being aware of it. In

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[4]as quoted in Leon Barsaq's *Caligari's Cabinet and Other Grand Illusions: A History of Set Design* (New York Graphic Society, 1976), 125-126.

[5]*Ibid.*, 165.

fact, it was almost standardized practice during the Hollywood studio years, when male stars were shot from a slightly lower angle to make them look imposing, and female stars from a higher angle, which heightened their vulnerability or feminine appeal (as well as avoiding potential wrinkle lines under the chin). However, these differences in camera height are usually kept to a few inches. Shooting with greater changes of angle is not unlike using a soft focus filter on one character and not the other—it begins to be noticable and in the extreme, can be considered an intrusive or expressionistic technique.

Using stairs within the set design, however, allows filmmakers to use more exaggerated high or low angle shots in a naturalistic or motivated manner. Actors can be placed at different heights, with as extreme a difference as the filmmaker cares to create, thus emphasizing psychological differences or powers within the characters without an alarming shift of style. There are countless examples of this, where stairs have been used to create credible contexts for superior-inferior contrasts of all types: female/male, upper/lower class, powerful/powerless, dominator/dominated, good/evil, etc. In *The Untouchables*, for example, photographers cluster around the bottom of the hotel stairs, excitedly shooting pictues of the gangster Al Capone (Robert de Niro) as he descends. This motivates a low angle shot of Capone, which emphasizes his power and highlights his role as the so-called "king of Chicago".

6. DANGER

Stairs offer an element of danger, since they are inherently predisposed to accidental falls. In fact, John Templer points out in *The Staircase: Studies of Hazards, Falls, and Safer Design,* that there are as many as 12 million injuries per year on

staircases in the United States alone.[6]

Therefore, using a staircase as a potential source of danger in a film story is not unwarranted and in fact is quite common. This might be in comedies, where the resulting action will have slapstick qualities (*Home Alone* (1990) and *Mouse Hunt* (1997), two films aimed at children, both feature cartoon-like mayhem on staircases). But a staircase will often be a location of intense physical action in any number of violent genres, including horror films (particularly those set in a haunted house or castle), gangster films, westerns (typically the fistfight in the saloon), kung fu or other action films.

7. PHOTOGRAPHIC DISPLAY

As evidenced by the many graduation, wedding, and family portraits shot on staircases, it is obvious that stairs can make a practical as well as visually impressive setting for large group photographs. The steps act as 'risers' or platforms allowing subjects in back rows to be raised above subjects in front rows, so that the vertical as well as the horizontal dimension of the screen is utilized and everyone can be seen.

This can be an interesting visual possibility in films as well as photographs. Occasionally stairs will be used in this way in dramatic films, as we see when a group of people sit on the stairs during the party in *All About Eve* (1950), or the melodramatic conclusion of *The Godfather III* (1990), when Michael Corleone (Al Pacino) and his wife (Diane Keaton) hold their murdered daughter in their arms on the steps outside an opera house, the composition recreating the Pieta. But employing stairs as risers is a more

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[6]Templer, John A., *The Staircase: Studies of Hazards, Falls, and Safer Design* (MIT Press, 1992), 4.

useful and common technique in musicals, where large groups of performers is the norm. In addition, given that many set designs in musicals do not portray any real-life setting, the stairs to be used in this way can be of any shape, colour, size, or style. I will look at this in detail in a later chapter on musicals.

8. CEREMONY/CHARACTER ENTRANCES

Architects have long recognized stairs as useful settings for ceremonial functions. By the early eighteenth century, baroque stair designs had reached a point of pure aesthetic fulfillment. Far beyond any functional motivations, highly decorative and elaborate staircases, taking up large amounts of space, became important sites for spiritual and regal processions. Writing on the history of the staircase, Catherine Slessor notes that

> The richest examples were in Germany and Austria, for example in the episcopal palace in Würzburg, built between 1729 and 1744 by Balthasar Neumann. These staircases were sumptuous art objects that spectacularly transcended the simple business of rising from one floor to the next. ...On the stairs, the formalities of reception and departure were played out. The precise location in which visiting dignitaries were received on the stair was a telling indicator of rank and social position.[7]

To this day, staircases are often used as part of a ceremony of passage, such as convocation, the giving of awards, or the lighting of the Olympic torch.

In films, ceremonies may also be staged on stairs. Weddings in particular have a long association with stairs, and fairy tales ending with weddings often feature stairs as key visual motifs. Walt Disney's *Cinderella* (1950) is a good example. Cinderella reaches her tiny attic bedroom via a rickety wooden stairway, is forced by her evil stepmother to

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[7]Slessor, 14.

scrub the grand curved central staircase of her family's mansion, makes an entrance down the same staircase in her beautiful homemade gown, and loses her shoe while running down the palace stairs, both before and after her marriage to the prince.

The processional or ceremonial possibility for a staircase may also be manifested in dramatic introductions for characters, either at the beginning of a narrative, when we are meeting them for the first time, or after a transformation of some sort has occurred. For example, during the Wilkes barbecue sequence in *Gone With the Wind* (1939), all the eligible young women descend the sumptuous staircase at the Twelve Oakes mansion, to be chosen by the men for dancing. In the now legendary ending of *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), Gloria Swanson, totally immersed in the past, descends the staircase to give her memorable line, "I'm ready for my closeup now, Mr. De Mille."

A recent 'reality' tv show, NBC's *"For Love or Money"*[8], took this use of stairs to an almost ludicrous extreme. Its fifteen female competitors were put on display for viewers one at a time, descending an elegant staircase inside the neo-Baroque mansion that was the show's main location. The camera remained at the bottom, and slow motion further dramatized the moment as these "angels" came down from heaven. Week by week, as the group of contestants was pared down (as is common in these competitions), the show would end on this ritual—the man at the bottom, selecting those young women who would go, or stay. If chosen, the women would re-ascend the stairs to the balcony, where they would pose victoriously.

In narrative terms, though, characters do more than display themselves on

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[8]NBC reality series, Summer 2003 season.

staircases; they also *reveal* themselves, and they are often at their most vulnerable. For example in *Tootsie* (1982), Dustin Hoffman plays an out-of-work actor who finds success only by posing as a woman. Revealing to the world that he is actually a man will cost him his job, and probably the girl he loves. However, the deception eventually becomes insupportable, and he is forced to 'unmask' himself. This dramatic revelation takes place during the live broadcast of the soap opera he's starring in, and naturally while descending a staircase.

THEMATIC

I have shown how stairs can serve a broad range of functions within a film set. Visually, they can help to create depth, they can provide a sense of scale, and their angles can be used to counter the more orderly horizontals or verticals. Spatially, they allow movement in directions other than horizontal, can also provide elevation justifying changes of camera angle, or serve as platforms on which to arrange performers. Narratively, they can indicate social class or period, offer a dramatic location for life-threatening action, or facilitate dramatic entrances or ceremonies. Now I will look at how stairs will help to reinforce the film on a *thematic* level. In other words, I will look at how stairs can be put to use generating meaning.

UP and DOWN

Much of human activity—work, family, and so on—is organized according to a hierarchical structure. Our relationships with government, church, school, and employer, can usually be diagrammed according to a chart which locates power at the top of the hierarchy. Attainment of almost any desirable goal is viewed as a process of scaling the

heights. In fact, positive and negative values of all sorts are typically measured on scales stretching from down to up, much like the high and low temperatures of a thermometer.

There is a great deal of linguistic evidence supporting this. We *look up to* people we admire, *look down upon* those who we feel superior to. We don't want to do work that is *beneath* us, may not respect people who are social *climbers*. One road to success in business is the *corporate ladder.* When we are feeling good we are *walking on clouds*, feeling *on top of the world*, having an *up* day; when we are not, we are feeling *low* or *down*. We speak of *lofty* ambitions, compared to *base* desires.

It makes sense, then, that stairways will be a recurrent visual motif in films dealing with these pairings of contrasting values. As a few examples will illustrate, a staircase will not only provide all the opportunities mentioned in the previous section, but will help to reinforce deeper meanings at work in the text, offering the filmmaker a chance to visually parallel or symbolize the underlying thematic concerns. Naturally, not all filmmakers will seize these opportunities; in many films, a stairway is just a stairway. But in the hands of the masters, a stairway can be a rich and powerful signifier, woven into a film's texture with undeniable coherence.

1. SPIRITUAL

Most religions consider a higher power to reside in a domain above the natural earth, while a darker place (such as the Christian hell) is situated below. Not surprisingly, therefore, stairs or ladder images abound in religious iconography. For example, Christian churches usually have the altar raised up three steps above the floor; to preach their sermon, priests or ministers might climb a small staircase to get to the pulpit.

Pilgrimages often involve daunting climbs, prayer by prayer, up lengthy stairways such as that outside Montreal's Oratoire St. Joseph. Since "the Word" comes down from 'on high', much Christian ceremony involves the representative of Divinity coming down to the level of the supplicants, who usually wait on bended knees.

Other religions also speak of specific steps which must be followed, or ladders which must be climbed to achieve salvation. According to Catherine Slessor, "In Islamic tradition, Mohammed saw a ladder that he climbed to reach God, while... the Egyptian deity Osiris was invoked as "he who stands at the top of the stairs."[9] The Ziggurats, or pyramidal structures of the Mesopotamians, were religious symbols which operated as a kind of bridge or meeting place between the heavens and earth. Egyptian, Mayan, Incan, and Toltec pyramids all used a similar architectural device—in essence a stair—to lift their religious leaders up above the masses.

One of the most obvious appearances of a staircase in a film with spiritual concerns is in Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's classic, *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946), retitled in the U.S. *Stairway to Heaven*. Here the 'other world' is presented above the clouds, using imaginative special effects and shooting in black and white, to contrast with the Technicolor footage of Earth. A gigantic stairway, appearing to stretch into infinity, is used to bring people up to 'meet their maker'. The plot has David Niven's character, Peter Carter, put on trial to determine whether he will be allowed to remain on earth; in general the film discusses the value of romantic love within the greater spiritual context.

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[9]Slessor, 6.

The film is not alone in terms of its imaginary heaven, and other similar stories such as those in *Here Comes Mr. Jordan* (1941), its remake *Heaven Can Wait* (1978), and Albert Brooks' *Defending Your Life* (1991), all use images suggesting that "Heaven" is situated above the earth. *Heaven Can Wait*, for example, humourously shows passengers lined up at the stairs, waiting to board a Concorde jet which sits shrouded in clouds. Even *"The Simpsons"* has featured this representation of the rise up to Heaven, with Bart riding a long escalator while a pre-recorded voice repeats "Please do not spit over the side" in English and Spanish. (When Bart can't resist, the escalator turns into a slide, and he descends to Hell.)[10]

Of course, films are not necessarily the first works of art to use stairways as a symbol of higher spiritual power. The Symbolist painters of the late nineteenth century made use of numerous icons or symbols which represented various ideas. Xavier Mellory, for example, did a series of drawings called *The Soul of Things*, using a vocabulary of symbols: stone = strength, plants = endurance and tenacity, and stairs = an ideal to be attained.[11]

The notion that God, Heaven, or higher spiritual values are located *above* can also be reduced to a much simpler notion: the split of good and evil. This then accounts for the many films which picture the battle against evil as an upward climb, even when they are not specifically dealing with religious matters. Horror films, in particular, tend to reduce to this basic, primal formula.

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[10]Fox animated series, Episode #23, "Bart Gets Hit By A Car", 1990 season.

[11]Robert Goldwater, *Symbolism* (Harper & Row, 1979), 29.

2. POLITICAL

As mentioned earlier in my brief look at architectural history, stairs have long been used to indicate the superior status of royalty. Templer writes that stairs were (and still are) symbols of power:

> Secular demonstrations of the monumental stair are every bit as common as those erected for spiritual edifices, for wherever autocratic power is exerted over large building complexes, there flourishes the monumental stair as an immediate exhibition of the puissance of the king, the empire, the state, and latterly the corporation and institution.[12]

Thus in the work of Orson Welles, many stairways appear in his Shakespearean tragedies, directly related to the kings and other royalty who are the protagonists, but also in *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), lending a 'kingly' air to both Kane and members of the Amberson family. In William Wyler's *Roman Holiday* (1953), Audrey Hepburn, playing a reluctant queen, steps down from a raised dias to meet the journalists (including her love interest played by Gregory Peck) symbolizing her desire to 'come down to earth' and live a regular life. In Wyler's *The Little Foxes* (1941), the Southern matriarch Regina Giddens (even her name is suggestive of her regal status) is given a queen-like imperiousness, and she customarily holds court from her second-floor balcony, reached by a long curved stairway.

3. SOCIAL

Class distinctions also follow the up/down scale, with the term Upper Class referring to the aristocracy, or wealthy class, and Lower Class referring to the 'common masses'. Since this class separation has historically been a predominant concern in Great

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[12]Templer, *The Staircase: History and Theories,* 47.

Britain, there are numerous examples to be found in British films where staircases play a major role within an examination or criticism of the class system. Servants, for example, are typically quartered in the basement of an upper class home, so a visual rendering of "upper" and "lower" classes is instantly and easily achieved. The popular television series "*Upstairs, Downstairs*"[13] used this concept as its basic structural principle, alternating between the lives of rich masters and lower class servants within the same home, separated by their height on the social hierarchy and of course by a grand staircase.

Even the recent bestselling *Harry Potter* books took advantage of this: while young Harry lives with his pompous relatives, who do not like or respect him, he is forced to sleep in a tiny room *under the stairs*; in other words, as though he was a lower class servant.[14]

The class system in America may not be as rigidly defined as that of the UK, but class distinction exists nonetheless, and provides the backdrop for most Hollywood musicals (to be discussed in detail in a later chapter). The vast majority of these films are "success stories" featuring some sort of rise in stature for their main characters, and they often include stairs as visual reminders of their characters' progress, socially as well as romantically. Sylvester Stallone's famous run up the steps of the Philadelphia Art Museum at the end of the training montage in *Rocky* (1976) works in this same way: it tells us his training is complete, that he is at *the top* of his form, but it also symbolizes his desire to be *on top* of the world. In fact this montage sequence begins with Rocky

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[13]series produced by Sigma Productions Limited, 1971-1975.

[14]J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (Bloomsbury, 1997).

crossing a train track (he comes from "the wrong side of the tracks") and running through slums before getting to the famous stairs, making it the same upward climb as the complete narrative, but in miniature.

Gangster films make recurrent use of stairs as symbols, since they act as *inverted* success stories. Typically they portray their criminal protagonists as greedy opportunists—false kings who climb to lofty heights, only to be cast down in the end. Their 'fall from grace' is often a prolonged tumble down a staircase to die in the arms of their childhood sweetheart or mother, as in Raoul Walsh's *The Roaring 20's* (1939). Brian de Palma makes spectacular use of stairs in both of his gangster films, *The Untouchables,* and his remake of *Scarface* (1983), in which Cuban druglord Tony Montana (Al Pacino) is mowed down by a hail of machine gun bullets in his tasteless Florida mansion, and falls down the outrageous serpentine staircase to die in a neon-lit fountain.

A number of other social realms follow the same hierarchy, including the education system, where university is also referred to as "higher learning". In the realm of work, a character may rise up the "corporate ladder", as in the musical *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* (1967), the Coen Brothers' *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994), and Gus Van Sant's *To Die For* (1995). In all these films, staircases make prominent appearances, since they can provide visual reinforcement of a "financial climb" as well as any other sort.

4. PSYCHOLOGICAL

The individual personality itself can be pictured as containing a sort of hierarchy,

with some of our behavior controlled by 'upper regions' of our brain and others apparently "beyond our control". Freud proposed a breakdown of the psyche into ego, superego and id, with the superego as a kind of moral center overseeing conscious thought and subconcious desires held inside the id (though not necessarily always held in check). Carl Jung also imagined the personality as divided, and even proposed that it paralleled the structure of a house, with rooms or levels housing different parts.

Within this imaginary picture of the personality as a divided structure, where are our memories kept? Our dark secrets, base desires, wishes and hopes? In this context the images of hidden rooms, locked doors, windows, and other architectural details become tantalizing symbols of the divided nature of our inner selves. And in this 'personality-house,' what function would be required of the "stairs"? Naturally they would play the part of passageway from one level to another, from the private to the public, the inner to the outer self, the controlling or dominant regions to the outward behavior.

Films which deal with psychological conflict may take advantage of this sort of imagery, making strong connections between their exterior places and the interior worlds of their characters. Some examples would include Orson Welles' *The Trial* (1963) (and in fact, virtually all his other films), many of the films of Roman Polanski, and numerous psycho-thrillers, including those of Alfred Hitchcock, and many Hitchcock-inspired films like *Wait Until Dark* (1967) or Robert Aldrich's *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* and *Hush... Hush Sweet Charlotte* (1964). Growing out of the "paranoid woman" strain of the melodrama of the 1930's and 40's, the psycho-thriller may sometimes borrow from the

horror or haunted house genre, putting its victim or victims in an eerie environment such as a rundown Gothic mansion, or a bewilderingly complex building (the Overlook Hotel in Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) comes to mind). This will then facilitate both the suspenseful events of the plot (endless entering of unknown rooms and regions) as well as the psychological underpinnings of the characters' personalities.

In these environments, stairs often become the site of complex battles for supremacy, with psychological, social, and physical values all placed in conflict simultaneously, as in Joseph Losey's *The Servant* (1963). In this film, the lower class servant played by Dirk Bogarde nefariously usurps control of his master's home, and their power struggle, which soon goes far beyond one of class, is played out most prominently on the central stairway:

> ...it is the stairway which is visually sustained as the most important place. Separating the quarters of master and servant, the stairway symbolizes social or class difference. Again and again the characters move up and down the stairs in their shifting relationships, gaining and losing various kinds of supremacy, competing in uncertain contests. Even as it is a symbol of difference, of that which separates, the stairway is also that which connects, that which binds the opposing forces to one another. For it is a characteristic paradox of the film that opposition binds as surely as alliance. The stairway becomes an axis or vortex within the house, which itself exerts a kind of centripetal force that attracts and finally imprisons the characters.[15]

When it comes to the psychological thriller, of course, the genre is dominated by the work of Alfred Hitchcock. As I shall show in a later chapter, Hitchcock derived maximum symbolic value from locations, which were often elaborate homes mirroring

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[15]Michael M. Riley and James W. Palmer, "An Extension of Reality: Setting As Theme in *The Servant*", *Mise-en-Scène*, #2, (Spring 1980), 45.

the conditions of their occupants. In these locations, stairways were typically a central feature. In fact, it is difficult to find a film by Hitchcock which does *not* have a significant staircase scene! Just to cite a few examples, there are memorable staircase moments (most involving murder) in *Rebecca* (1940), *Suspicion* (1941), *Shadow Of A Doubt* (1943), *Notorious* (1946), *Strangers On A Train, Vertigo* (1958), *Psycho* (1960), and *Frenzy* (1972).

5. SEXUAL

Curiously, if there is a hierarchy in terms of male-female relations, it operates both ways. While traditional thinking might position man above woman (for example, the Biblical assertion that God created man in his image and woman from a single rib of man), on the other hand in romantic or chivalrous love the woman is elevated above the man—put on a pedestal, as it is sometimes called. This may simply be a matter of the objectification of woman, where she is not considered as superior, but merely an object of desire, or a goal to be attained. Or it may be an equating of woman to Goddess, endowing her with spiritual qualities, and viewing a romantic union as a kind of celestial victory, akin to "entering heaven".

In fact, romantic love is typically presented in this way, as having spiritual overtones which elevate it to the top of worthwhile human activities. Earlier I spoke of wedding scenes related to stairways; this seems to me an accessing of the spiritual qualities underlying our image of romantic love. As we will see in musicals, the use of stairs is often motivated by attempts to make the female stars metaphoric "angels".

The relationship between a man and a woman is often played out upon an up and

down scale, either placing the man above to indicate his power, or the woman above as an object of desire. Stairways have served to illustrate this in numerous films. In the classic musical *Singin' In the Rain* (1951), Don Lockwood (Gene Kelly) can't tell Kathy Seldon (Debbie Reynolds) how much he loves her until he has the proper atmosphere. This involves studio lighting, a fog machine and a fan to blow her hair; but also a stepladder so that she can be raised up for him to worship. In a number of films, Charlie Chaplin staged encounters with the female characters positioned on stairs, so that they would be raised above him.

In Billy Wilder's film noir classic *Double Indemnity* (1944), the two protagonists meet in a sexually charged scene using stairs to create a similar "woman on a pedestal" image. Fred MacMurray is a 'two-bit' insurance agent who drops in on a rich client and meets the man's wife (Barbara Stanwyck) instead. As Stanwyck, wearing only a towel, makes her entrance on the balcony at the top of the stairs, MacMurray looks up with obvious lust. Here the woman may be the object of the man's desire, as in the previous example, but in this case it will also turn out that this "femme fatale" is the superior character, certainly the one who holds all the power.

Apart from their ability to raise man over woman, or woman over man, stairs also have a more overt connection to sexuality. In his "Interpretation of Dreams", Freud wrote that the appearance of a staircase or its facsimile in a dream refers directly to the sexual act:

> We directed our investigations to the occurrence in dreams of flights of stairs, ladders, and steps, and we soon ascertained that stairs (or anything analogous to them) represent a definite symbol of coitus. The basis for this

> comparison is not difficult to find: with rhythmical intervals and increasing breathlessness one reaches a height, and may then come down again in a few rapid jumps. Thus the rhythm of coitus is reproduced in climbing stairs. Let us not forget to consider the colloquial usage. This tells us that 'mounting' is without further addition, used as a substitutive designation for the sexual act. In French, the step of a staircase is called *la marche*; *un vieux marcher* corresponds exactly to the German, *ein alter Steiger*.[16]

This symbolic sexual connotation can be applied to the stairs in many films, including the melodramas of Nicholas Ray and Douglas Sirk. It also seems appropriate in reference to *Gone With the Wind*, when Scarlett O'Hara is carried upstairs, presumably to be raped, by her sexually frustrated husband; the familiar framing of stairs in Max Ophül's *Letter From An Unknown Woman* (1948), each time the womanizing Stefan (Louis Jourdan) brings a lover up to his apartment; the spiral staircase in *The Seven Year Itch* (1955) which *could* connect married man Sherman (Tom Ewell) with the girl upstairs who he'd like to sleep with (Marilyn Monroe) except that it is blocked off at the ceiling, since the upstairs was turned into a rental apartment. It also explains the sudden appearance of a grand spiral staircase in Don Siegel's peculiar and dark *The Beguiled* (1971). Clint Eastwood plays a wounded Civil War soldier hiding out in an old Southern mansion inhabited by a school for girls. He spends his time 'sweet-talking' a number of the girls, including the school's headmistress, who invites him to come to her room later. However, as he tiptoes across the hall to meet her, he is interrupted by the appearance of a coquettish 17-year old who has repeatedly attempted to get him into her bed. This scene is shot with Eastwood in the foreground, stopping and turning to see the girl in the

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[16]Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Buccaneer Books, Inc. 1985), 243. Originally published, 1900. English translation, 1913 by G. Stanley Hall.

background, posed alluringly halfway up the staircase (a common feature of such houses, but this is the only time it appears significantly in the film). Forgetting the headmistress, he mounts the stairs with the young girl and in her room they begin to have sex. They are caught in the act by the headmistress and another girl, and in a jealous rage, together the three women push him down the stairs.

In *Body Heat* (1981), Lawrence Kasdan's clever neo-noir remake of *Double Indemnity*, Kathleen Turner stands invitingly on the stairs inside her locked mansion, *daring* William Hurt to come and get her. He does, crashing a chair through the patio doors and then making passionate love to her on the stairs. In the 'coming of age' comedy, *Risky Business* (1983), Joel Goodson (Tom Cruise) has sex with Lana the call-girl (Rebecca de Mornay) on the stairs of his family's suburban home, with his baby pictures on the wall in the foreground. In Louis Malle's *Fatale* (1992), after finding his own father (Jeremy Irons) in bed with his fiancée (Juliette Binoche), a young man (Rupert Graves) backs out of the room in shock and falls to his death down the stairs. The Freudian dream interpretation can be profitably applied to many films. Within the melodrama and psycho-thriller genres, where sexual repression is often present, stairway scenes are very common, especially those combining sexual symbolism with the violent possibilities of a staircase. Nor is such symbolism restricted to conventional narratives. In Maya Deren's classic surrealist work, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), stairs are one of many recurring sexual symbols.

CONCLUSION

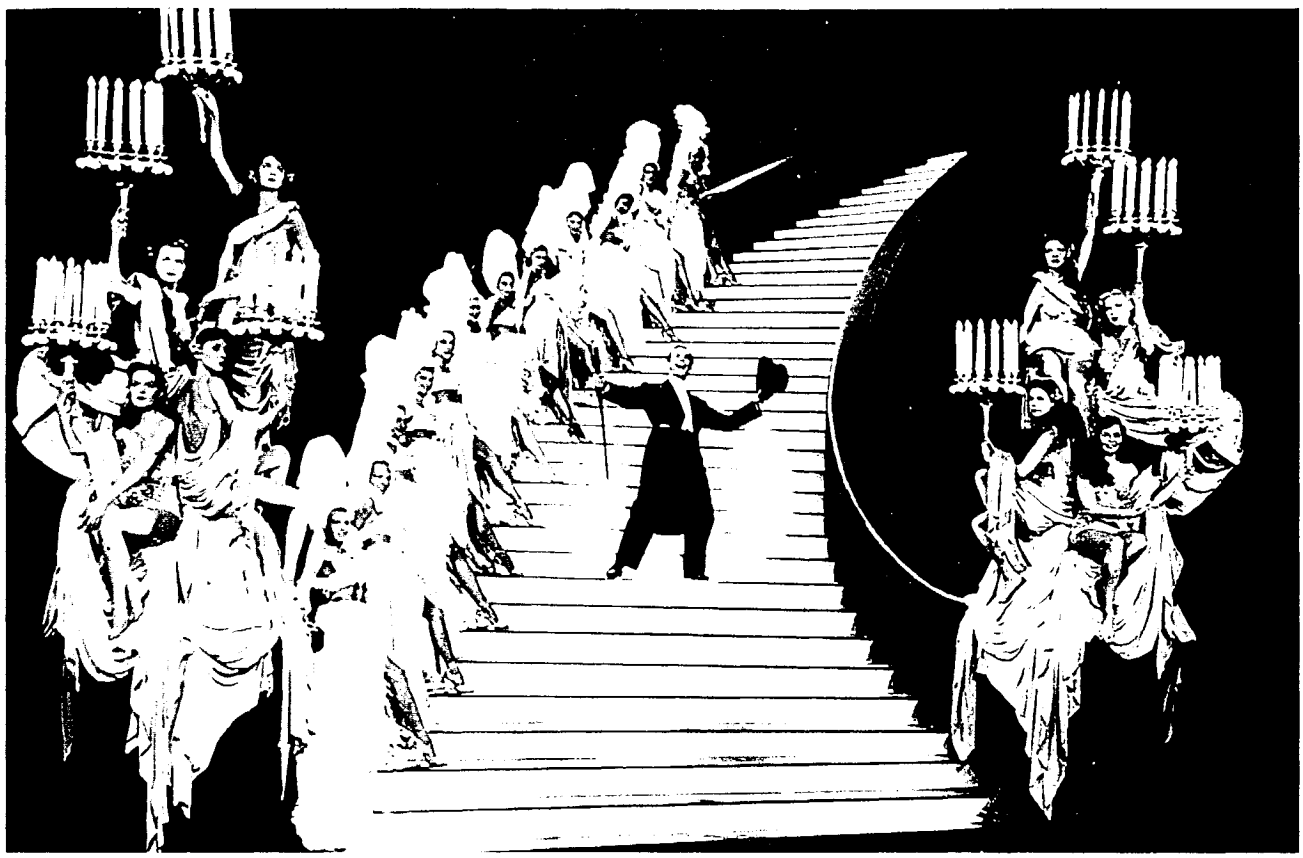
In this last section I have indicated a number of domains—spiritual, political,

social, psychological, and sexual—which can be considered according to a hierarchical structure. As I have tried to show, films concerning themselves with these domains will be well served by including a staircase in the set design, which will offer opportunities to enhance the film's central themes or issues with its images. In fact, any film contrasting good to evil, failure to success, order to chaos, or any number of opposing values, might make use of a staircase as a visual motif or symbol.

The repertoire of possibilities which I have elaborated here will return in greater detail as I continue to look at the way stairway settings can serve a film. I will show how different film genres will use different combinations of these possibilities, in some cases so regularly and with such prominence that stairs have assumed an iconographic role within the genre, sometimes accessing a wealth of symbolic meaning with little or no effort required on the part of the filmmaker. And it is not uncommon to find a staircase providing opportunities on many different levels within in a single film.

3

THE STAIRWAY TO PARADISE



An American in Paris, 1951

STAIRS IN THE MUSICAL

CHAPTER THREE: STAIRS IN THE MUSICAL

> "I've got to have more steps. I need more steps. I've got to get higher. Higher."
> —Florenz Ziegfeld Jr., in *The Great Ziegfeld* (1936)

The repeated use of stairways in musicals seems to be motivated by obvious reasons. This most American of film genres may not place much of a premium on narrative, but what narrative there is, is almost always a "success story". Therefore, as they do in other genres, stairs can act as a symbol of upward aspirations.

Typically, musicals work within the *social* sphere, and they are often stories of ascension— someone rising through the class barricades, for example, as in George Cukor's *My Fair Lady* (1964), or the more common 'rising star' story (*A Star is Born* (1937, 1954, 1976) is probably the best-known example). Or, rather than elevating an individual to stardom, some backstage musicals chronicle the formation of a community, guided by a sort of grass-roots leader played by Gene Kelly, Mickey Rooney, or the like. Eventually, over great odds, their endeavour achieves success. As Jane Feuer points out in *The Hollywood Musical*,[1] the "communal" story is linked to the folk traditions which are part of the musical's heritage, but in my opinion it also has obvious parallels with the American democratic political process.

Of course, most typically these narrative events are intertwined with a love story, also ending in success—the union of a happy couple (or couples). In fact, Rick Altman,

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[1]Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical* (Indiana University Press, 1982). Feuer proposes that musicals put up 'community' as an ideal concept in order to bridge the gap between the live performance (folk art) and the recorded (popular art) and attempt to reduce the generic qualities of mass production.

in *The American Film Musical*, posits the bringing together of a couple as the most important element in the genre, and defines the musical specifically as a mythological treatment of the romantic couple in society. He suggests, in addition, that *all* musicals work in *dualities* or values of all sorts placed in opposition. While the romantic couple are shown in parallel scenes, highlighting their differences, other contrasts are created as well. Often, work is contrasted with entertainment (musicals after all, are reflexively concerned with the value of show biz), but it is not uncommon to see musicals deal with other pairings: rich/poor, honest/phony, serious/carefree, dream/reality, high art/low art, and so on. Altman proposes that musicals help to resolve for audiences not just the differences between male and female, but the contradictions presented by many such problematic dichotomies:

> Seen as a cultural problem-solving device, the musical takes on a new and fascinating identity... By reconciling terms previously seen as mutually exclusive, the musical succeeds in reducing an unsatisfactory paradox to a more workable configuration, a concordance of opposites.[2]

Whether we treat musicals simply as success stories, or use Altman's broader and more astute notion of the merging of opposing value systems, the use of staircase imagery is appropriate, either as a direct reminder of the upward climb performed in the narrative or a visualization of the contrasts—up versus down standing in for any number of opposites. The stair becomes a symbolic bridge, or transition device between one state and the other.

This bridging function performed by stairways is directly linked to the narratives

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[2]Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Indiana University Press, 1987), 27.

within the musicals, and as such is quite similar to those in non-musical narratives. It justifies the key scenes on grand staircases in films as late as *Annie* (1976), *The Sound of Music* (Wise, 1964), and the previously mentioned *My Fair Lady*, as well as *An American In Paris* (1951) and innumerable early musicals. In all these films stairways figure prominently in the set design, playing a utilitarian role within the narrative but also reinforcing in a symbolic way stories of upward growth or mediation of opposing values. *The Sound of Music,* for example, accomplishes both. Maria (Julie Andrews) is a commoner, down the social scale from the aristocratic Von Trapp (Christopher Plummer), and so moves up in the world by marrying him. But she also brings warmth and humanity to the home, softening his overbearing, militaristic manner, and 'bringing him down to earth'. The ornate staircase at the Von Trapp mansion is a familiar image during the first part of the film, and even acts as a stage for the children's song, "Farewell", during a party. After the romance is successfully concluded, the family turns to another challenge—fleeing the Nazis. Interestingly, their clever departure during a contest is effected with the same song, "Farewell"; then their escape accomplished by climbing mountains into Switzerland. The song "Climb Every Mountain" suitably ties all these images together, reminding us that the key to happiness is to surmount every obstacle life puts in front of us.

As in any fiction film, the stairs in musicals also play a part in defining the particularities of the world being portrayed. Given that one of the goals of the classic musicals was the presentation of an alternate world into which spectators could escape from their everyday lives, it's hardly surprising that during the Great Depression, when

the genre surged in popularity, their predominant look was highly exaggerated. The so-called "big white set" musicals of RKO and Paramount (sometimes stretching across *two* soundstages) often included monstrous arches and columns, raised diases, and other oversized details. In particular, the subset of musicals which operate as *fairy tales* often take place in worlds populated by aristocracy—fancy hotels, mansions, ocean liners, night clubs, and so on. Grandiose, larger than life stairways are common and help bring to life these opulent fantasy environments.

Even in the later, more naturalistic musicals produced after the demise of the Hollywood studio system, and after musicals had ceased to be a dominant genre, staircases are a quickly recognized detail, with an almost iconic power to represent a whole environment. The impressive staircase in *The Sound of Music,* for example, is an expected and plausible detail in such a house, but at the same time it instantly telegraphs the aristocratic world in which the Von Trapp's live. The massive staircase in *Annie* plays a similar role.

Now, what of the many stairways seen in the production numbers, or non-narrative portions of musicals? While these too may echo the up/down themes at work in the story (success, social status, etc), from a more practical standpoint, as we have seen, they also take care of a third function by expanding the kinetic possibilities of the set design. Stairs can serve as platforms to display dancers on multiple levels, and allow both cameras and dancers to move in directions other than the horizontal. This is absolutely essential in productions involving large numbers of performers, and therefore stairways, ramps, and other such devices are often seen in these sorts of sequences. As in

the theatre, typically these stairways are positioned in rear corners of the set, so that performers may enter deep in the composition (downstage) and still be seen above the performers who are closer to the camera. However, when many performers are used, stairs may be used throughout the number to keep everyone positioned at different heights, again in the interest of visibility or compositional variety.

Such staircases can sometimes then become interesting 'objects' within the scene, and may be used to inspire movements or choreography which otherwise may not have taken place. The Victorian staircase in *Mary Poppins* becomes a soapbox during the mother's "Suffragette" song; the kids and Mary Poppins slide down the railing and out the door at the end of "Spoonful of Sugar". This sort of integration of a stairway into the sequence itself is best exemplified by a number like "I'll Build a Stairway to Paradise", in *An American In Paris,* a song that's actually *about* a staircase. Henri (Georges Guetary) sings about how love will allow him to climb up to paradise, all the while climbing a vast curved staircase lined with *Folies Bergères*-type showgirls, and each of the individual steps lighting up as he steps on them.

To summarize, we can say that stairs in a musical are usually fulfilling three separate roles: thematic (serving up/down concepts within the story), narrative (providing information about characters and places), and spatial (accomodating the needs of choreography).

Beverly Heisner traces the lineage of these overlapping uses for stairs in musical films, in *Hollywood Art: Art Direction in the Days of the Great Studios:*

> The most ubiquitous scenic device in musical finales, and in

> musicals in general, was the grand stairway--whether a single centralized stair, as in Universal's *King of Jazz* (1930) or multiple curving flights, as in *Paramount on Parade* (1930). The grand stairway had been used with great effect on the Broadway stage, especially in musical extravaganzas like the Ziegfeld Follies and Earl Carroll's Vanities. It migrated as a scenic tool to the motion picture to be used for the same purposes as those of the stage. It even gained in purpose when Busby Berkeley devised his movie camera shots for musicals staged first at Warners and later at MGM. A stairway provided an architectonic device which was both open and passed vertically through the set. It could be used as a platform on which beautiful women posed or it could be danced and performed upon. Importantly, a grand stairway powerfully suggested elegant palatial surroundings unlike those the viewer was accustomed to in daily life.[3]

Other than these three obvious possibilities, stairs within musicals sometimes assume yet another role. Since many musicals were not bound by the confines of realism, their sets could be fanciful and dreamlike to an extent few other genres could rival. Their designers were able to work in the abstract, with any colour and shape, and in production numbers the sets could literally appear out of nowhere and transform at will, only to disappear again as the film returned to its narrative. In *King of Jazz* (1930), Universal Studios' first feature-length musical, the sequence referred to earlier by Heisner features a wedding set on an endless stairway that stretches upward into infinity. We never see where it goes. In *The Great Ziegfeld* (1936), the camera does an attention-getting crane movement up a gigantic spiral staircase/wedding cake set, passing showgirls and tuxedoed men artfully arranged in varying tableaux , for almost ten minutes with no contribution to the story itself. And the legendary "Broadway Melody" segment of *Singin' In the Rain* begins as Don Lockwood (Gene Kelly) simply says, "I've got an idea for a number..." Because his idea is about a wanna-be Broadway dancer, the entire

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[3]Heisner, 85-87.

number takes place in a world of two-dimensional hand-painted theatre sets, except for the part when Kelly's fantasy character has *his own* fantasy in an even dreamier environment—a stairway that, of course, stretches into infinity. And in the end, it too contributes nothing to the story. When we return to the principal narrative, Millard Mitchell's producer character, R.F. Simpson, dismisses the idea with the throwaway line, "I don't know... I'll have to see it on film first."

Even during musical numbers which contribute nothing concrete to the narrative, musicals often use stairs as a motif within dream landscapes. This is true in film after film after film, whether the stylized deco environments of the thirties (often rooted in nightclub or theatre settings) or the flamboyant Technicolor productions of MGM in the fifties. In these contexts, the staircases sometimes take on the characteristics of dreams—they might look like stairs, but may behave in illogical or physically impossible ways: moving on their own, shifting, going nowhere at all. In the inventive and surreal choreographies of Busby Berkeley, for example, stairs are often amorphous, gravity-defying creations, sinuous and suggestive, as curved as the women cavorting upon them, or the serpentine camera movements with which they are photographed.

Despite their ubiquity, the so-called "dream factory" images commonly seen in musicals are most often taken for granted and not thought about beyond their glamour. I suggest that musicals, in giving free rein to the imaginations of their creators, tapped into deep psychic forces, hardly different than those at work in more 'serious' art. It's true that much of what came out of these studios was mechanized, standardized, and slavishly followed the dominant styles of the day. Nevertheless, a few influential

individuals—Berkeley, Arthur Freed, Van Nest Polglase, and others—managed to shape the look of musicals, Hollywood, and the world at large. And the iconic images they created, *whether they were aware of it or not*, expressed some fundamental human impulses.

MUSICAL SET DESIGN

During the studio years in Hollywood, set building was a serious undertaking, since entire films were shot within studio confines, whether in soundstages or on backlots. Some genres, such as westerns, might make use of actual exteriors, but musicals, in particular, rarely ventured outside the studio walls. As such the studio art departments were an important part of the business, and employed hundreds of workers of all sorts, both designing the films' visual environments and building them, life-sized or as special effects models, glass paintings, and other trickery.

In the introduction of *Production Design in the Contemporary American Film*, Beverly Heisner outlines the hierarchical structure which governed set building during these years:

> ...The supervising art director oversaw all of the work put out by the studio. It was he who assigned individual art directors to particular pictures, and they then did the actual planning of the settings. Sketch artists and draftsmen executed in detail the ideas of the art directors. Special effects were usually handled by the art departments.
>
> A construction department within the studio built the sets. There were separate shops for scenic painting, matte painting, miniature and model construction, and plaster work. Large property warehouses stored everything from furniture to parts of buildings. The studios also maintained large standing settings -- the back lots -- where western and European streets, theaters, and other locations could be found. They were

used, redressed, and reused time and time again.[4]

Stairs went from a common device used in theatre, painting, and architecture to similar usage in the cinema, most likely since those responsible for the set designs came predominantly from these backgrounds. Some, like Warner Brothers' Anton Grot or the independent William Cameron Menzies (for whom the title "production designer" was first coined) could easily have gone on to equally successful careers as artists. Others, like Cedric Gibbons at MGM, practised architecture outside the movies (Gibbons designed a modernist house for himself which was so celebrated that it helped disseminate the International style in America.[5]) In fact, even among those directors who seem to favour stairs in their mise-en-scène—Minnelli, Sirk, Welles, Ophuls, and the like—a good many of them have similar backgrounds.

Theatre, architecture, or studio arts-trained visual designers and directors brought with them into the Hollywood sound stages a wide variety of visual techniques, including the highly useful 'scenic tool' of a staircase. They employed stairs to a variety of ends, as in those other arts: to create depth, add visual complexity, or play off horizontal and vertical lines within the composition; to help break up and negotiate large environments designed for multiple dancers and moving cameras; and finally, for their evocative power as instantly recognizable design elements helping to establish character and location, but also able to symbolize or enhance thematic concerns.

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[4]Beverly Heisner, *Production Design in the Contemporary American Film: A Critical Study of 23 Movies and their Designers* (McFarland & Co, 1997), 2.

[5]*Ibid.*, 38-39.

In addition, at the same time that filmmakers returned again and again to using staircases as a design solution facilitating all of the above, their use of stairs also operated, as I suggested earlier, on a subconscious level, and can be read as a form of dream imagery which though it may have been created unwittingly, nevertheless has additional meaning.

A detailed look at some representative Hollywood musicals will establish the multi-layered nature of stairs within their designs, and the way in which stairs were able to reinforce, on many levels, the dominant stylistic and thematic concerns of the genre.

ASTAIRE & ROGERS AND RKO'S "ART DECO" MUSICALS

During the 1930's, RKO produced a string of musicals featuring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, many directed by Mark Sandrich, and all with an almost interchangeable plot line and look. These included *Flying Down to Rio* (1933, directed by Thornton Freeland), *The Gay Divorcee* (1934), *Top Hat* (1935), *Roberta* (1935, directed by William Seiter), *Follow the Fleet* (1936), *Swing Time* (1936, directed by George Stevens), *Shall We Dance* (1937), and *Carefree* (1938). All the films are comedy-romances, witty romps with Astaire chasing Ginger Rogers, the female lead, sometimes so agressively that today it would be considered sexual harassment! Finally she succumbs to his charms and the two are united. Their 'give and take' romantic pursuit is duplicated by the dance numbers, with Astaire and Rogers' choreography mirroring the tug of war going on in the plot. The films are witty and quick, and many of them add touches of humour by contrasting Astaire's smooth talking and urbane lead character with RKO second-stringers like Edward Everett Horton as his goofy sidekick, Erik Rhodes or

George Metaxa as ludicrous 'Latin lovers', and Eric Blore as a bemused servant, hotel clerk, or waiter. And while they are kept for the most part in the sophisticated and high-class world of the very rich, they lose no opportunity in making many double-entendre references to sex. In fact, rarely will you find films more thoroughly concerned with sex and seduction, but which on the surface so studiously avoid it.

According to the preference of the times, the films are set in a stylized art deco universe of hotels, cruise ships, and other sophisticated locations, all shot in studio-constructed sets overseen by RKO's supervising art director, Van Nest Polglase.[6] Stairs are used prominently, and in a consistent manner. Within the stylish settings, they often create stripes of dark and light, matching venetian blinds, railings, and the sleek and gratuitous "speed lines" which are so predominant in deco design. Even in single-story locations which have no need of a stairway, opportunities are created by two or three stairs which lead to a raised platform; this might be a balcony, a window seat, a fireplace hearth. The night club and restaurant settings which recur are often designed with a higher level, accessed by short stairways and bordered with a streamlined railing, surrounding the main level. This allows the entrance of characters into the frame from above, so that they can be seen behind the main compositional elements. It also adds deco stripes to the composition.

Then, in large production numbers like *The Gay Divorcee's* "Continental", *Top Hat's* "Piccolino", and *Swing Time's* "Never Gonna Dance", a full soundstage is exploited

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[6]It would be interesting, in fact, to consider how much of an impact these films had on the dissemination of art deco style throughout the world, that is, *outside* the movies.

and longer staircases integrated. *The Gay Divorcee's* night club has a staircase that stretches completely across the frame, allowing six lines of dancers to descend at the same time. *Top Hat's* imaginary Venice incorporates a number of curved stairway-bridges over the canals. And *Swing Time's* "Silver Sandal" night club features twin curved staircases which meet at a landing at the top.

In addition to their role in delineating a sophisticated and luxurious fantasy world, the stairs in these sets also enhance the opportunities for clever choreography. Astaire's style makes good use of all of the stairs—no matter where he is, he'll climb up onto anything in order to break into impromptu tap, soft shoe, or ballroom numbers. In *The Gay Divorcee,* a fireplace hearth in his hotel room, though it is only a single step up from the rest of the room, turns into a stage. In *Top Hat*, Astaire and Rogers take shelter in a raised bandstand during a rainstorm and use it as a dance floor.

The films do not typically feature elaborate camera movement. Instead they focus our attention on Astaire and Rogers, keeping them framed from head to toe with as little cutting, even, as possible. With minimal camera movement and long shots predominating, the emphasis is shifted to the choreography and set design to hold our attention. Staircases are often used, so that the dancers can move up and down as well as horizontally, exploiting as much of the space as possible. One of the best examples of this is the final dance number of *Swing Time*, "Never Gonna Dance".

In the plot, Astaire finds himself saying goodbye to Ginger Rogers, who he thinks he has lost to another man. In a final attempt to win her over, he tells her solemnly that he will never dance again, since dancing was something he did with her. Rogers climbs

up one of the twin staircases, as if she is leaving him, but then stops to listen as his plea turns into the song. Since the club's rear wall is conveniently a special effects background of twinkling stars, the low angle shot looking up to Rogers suggests she is like an angel in the heavens. As Astaire sings to her, the cutting keeps them separated in two long shots, the one looking up to her, in her white gown and against the sparkling background, the other from her vantage point, looking down on Astaire against the black floor.

When they begin to dance, the choreography employs the familiar tug-of-war; Ginger leaving, returning, leaving, returning, each time lured back by Astaire and finally surrendering to the purity of the dance. In their complex movements, they make use of the entire sound stage—the main floor, the two stairways, the smaller stage above. All the film's contrasts are now brought together: male and female, dark and light in their costumes as well as the set design, up and down physically as well as metaphorically. At the same time, as it has done in so many films, the dance puts into visual terms the emotional truth: Astaire and Rogers *belong* together. The film has implied this by showing the two characters to be similar, at least in what it considers important ways. They are resourceful and quick-witted, destined to succeed and deserving of their success. More importantly, they are both of the same social status. This has been highlighted by matching each of them with inappropriate, upper class suitors.

The stairs are integrated exceedingly well into this final production number. On a superficial basis, they contribute to the stylish deco world. Spatially, they turn a box-like soundstage into a multi-storied and complex dance environment, allowing Astaire and Rogers to move in all directions. In a metaphoric sense, they support the film's

underlying themes. They remind us of the characters' upward climb, both in terms of their careers as well as their romance. The stairs also suggest a spiritual aspect, creating a symbolic heaven and earth, so that at first, Ginger Rogers is presented as an angel; later, through their mutual passion, the couple can 'rise up to paradise'. (Here, as in most romantic films, true love is posited as a solution to all other problems.) And finally, even the 'twinning' of the staircases in the set seems to validate the character's coming together, suggesting as it does their equality, and therefore the appropriateness of their union.

As the 1930's came to an end, the RKO-style musicals with their aristocratic fantasies were supplanted by a new breed of musical. As exemplified by the early Busby Berkeley films at Warner Brothers, and later by the "Freed unit" at MGM, they replaced the elegance and fairy-tale aspects of the Astaire-Rogers series with a brash optimism, a more communal, or 'democratic' spirit, and a vigorous energy. Stairs would continue to be a fundamental element of musical sets, but in this new context, their design would be more varied and more complex.

BUSBY BERKELEY

> "Chin up, you glorified girl. Stairs are your specialty.
> Shoulders relaxed, and don't forget to smile."
> —Sheila Lane (Lana Turner) in *Ziegfeld Girl* (1941)

It's difficult to think of musicals without the name of Busby Berkeley coming to mind. He, more than any other individual, is associated with the classic Hollywood musicals, and particularly the extravagant fantasy numbers that for so many, identify the genre. Certainly he helped musicals break away from their stage origins and move into a realm of pure cinema, and his inventive numbers supplied the genre with an expansive

vocabulary of camera moves, choreographic ideas, and special effects. From the moment Berkeley arrived, musicals were never the same.

After spending close to a decade in the musical theater, Berkeley had made a name for himself as a highly inventive choreographer. When he finally was brought to Hollywood by Samuel Goldwyn[7], he broke with convention first by asking to *direct* his own dance numbers, then by insisting on using only one camera. Rather than stage a completed routine for a battery of pre-positioned cameras, producing standardized footage from which an editor would select the necessary takes, Berkeley moved through his choreographies moment by moment, positioning the single camera where he thought it should be for that particular moment. His innovation was two-fold: he, not the film's director or editor, was in control of the sequence, and he was thinking not as a stage director but with the three-dimensional latitude of a filmmaker.[8]

Early in his career, Berkeley worked on two films, *42nd Street* (1933) and *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933), which cemented his reputation . The two highly successful films established him as a visual stylist par excellence, and he spent the rest of a long career bouncing back and forth between Warner Brothers, where he made 24 films, and MGM, where he made 19, many with the legendary Arthur Freed.

Berkeley's style is immediately recognizable, mostly by its sheer audacity. Unlike

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[7]Berkeley's first movie assignment was to choreograph five dance numbers in the film *Whoopee* (1930), a Florenz Ziegfeld property starring Eddie Cantor, and directed by Thornton Freeland.

[8]Tony Thomas and Jim Terry with Busby Berkeley, *The Busby Berkeley Book* (New York Graphic Society Ltd., 1973), 24-25.

the Astaire musicals, Berkeley's camera positions are unusual and extreme. Even in narrative sections (in those films he directed from beginning to end) his camera is fluid, dollying and craning through space from closeups to high angle long shots, and so on. He pioneered the use of shots taken from directly overhead, in which dancers were reduced to design elements and formed circles, stars, flowers, and other patterns -- shots which quickly became a staple in dance films and which might be the most familiar (and lampooned) cinematic motif in all of film history.[9]

Along with his highly mobile camera, in production numbers Berkeley employed an editing style not unlike Russian dialectical montage, often creating a kaleidoscopic result. He was also interested in special effects, and incorporated mechanical and optical devices, animation, and other techniques extensively. This was true even in more 'realist' films, such as the Judy Garland-Mickey Rooney vehicles, whose production numbers are usually passed off as rehearsals or performances, not fantasies. In these films, Berkeley was able to come up with unusual routines such as the "musical fruit" sequence in *Strike Up the Band* (1940). Mickey Rooney explains the breakdown of the orchestra to Judy Garland using a bowl of fruit, inspiring a musical number with the fruit coming to life via stop motion animation.

Combined with the emphasis in his production numbers on outrageous costumes, set designs, and props, his command of all the technical details worked to mask the fact

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[9]It is a rare Mel Brooks film, for example, which does not make fun of the Berkeley overhead shot. My personal favourite takes place in *The Producers* (1968) when goose-stepping Nazis in the Broadway show, "Springtime for Hitler", form a rotating swastika—surely the worst-taste application of the Berkeley style that can be conceived of.

that not much dancing actually took place. Even Berkeley's biggest spectacles, with a hundred white grand pianos, giant bananas, or a stairway to infinity, were really meant to do one thing: showcase beautiful women.

Berkeley took the "showgirl" spectacle, as exemplified by the theatrics of Florenz Ziegfeld, to a new level, with the camera treated as a voyeuristic eye and the female stars relegated to fetish status. Sexual imagery and innuendo abound; costumes often make use of sheer, flesh-coloured material to simulate partial nakedness; women are glimpsed in the midst of taking baths, dressing, undressing; a line of women raise giant phallic bananas; women dressed as violins are stroked by a giant bow; the camera penetrates a chorus line of spread legs. All Berkeley's razzle-dazzle, impressive and technically innovative though it may be, seems aimed at an intensified glorification (and sexualization) of the female form. The women, as interchangeable as parts in a machine, function merely as passive stereotypes. Lucy Fischer, for example, points out that the razzle-dazzle and technology itself only serves to marginalize "Berkeley's girls":

> In a number like "I Only Have Eyes For You," the women's gestures (swaying back and forth or undulating the folds of their gowns) clearly do not function as choreography. Rather they serve as kinetic designs which interact dialectically with the complex trajectories of the mobile decor and the moving camera. But the awesome proficiency of Berkeley's mechanical decor tends to underscore the technical incompetence of the Berkeley girls and concretize the image of women as essentially passive.[10]

In fact, feminist critics like Paula Rabinowitz have pointed out that Berkeley's musicals

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[10]Lucy Fischer, "The Image of Woman as Image: The Optical Politics of Dames," in *Film Quarterly*, Vol. XXX no. 1 (Fall 1976), 6.

provide "extreme examples of the objectification of the female image."[11], and while they might show their female stars as capable and talented during the narrative, they negate this power by suppressing them in the production numbers. Rabinowitz uses Berkeley's *Gold Diggers of 1933* to explain the connections between capitalist/consumer ideology and the commodification of female sexuality.[12]

Where do stairways fit into these textual readings of Berkeley's work? As some analysis of Berkeley numbers will show, his use of stairs is motivated by stylistic concerns, but inadvertently falls into the most overt of patriarchal imagery.

Stairways had been common in the Ziegfeld Follies, as they were in other 'revue' stage shows, and Berkeley, transferring those chorus girl spectacles to the screen, took their staircase sets to new heights. With his proclivity for the huge, complex set, often with repetition *ad nauseum* of an element as its dominant device, it is a rare Berkeley film or number that doesn't have a staircase in its design. Most common is a rear-ground staircase that rises in a slow curve from left to right or right to left. Also prevalent is the variety that runs completely across the back half of the frame, more like stadium bleachers. *42nd Street*, an early Berkeley choreography assignment, makes use of such a staircase in the finale of its title song. Hundreds of dancers waddle slowly up the stairs,

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[11]Paula Rabinowitz, "Commodity Fetishism: Women in *Gold Diggers of 1933*", in *Film Reader* No. 5 (1982), 142.

[12]One could easily hypothesize connections between Berkeley's own life and his work. Certainly his devotion to his mother, his many failed marriages, his attempted suicides, all seem to point to an arrested sexual development and psychic anguish which might relate in some way to the overt sexual and masculine nature of his imagery. However, other than that of the feminist critics, little conjecture of this sort has been made.

with their backs to the camera. When they are in position, they turn to reveal themselves as New York high rises, forming a skyline of cutouts. The stairs left unused in the middle of the frame are painted as a giant mockup of an art deco skyscraper, from whose top Ruby Keeler and Dick Powell wave.

Set loose from the confines of a real-life theatre stage, and supported by Hollywood's lavish budgets and immense technical support, Berkeley's stairway sets can go where they want, in any shape or size, and using cinematic trickery if need be. Stairs spiral down to a star-shape in *The Kid from Spain* (1932), go up and around and back again like an Escher trompe-l'oeuil in *Dames* (1934), cascade down like folds of silk in *Broadway Serenade* (1939). *Footlight Parade's* (1933) waterfall flows over multiple staircases; in the 1954 remake of *Rose Marie*, the stylized Southwestern cliffside on which Indians sing "The Totem Tom Tom", is a barely disguised stairway of stones.

Berkeley's most exaggerated use of stairs takes place in *Ziegfeld Girl* (1941), directed by Robert Leonard. Its big stairway numbers are meant to be a direct representation of a Ziegfeld show, but the stairs seem just a little too extravagant, and much of the choreography is staged for a roving camera, presenting views onscreen that could never have been seen by spectators sitting in a theater setting. What is interesting, though, is that the narrative picks up the motif of stairs from the production number, and echoes it throughout other locations, 'squeezing' from it additional meaning.

The narrative follows three young hopefuls who audition and are selected to be "Ziegfeld Girls". They are given a welcome speech, where they are told, "Some of you are gonna wind up with your names in electric lights; some of you are gonna wind up

with a husband and kids; and some of you are gonna wind up... well, not so good."

The film goes on to illustrate exactly this. One, played by Hedy Lamarr, finds no real happiness in the glamorous world of show biz, and quits to marry her true love, a classical violinist. A second girl (Lana Turner) dumps her truck driver boyfriend and becomes the plaything of wealthy gentlemen, eventually crashing in an alcoholic daze. The third (Judy Garland) remains true to her wholesome values, gets her father a job in the show, and presumably goes on to be a big star as a singer.

The film's backstage narrative focuses a great deal of attention on the first production number, "You Stepped Out of a Dream", where the three leads make their debut. It gets talked about, rehearsed on a wooden facsimile staircase, and as we track the three female leads, referred back to in several other scenes.

Since the production numbers of the film are, to an extent, an attempt to recreate the real-life performances of the Ziegfeld Follies, the stairs can be thought of simply as a detail demanded by biographical verisimilitude. But the morality-play nature of the narrative, which calls into question family values and true love versus fame and materialism, makes use of the staircases in a deeper sense.

First, stairs help to define the settings. As with the RKO musicals, *Ziegfeld Girl* presents a world of the rich and famous (though not as stylized as those of RKO), and it contrasts the ordinary homes of the three principals before their success, with their high-class surroundings afterwards. For example, the plain wooden staircases at both Judy Garland and Lana Turner's homes contrast manifestly with the massive and elegant stairs in the theater lobby or at the hotel frequented by Turner and her millionaire boyfriend.

Secondly, stairs provide a backdrop for an obvious thematic statement about the three women, who are 'rising up in the world'. This is made most prominent with Lana Turner's character, Sheila Lane, who ultimately will wind up "not so good". At home with her working class Irish family, Lana Turner sleepily comes downstairs in the morning, but when her brother begins playing the Ziegfeld music, she snaps to attention and proudly turns her descent into a copy of her triumphant stage performance. This is a clever moment, for behind the humour it reminds us that her stardom is enabling her to transcend her lower class status. At the same time, though, it works to foreshadow her tragic end. The hurried manner in which she assumes her Ziegfeld posture when she hears the music seems almost 'Pavlovian'; hinting that the fame and fortune are a trap—*she's* the one being controlled. Eventually the story shows the negative effects of stardom on this character—while she thinks she's going up, she's really on her way down. She loses her down-to-earth boyfriend (Jimmy Stewart), becomes the paid mistress of a wealthy older man, drinks heavily, and finally is cut from the Ziegfeld show. In her final moments in the film, she is shown falling drunkenly down the staircase at the hotel where she has just had a sad reunion with her ex-boyfriend. As she lies in his arms at the bottom of the stairs, it may be a moment of revelation for her. But we are never told if this will be the case.

In Sheila's case, the stairs become a direct and powerful symbol of her ambitions and how they amount to a "selling out" of herself. It is as though her rehearsals and subsequent appearance in the Ziegfeld show (where all she did was walk up some stairs looking beautiful) was training for her work finding a rich husband; the stairs, in other

words, were her passage upward into the world of the wealthy. At one point later in the film, she reinforces this notion, trying to boost her confidence as she makes a dramatic entrance down the hotel stairs. She whispers to herself, "Stairs are your specialty."

The stairs in the film may serve as a symbol of the women's rise to stardom, but in the production numbers, on a practical, shot by shot basis, they also provide Berkeley with a multitude of visual possibilities. The first number goes on, almost tiresome in its repetitive presentation of each and every chorus girl (all virtually identical anyway, except for the three leads), and every woman makes her entrance either up or down a stairway. The second number, meant to be "the next Ziegfeld hit", is virtually a repeat of the first.

Visually, the grand staircases in the set design allow for the following:

—camera angles can be varied constantly

—the curved and diagonal lines of the stairs can motivate camera moves

—the women's bodies (and especially legs) are revealed and look attractive as they walk up and down stairs;

—each entrance is given a dramatic ceremonial flavour, with a woman descending or ascending into frame.

Finally, however, it is on a more subliminal or subconscious level that the stairs seem to provide their most interesting qualities. As noted in my earlier section on the repertoire of effects provided by stairs, Sigmund Freud interpreted stairs in a dream as a direct symbol of "copulation". If this is the case, the frequent appearance of stairs in musical numbers involving scantily-clad female performers suggests a rather obvious and dream-like reference to sex, and can be tied together with other repeated motifs, shapes,

textures, and visual elements which might also be consider sexual. For example, many Berkeley routines feature circular shapes thought to be feminine 'orifices', objects such as oversized bananas or cannons which can be taken as phallic symbols, suggestive costuming such as the fur "muffs" in *42nd Street's* "Young and Healthy", or the metal bathing suits which men attempt to open using can openers in *Gold Diggers of 1933.* In this film, for example, most of the costumes are designed to make the women look partially naked, with sequins, feathers, or fur trim at appropriate places.

Even the repetition of elements and illogical leaps in space and time in many Berkeley sequences serve to highlight their dream-like nature. Whether consciously or not, Berkeley worked in such a way as to break down the film's adherence to reality, and move closer to the realm of the purely imaginary. Rick Altman suggests that all cinema works in a mode similar to dreams, but that musicals do so more than any other genre:

> By collapsing categories and overcoming oppositions, the musical succeeds in avoiding psychic expenditure... This is of course the very mode of dream, where separate experiences are displaced and condensed in such a way as to provide a single fluid vision. Normal notions of causality are replaced by a free-floating network of memories, desires, and fears, each dissolving into the next by a principle which is psychic rather than physical. The musical's characteristic style approximates this dream world, constantly calling us out of diegetic reality to the past, a performance, a dream sequence. Scenes from reality suddenly metamorphose into well-known art works... What distinguishes the musical is its tendency to dissolve one realm into another...[13]

This supports the interpretation made by Jerome Delamater, who sees Berkeley as a consummate, if unwitting, *surrealist.* He points out many parallels between the work of surrealist artists and Busby Berkeley, including their fascination with erotica, and their

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[13]Altman, 76.

attempts to simulate the workings of dreams:

> ...the worlds of fantasy, irrationality, and eroticism so important to the Surrealist are the controlling factors in Berkeley's work... More specifically, major elements of surrealism also evident... are the idolization of female eroticism; the concretization of dream and its corollary, the absurdity and illogicality of reality; the relativity of time and space; the mechanization of life; and the freedom of imagination.[14]

In *Ziegfeld Girl,* the song title "You Stepped Out of a Dream" itself suggests that its content (in particular, the women) is the 'stuff of dreams'. The women are presented as "dream-girls" for their primarily male audience, not just to gaze upon but as potential romantic (or sexual) partners to be seduced at the dressing-room door. For the women, their appearance on stage is also meant to be the culmination of a dream—they are "Ziegfeld Girls", after all—and being selected for a Ziegfeld show is meant to be a springboard to success, a fulfillment of a dream whether it is finding a husband or going on in show business. The long curved staircase which allows the girls to step up or down into the spectators' view, operates in each case as the bridge between the dream and reality. By associating the stairways in particular with Sheila, who becomes a 'bought woman', the film cruelly suggests that her success is totally dependent on her sexuality. As Paula Rabinowitz suggested earlier, the attainment of her dream will only be facilitated by her body, her sole commodity.

AN AMERICAN IN PARIS AND THE "STAIRWAY TO PARADISE"

In the 1950's, the musical still reigned supreme, and technically as well as artistically, it still drew big talents as well as big audiences.

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[14]Jerome Delamater, "Busby Berkeley: An American Surrealist", in *Wide Angle,* Vol. I, Nr. 1 (Spring 1976), 31.

As in almost any genre, with the maturation of the musical came a tendency toward self-reflection. Jane Feuer has pointed out that the musical was this way almost by nature, but that it "evolved toward increasingly greater degrees of self-reflectivity," such that "by the late forties and into the early fifties, a series of musicals produced by the Freed Unit at MGM used the backstage format to present sustained reflections upon, and affirmations of, the musical genre itself."[15]

Under the leadership of Supervising Art Director Cedric Gibbons, MGM's do-anything designers and builders used the world's largest soundstages to create environments as varied as they were lavish. As in *Singin' in the Rain*'s "Broadway Melody" number, or *The Pirate*'s (1948) Caribbean fantasyland, their decors were often stylized to the point of pastiche—exactly the kind of self-referential treatment that Feuer talks about. In this context, stairways are still an essential design feature; oftentimes, they *are* the pastiche, as in *An American in Paris*' "Stairway to Paradise" number, or the moment during a dress rehearsal in *The Band Wagon* (1953) when all the mechanized staircases of the show-within-a-show go wrong.

The Freed Unit's biggest talent behind the camera was Vincente Minnelli, an inventive and highly visual director, who uses an almost constantly moving camera and an always rich palette of colours and visual effects. As his camera plays in three-dimensional space, stairways are often crucial, for example, the long ornate bannister of the family mansion in *Meet Me In St. Louis* (1944), which inspires the film's undulating

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[15]Jane Feuer, "The Self-reflective Musical and the Myth of Entertainment", in *Quarterly Review of Film Studies,* vol. 2, no. 3 (August 1977), 314.

crane shots. In both his musicals and his melodramas, Minnelli uses staircases of all sorts, but within dance numbers his principal choice is a short flight which runs wide across the frame, providing a second slightly higher platform behind the foreground. This is much the same as the RKO-Astaire films, but now matched with a graceful, rarely static camera and an extravagant use of colour.

Thomas Elsaesser, in a seminal article, praised the "unity" of Minnelli's vision and the vitality of his style:

> One only needs to hold a Busby Berkeley musical -- with its formally brilliant but dramatically empty song-and-dance routines and elaborate visual compositions -- against even an early and comparatively minor Minnelli effort, say, the 'Limehouse Blues' sequence from *Ziegfeld Follies*, to see how the musical with Minnelli has been given an authentic spiritual dimension, created by a combination of movement, lighting, colour, décor, gesture and music which is unique to the cinema.[16]

A detailed study of *An American In Paris* (1951) will indicate how Minnelli uses stairways to create spatial complexity, maximizing his gigantic soundstage sets. As in *Ziegfeld Girl,* the staircases are also integrated into the narrative, adding layers of meaning that support characterization as well as a variety of themes.

Like *Citizen Kane*, *An American In Paris* can be seen as a kind of milestone film, summing up the powers of the cinema for its time. Certainly it stands as one of the great examples of what could be achieved within the American studio system. With MGM's Arthur Freed producing, and Minnelli at the helm, *An American In Paris*'s team of talented collaborators combined virtually all the artistic, conceptual, and technical

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[16]Thomas Elsaesser, "Vincente Minnelli," *Brighton Film Review*, no. 15 (December 1969), reprinted in *Genre: The Musical,* edited by Rick Altman (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 16.

capabilities then possible in the musical, and the resulting film is a brilliant example of the genre, one which set the stage for a string of successes to follow. To recount briefly the film's strengths: it mixes a French and American cast (including experienced performers as well as a new discovery, Leslie Caron); it utilizes an exclusively Gershwin score incorporating a variety of musical styles from blues to jazz to cabaret to symphonic, and even a 17-minute ballet at the end; and most importantly, it has a superb visual look, with some of the biggest and most elaborate set constructions achieved to that date in a film, a number of special effects achieved both optically and mechanically, and the film's lighting and design first of all creating a believable Paris on the MGM backlot, but then also pushing to the limit the Technicolor process in order to bring to life onscreen a variety of well-known Impressionist paintings. At the same time, a witty (if not very original) script by Alan Jay Lerner merges familiar elements such as the backstage musical, represented by French cabaret star Henri (Georges Guetary) and the success story (with Gene Kelly and Oscar Levant as struggling painter and composer), with that of the crossed lovers (both Kelly and Caron are attached to unsuitable partners).

Stairs appear in the film during the song and dance number at the cabaret show, when Henri (Georges Guetary) sings "I'll Build A Stairway to Paradise" while climbing the long, sweeping staircase which goes on upward into infinity (apparently, to paradise). There is a windy staircase at the Left Bank pension where Gerry Mulligan (Gene Kelly) and Adam (Oscar Levant) live; he talks to the charwoman as he goes down, and during song-and-dance routines in the bistro on the ground floor, he and his friends use the last flight of the stairs as a staging device.

Most importantly, though, there are stairways present in *every scene* involving the two lovers played by Kelly and Caron—all their romantic meeting places as well as the final production number, the American in Paris ballet. Since this last category is most central to the film, it deserves a close examination.

First of all, the simple fact that there is a staircase in every scene where the two lovers are present is a cue to their importance, and begs the question, What is the relationship between these stairs (visual motifs) and the lovers?

As in many musicals, *An American In Paris* draws a comparison between success in a career and success in love. In many films, though it is not always the case, the two are shown to be incompatible. Here, the lovers who are finally brought together are both young and poor, while the partners they are unsuitably matched up with at the outset (Henri is an old family friend of Lisa's parents, and Milo, played by Nina Foch, is a divorcée trying to buy Gerry's love) are older and rich.

The film's main narrative, then, places the two lovers in a position where they have to make a difficult choice; in Gerry's case, choosing Lisa will cause him to lose something else he wants—Milo's support for his art career; in Lisa's case she feels an obligation to Henri. Nevertheless, the film suggests that the lovers should choose each other, whatever the consequences. If we boiled the film's romantic narrative down to a simple theme, we might express it as this: no matter how difficult, choose love over all other things.

Many other moments in the film contribute to this particular reading. When Gerry goes to the perfume shop where Lisa works, she is engaged in helping an older woman

trying to choose between two perfumes, *L'Escapade* and *Nuits d'Amour*. "Choose amour, always," says Gerry. (In the background is a long curved staircase.) When the lovers meet under the bridge, Gerry sings "Our Love is Here to Stay", which describes how love will outlast everything from the Rockies and the Rock of Gibraltar to the radio and movies. (At the close of this scene, she checks the time and must hurry away up the stairs—a small reference to *Cinderella*.)

Even the scene where Gerry leaves his lower-class pension in the morning, down its central staircase, becomes a significant moment contributing to this theme. He and the cleaning lady have a witty conversation about how he has no money. She suggests using his free time to enjoy wine and women, but he replies that even in Paris, no money means no wine and women. Of course, she knows better than he does: choose love and the rest will fall into place.

All of this is interesting when we compare Henri's song about climbing the stairway to paradise (he's going *up*) to the repeated use of stairs in the scenes with the young lovers. In their case, they always go *down* to meet each other—down the stairs to their special spot under the bridge, down the stairs from the Beaux Arts ball to their final union. It is not too great a stretch for us to say then, that the film links material success (Henri is a star, Milo is going to make Gerry a star) to the inappropriate partners, whose offers of love are false and set in opposition to the 'true love' shared by Gerry and Lisa. Combined with the staircase motif, this could be expressed as an interesting set of contrasting values:

Up = material success/inappropriate union = Undesirable

versus

Down = rejection of wealth/appropriate union = Desirable.

While stairs in musicals are often a simple signifier of success—on your way up—*An American In Paris* inverts the formula. For the lovers' romance to succeed, it must be 'down to earth', grounded in reality rather than fantasy.

An American In Paris strengthens this duality by wrapping it in many other such pairings or values in opposition. Right off the bat, there is *an American*, Gerry, *in Paris*. His opening narration explains that he's an ex-GI who remained in Paris after the war because he wants to be a painter. This sets us up for the comparison of American and French culture that becomes a playful part of the context of the film, with Gerry making jokes with Lisa about what it's like in America (Saturday night—lots of fun, Sunday night—all your money is gone), disdainfully describing the "third year girls" who come from America to soak up a little European culture in their third year of college, and teaching the neighbourhood kids American words in the song and dance number "I Got Rhythm". (Another lyric about choosing love: "I got my gal, who could ask for anything more?")

Another comparison is made between high culture and popular culture, represented in dance with Gene Kelly's tap and Leslie Caron's ballet, in music with Adam's symphonic aspirations and pop-arranging reality, in the tiny lower-class room Gerry rents and the spacious opulence of Milo's hotel suite, even in the film's mix of Hollywood musical garishness and painterly seriousness.

There are other, lesser moments of contrast as well. Our introduction to Lisa is a

rather silly special effects sequence accompanying Henri's voice-over, where he tries to describe all the different, contradicting sides to her character and ends up confusing Adam. The Beaux Arts ball at the film's end is decorated exclusively in black and white, and explodes into colour during Gerry's dream sequence (the American in Paris Ballet) which simulates the colourful impressionist canvases. Even the many character couplings in the film (romantic or otherwise) end up creating contrasts: Nina Foch's divorcée character is meant to be an opposite to Leslie Caron's virginal Lisa, Guetary's Henri, a debonair European compared to Kelly's more down-to-earth American, Oscar Levant is short, squat and dour next to the athletic, handsome, and fun-loving Kelly. The customer trying to choose between two perfume brands moans, "I can never make a decision!" but Lisa, pressured by Gerry to go out with him, has no such problems. She hesitates only a moment and then decides to go. (Choose love over all else.)

The final production number, the "American in Paris" ballet, is the logical structural conclusion to the film. It now contrasts the real world with the dream world of the young lovers, where their desires will be magically fulfilled in the dance, unimpeded by any of the details of real life. It is appropriate that this number is set in a stylized world of French paintings come to life; appropriate since Kelly's character is a painter living in Paris, but also since the function of art, often, is the creation of a 'perfect' world. In this number, as elsewhere, the stairs originate from the actual paintings being brought to life, but they resonate with all the previously outlined thematic elements of the film. Here, Gerry and Lisa can cavort at will, up and down, from back to front, from one frame to another, and unimpeded by any of the unpleasant details impeding their real situation.

Interestingly, the sequence takes place at the moment in the plot when all the obstacles preventing the two lovers from uniting have been presented; at the peak of their troubles, as it were. Even the pressure of time is at its maximum—Henri is taking Lisa away this night, to marry her before going on tour. However, the sequence (though a dream) acts almost as if to erase all the problems presented in the narrative. Having shown the couple together in this love-inspired fantasy dance, little resistance is offered them once the film returns to its narrative. Henri has overheard Gerry's declaration of love, and nobly allows Lisa her freedom. She exits the taxi, starts running up the long stone staircase outside the party, and is met by Gerry running down the stairs, who meets her halfway.

An American in Paris is a world of contrasts, but all these contrasts create a pleasant tension in the film, driving the narrative along as well as enlivening its world—it's a world of many choices, many possibilities. And the stairs, so familiar to the musical, serve in *An American In Paris* as a visual reminder of these possibilities. In a way that only Minnelli seems able to do, they reassure us that our world stretches off invitingly in many directions.

CONCLUSION

This somewhat chronological survey has shown that stairways were a useful tool in the musical genre, during Hollywood's studio years. In the RKO musicals, stairs were a stylish detail of the set design, used to indicate wealth and upper class status, and to create metaphors about material success or the spiritual qualities of romantic love. They also related to subconscious desires, representing sexual or other basic impulses. Later,

as musicals became more visually elaborate and technically inclined, Busby Berkeley and others used staircases almost as a special effects tool, stretching them in fanciful and perhaps more abstract or surreal directions. By the 1950's, stairs were put to use in a complex variety of ways, and were such a familiar instrument in the genre that they could even be lampooned. In the hands of a director like Vincente Minnelli, they were integrated into a style that made use of movement, colour, texture, rhythm, and form—all brought into play in harmonious organization.

Much of what is attractive in the musicals, of course, can not really be put into words -- we appreciate Astaire and Rogers' dancing talents as well as their complex interactions provided by the narrative, but we also enjoy, without consciously understanding, the patterns they form, the stripes and shapes of the set designs, the swirl, even, of Ginger's dress. Many of the formal qualities mentioned earlier in describing Busby Berkeley's work—repetition of elements, circular motifs and other shapes—also function in this way. And the work of Minnelli is as "musical" as the cinema can be, with pleasures which are as ineffable as those of a great symphony.

The constant appearance of stairways in musical sets seems very much related to this visual pleasure. While the stairs perform all the tasks enumerated earlier, they also are part of the musical's more "fundamental" or primeval imagery. When we watch the women descending and ascending the stairs in those Berkeley numbers, watch Leslie Caron take Gene Kelly's hand, then the two of them run lightly, almost floating, down those infinite stairs, there is something about the image that touches us much more deeply than the superficial story would suggest.

With the closing of the studios' comprehensive facilities, including their production design services, the musical seemed simultaneously to fall out of favour with the public. Nevertheless, a glance at the few successful musicals produced after the fifties will show that stairs still provide filmmakers with multiple opportunities, within the choreography as well as the narrative, and with an iconic power. These films might include *West Side Story* (1961), *Mary Poppins, The Sound of Music, Oliver* (1968), *Funny Girl* (1968), *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971), *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), *Annie, Hello, Dolly* (1969), *New York, New York* (1977), or the recent *Chicago* (2003), all of which feature a stairway in some significant scene.

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WOMAN ON THE STAIRS

The Little Foxes, 1941

STAIRS IN THE MELODRAMA

CHAPTER FOUR: STAIRS IN THE CLASSIC MELODRAMAS

> "Melodrama represents a struggle against, or within, the patriarchy, and what seeks release and definition is a repressed identity."[1]

It is in the classic American melodramas, I would argue, that the staircase achieves its fullest potential as a location, for its spatial properties as well as its rich symbolic associations. However, where musicals used staircases in most senses as a positive symbol, an indication of upward aspirations or ascendance, in the melodrama this symbolism is almost reversed. The staircase still seems to represent in all its myriad of possibilities the idea of the hierarchical structure—the up and down, and the hegemonic ordering—of human social interactions, but in its melodramatic appearances it is more often a signifier of the dark side of these structures.

In melodramatic applications the staircase frequently acts as a stage upon which the cruel dramas of life are played out, a tightly confining entranceway which narrows our attention, and which simultaneously traps characters as they attempt to achieve their desires. When characters in melodrama ascend, it may be at a great cost—or what appears an ascent (or fulfilment of their desires) may in fact be revealed to viewers as a tragic descent. Frequently, these characters are women, and the long associations of stairs with patriarchal hierarchies become significant.

Like the musical, the melodrama also makes use of stairways for their spatial or 'staging' possibilities, but here too a more nefarious side is brought into play. Stairs may

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[1]Robert Lang, *American Film Melodrama: Griffith, Vidor, Minnelli* (Princeton University Press, 1989), 40.

be dauntingly steep, narrow and constricting, or even off-limits; their elegance may mask an evil nature. Frequently, as we will see, their railings may be used by filmmakers as metaphoric prison bars, their higher reaches may lead to an unknown or forbidden region. Powerful characters may stand on stairs and look down on others from their higher position. In some films, the stairs may even become a source of menace in themselves—not only symbolizing the oppressive nature of our society, but serving directly as a weapon in the hands of the oppressors.

Speaking about the so-called "paranoid woman" strain of melodramas, Mary Ann Doane notes that

> ...in the best tradition of the horror film, affect is condensed onto the image of a woman investigating, penetrating space alone. And it is the staircase, a signifier which possesses a certain semantic privilege in relation to the woman as object of the gaze, which articulates the connection between the familiar and the unfamiliar, or between neurosis and psychosis. An icon of crucial and repetitive insistence in the classical representations of the cinema, the staircase is traditionally the locus of specularitization of the woman.[2]

Doane goes on to describe the curious enigma of a woman's "place" on the stairs: active and investigative as she penetrates unknown or forbidden space alone, and at the same time submissive and threatened.

This feminist reading recognizes the stairway in the melodrama as representative of a male-dominated social hierarchy. As in musicals, stairs are frequently a place where women are displayed, but while musicals for the most part made this display a simple one either of rapturous adoration or sexual objectification, in the melodrama the presentation

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[2]Doane, 135.

of female characters is much more complex. Ultimately, what we might call "the woman on the stairs" is a woman trapped in the social order, forever doomed to unfulfilled desires, not just objectified but *victimized,* and by both the masculine antagonists of the narrative as well as by the possessive male gaze of cinema itself.

It is interesting that the makers of melodramas—predominantly men, and many of them the same filmmakers who simultaneously worked in other genres—seemed to understand so well the plight of their female characters. It is also interesting that these films gave strong, fully developed roles to actresses who were denied this in other genres, at the same time giving their predominantly female audiences powerfully cathartic, rich, and socially astute narrative experiences—"women's films" in every sense. The genre was able to pinpoint with surprising accuracy the conflicted role of women as agent-victim, object-subject. And while superficially many of the films may have seemed to suggest that "a woman's place is in the home", or that women must make sacrifices in order to preserve social stability, the suffering and loss that women would endure as a result of these sacrifices was presented with surprising veracity.

However, though many melodramas focused on female characters, the genre was not restricted to the domain of women. As Thomas Schatz points out in *Hollywood Genres*, the films usually depict "a virtuous individual (usually a woman) or couple (usually lovers) victimized by repressive and inequitable social circumstances, particularly those involving marriage, occupation, and the nuclear family."[3] While Schatz

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[3]Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking and the Studio System* (Temple University Press, 1980), 222.

sees musicals and comedies as *integrating* their anarchic characters into society, the melodramas worked as a flip side, showing "the ultimate *resignation* of the principals to the strictures of social and familial tradition."[4] This definition fully encompasses the genre, describing melodramas as early as the silent films of D. W. Griffith, through the films of the 30's and 40's, finally even the more self-reflexive work produced in the 1950's, which includes what Schatz calls the "male weepies" of Nicholas Ray, *Rebel Without A Cause* (1955) and *Bigger Than Life* (1956). It could even, conceivably, describe hybrids such as *The Godfather* trilogy (gangster-melodrama) and *The Deer Hunter* (1976) (combat-melodrama).

In this chapter, I will focus on some of the classic melodramas of the American studio period, taken from within the three decades from 1930 to 1960 which go from the introduction of sound to the breakup of the major studios. As I will show, stairs are an important site within the settings of the broad spectrum of subsets that make up the genre, whether it is the women's films or the family variety. Even in those self-conscious and often flamboyant films of the fifties, in particular as turned out by Nicholas Ray, Vincente Minnelli, and Douglas Sirk, stairs figure prominently and for the most part adhere to the symbolism I described above. As in the musical, stairs act as a tool which can be used in a variety of applications, and with a rich range of possibilities.

MELODRAMA SET DESIGN

Because a great number of the classic melodramas involve romantic or familial conflicts, the films often tend to center around the homes of the principal characters. And

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[4]Ibid.

since these characters are often wealthy, this means, in turn, that we will see large and impressive homes. In many cases, so much time is spent in these locations and the homes themselves are so magnificent, that as Charles Affron and others have observed, they become like characters themselves, some even going so far as to have names, like *Rebecca*'s "Manderley", and *Gone With the Wind*'s "Tara". As I explained earlier, grand homes typically feature impressive stairways, centrally located in order to maximize their role as an indicator of wealth or status. Given the nature of the homes we see in melodramas, this explains to a great extent why the staircase returns with such frequency within the genre.

Thematic concerns which are prevalent in the melodrama also help determine the *treatment* of settings, a treatment which offers considerable consistency even when the settings might vary. For example, the insistence on mise-en-scène, decor, and costumes as expressive elements means these details may be more prominent or 'artistically exaggerated' than in other film genres. One such treatment applied to the decor would be the up and down motifs spoken about earlier. These are often highly appropriate to stories of social mobility, and in films like *Stella Dallas* (1937) and *Mildred Pierce* (1945), which feature characters rising from lower to upper class status, not only will we see squalid or single storey flats give way to immense, multi-storied mansions with elaborate staircases, but other locations may be designed with similar up/down possibilities. King Vidor and his team, in *Stella Dallas*, don't miss an opportunity to visually reinforce the characters' aspirations. On a train, the lower class mother sleeps in the *lower* berth, while the daughter whom she wishes to introduce to higher society,

sleeps in the *upper* berth. In Michael Curtiz's *Mildred Pierce*, when Beragon first meets Mildred (Barbara Stanwyck), she is perched at the top of a stepladder in the midst of renovating her new restaurant. He convinces her to take the day off and go to the beach; distracting her from her "climb" to success, in other words. Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without A Cause* also utilizes many such settings, adding up/down motifs which serve its own particular themes and enrich the film on many levels, as I will show later.

Of course, the recognizable details we see repeated in melodrama locations include much more than those relating to elevation. Narratives featuring characters who are trapped within oppressive social milieus often make use of framing devices such as the fence at the end of *Stella Dallas*, which shuts Stella out from her daughter's high society wedding, or the fences and gates which play a similar part in *Letter From An Unknown Woman* (1948). Heavy drapes, sliding partition doors, and a dauntingly steep staircase all add to the feeling of claustrophobia and oppression in *The Heiress* (1949)—her New York brownstone home is a virtual prison for Catherine Sloper (Olivia de Havilland), whose domineering father (he is tall and thin, not unlike the staircase) makes certain she will never escape the 'velvet bindings' of her class, even after his death. Similarly, a multitude of framing devices in Douglas Sirk films, including windows, doorways, railings, reflections, and the like, are perhaps the most acknowledged feature of his mise-en-scène.[5]

Since staircases are such complex visual elements, they are often a focal point in

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[5]Elsaesser, Schatz, Modlaski, etc. all point out the 'framing' imagery in Sirk; only Elsaesser talks about stairs, however.

the saturated visual approach employed by many melodramas. As Affron says, "with its delimiting railings, its articulated steps, curves, and landings, the staircase comes equipped for focus."[6] I would suggest that stairways act as both a synechdotal and metonomic element within the design; that is, a detail standing in for the whole, as well as a metaphoric rendering of ideas, adding to the 'narrativized' set design a range of psychic meaning that goes far beyond cinematic convention. And in melodramas, with their reliance on set design as an expressive element, the importance of stairways is heightened.

One last note on set design practices during the period in question is in order. The 'factory' mentality of Hollywood's studio period is well-documented, and has of course something to do with the reappearances of set design elements such as grand staircases. One of the fundamental motivations which gave birth to the genre approach in the first place was the economic advantage of recycling product, both from the consumption point of view (audiences clamouring for more of the same) and from the production point of view (using the same stories, sets, props, actors again and again to amortize their costs). Affron mentions, for example, a 1940 *Hollywood* magazine article concerning Bette Davis, "who discovered herself on the same staircase and in the same room, redressed, in *Jezebel, Dark Victory, The Letter, The Old Maid,* and *The Great Lie.*"[7] So we must always temper our notions of the artistic contributions of a staircase within the narratives and the genre with the practical realization that their repeated use was in no small part a

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[6]Affron, 64-65.

[7]Ibid, 6.

financial consideration. Even a film so critically lauded as *Citizen Kane* utilized sets and props from previous RKO productions (including the grand staircase in the Kane mansion, "Xanadu")[8]. Together with this practice of recycling we could add the very real tendency for individuals (in this instance, writers, directors, art directors) to rely on the same solutions to problems; envisioning the same types of sets over and over. What works once will work again. Why fix it if it isn't broken?

SOUTHERN TRAGEDIES—GONE WITH THE WIND, JEZEBEL, THE LITTLE FOXES

> "If the melodrama sees the world as a stage, and the stage as a world, it is because there is an affinity between the familial (melodrama's controlling structure) and the theatrical".[9]

Stairs play a decidedly theatrical role in *Gone With the Wind, Jezebel* (1938), and *The Little Foxes* (1941), three films from the "Southern aristocracy" subset of the melodrama. In these films, powerful female characters hold court like queens in the class-conscious and antiquated world of the Antebellum South. In all three cases, however, the results are tragic.

The three films all portray the South as a bygone world, one which had noble qualities such as chivalry and gentility, but also considerable class prejudice and oppression. They bring this world to life vividly, using colourful historical detail and lavish design. All three films also make similar use of a grand Southern home (or in the case of *Gone With the Wind,* homes) as a principal location, representing the larger world

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[8]Robert L. Carringer, *The Making of Citizen Kane* (University of California Press, 1985), 52-63.

[9]Lang, 231.

of the South with an almost theater-like interior set. In all three, the stairs are a central and evocative detail. One is reminded, in fact, of the ceremonial uses of stairs within the Austrian palaces of Balthasar Neumann.

GONE WITH THE WIND

To the movie-going public, *Gone With the Wind* represents the ultimate melodrama, with its roller-coaster narrative, over-the-top performances, and lush visual treatment. It's no surprise that for decades it remained the top box office-grossing film of all time. Despite its status as a pop culture phenomenon, though, the film is also remarkably dense. It addresses many of the fundamental concerns of the genre, in a complex and highly satisfying way.

Thematically, the story of *Gone With the Wind* might be read as a political allegory, representing the fall of the Southern states and their annexing to the North through the romantic union of Rhett and Scarlett. Scarlett O'Hara, representing the South, clings to her old values (including vanity, materialism, prejudice, and imperiousness). The man she loves, Ashley Wilkes, is the ideal male representative of Southern aristocracy, hard-working, upright, and honourable, if humourless and somewhat effete. Not able to have Ashley, Scarlett carries on a love-hate relationship with Rhett Butler, a Southerner who is willing to accept the new ways of the North. He's everything Ashley isn't, and what Rhett lacks in old-world values like chivalry and adherence to tradition, he makes up for with his sense of humour as well as his 'modern American' qualities: he's brash, pragmatic, energetic, direct, resourceful. He seems the ideal mate for Scarlett, but her tempestuous nature and her pride won't let her accept him wholeheartedly. Even after

they are wed, the union is not a happy one. He gives her the lavish lifestyle she wants (exaggerated to the point of sarcasm), but she pines for Ashley and still seems to detest Rhett. They separate several times, and tragedy in various forms mars the long years of their married life. Rhett finally gives up on the relationship, leaving Scarlett alone to return to her childhood home, Tara. Thus the metaphor might be taken for a warning that the South will never integrate successfully unless they are willing to renounce their old values and move forward.

On the other hand, the film also fits the melodrama genre's focus on a strong woman persecuted because she does not behave according to the customs of her society, and whose determination and strength earn her nothing but scorn. In her struggle for identity against the patriarchal values of the Old South, Scarlett does as Molly Haskell describes in her introduction to *From Reverence to Rape*: "In a woman's "unnatural" climb to success, she *did* have to step on toes, jangle nerves, antagonize men, and run the risk of not being loved."[10]

Of course, it is possible for both interpretations of the film to coexist, and as I will show, the stairs function in full support in either case.

While the shooting and cutting of *Gone With the Wind* is fairly conventional, it is the work of William Cameron Menzies, the production designer, that stands out. The film's set and costume designs are opulent and colourful, and enhance the film on a thematic level. There are a number of spectacular set pieces such as the burning of

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[10]Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1973, 1974), 5.

Atlanta and the famous long crane shot showing the countless wounded soldiers, but it is the Southern plantation homes of Tara, the Wilkes plantation (also known as "Twelve Oaks"), and Rhett and Scarlett's home that are the memorable and most resonant locations. These are spectacular constructions, played off each other in interesting ways so as to represent various sides to the story. The Wilkes plantation, for example, is a direct symbol of the South: grand and courtly, a place where time has stood still. "It's more than a house," Ashley's fianceé says, "It's a whole world of gracefulness and beauty."

Two moments in the film highlight the importance of the Wilkes house as part of the Southern metaphor. The first is during the 'Wilkes family barbecue' sequence, when all the unmarried girls descend from their afternoon nap upstairs, now wearing their finest dresses, to be chosen by the men for dancing. The whole space is given the feel of a theater, where the courtship ritual is played out in a lengthy scene with the young women making their entrances down the elegantly curved staircase. In fact, the melodrama's similarities to the musical seem most pronounced in a sequence like this one, which looks almost like an Astaire-Rogers dance number. The ceremonial feel during this sequence is juxtaposed with the first meeting of Scarlett and Rhett Butler, which takes place immediately following. The courtly aspects of the ritualized Southern dance and the refinement of the ladies act in direct contrast with Scarlett and Rhett during their stormy encounter, where she accuses him of not being a gentleman, and he replies, "And you are no lady."

Later, after the war has begun, Scarlett returns to the Wilkes home to find it

burned. Inside, its ghostly ruin still contains the curved central stairs, which hang almost suspended in mid-air. Symbolically, if the stairs had been associated with the courtly rituals of old Southern culture, this haunting scene shows that those values have been overthrown. The stairs now lead nowhere; the plantation's status as a "world of gracefulness and beauty" has been revoked.

Scarlett's own home, Tara, of course, is most directly associated with her character. Here too the stairs are central in the set design, and used at several key narrative moments. In the days of pillaging following the war, Scarlett must defend the house and herself from a Northern soldier (who would rape her). She blocks him on the stairs, finally having to shoot him. The stairs are also the stage on which she makes numerous grand entrances as she is rebuilding the family fortune, for example when she wears the famous green dress made from old curtains.

The two homes and their lavish stairs are almost lampooned by the garish Atlanta mansion that Rhett and Scarlett move into after their marriage. The stairway in this house is particularly exaggerated, spectacularly long and wide and covered in scarlet-coloured carpeting (thus cementing its association to Scarlett). During this half of the film, the staircase is the site of further troubles for Scarlett; the sexually-frustrated Rhett picks her up and carries her up to rape her, resulting in her second pregnancy; later Scarlett miscarries when she tumbles down the stairs during a fight with Rhett.

In general, the stairs throughout the film serve as platforms for a great many of Scarlett's dramatic performances, whether a short flight like the one in her bedroom, or the lavish central stairways of Tara, Twelve Oaks, or Scarlett and Rhett's Atlanta house.

Of course, much of her life *is* a performance, especially her marriages, none of which is based on mutual love.

As a shooting strategy, placing Vivien Leigh on the stairs for important moments allows the camera to angle upward, creating dramatic emphasis. Other characters, on the floor below, are relegated to the status of audience members. In addition, the stairs themselves act as a symbolic figure, not only signifying the house and all the values attached, but operating as the passageway for Scarlett's 'upward' desire, set against the strictures of her class. Does she climb the stairs to success? Never. Set against the stairs as an upward symbol, all of Scarlett's fight to retain the land and keep her position as an aristocrat end up as hollow victories. At the film's conclusion, she is neither up nor down. From her position halfway up the stairway, she looks at the closed door where Rhett left. She is alone.

JEZEBEL

William Wyler's *Jezebel*, released a year earlier than *Gone With the Wind*, is remarkably similar (if smaller in scope). It looks in on the South in 1854, before talk of war, and when the encrouchments of the North were more economic and cultural than military. The tragic backdrop to the story is the outbreak of "yellowjack fever" which came out of the swamps and killed hundreds of Louisiana residents.

As in *Gone With the Wind*, the aristocratic Southern life is presented as a kind of theater, to whose strict script all the players must adhere. If not, there will be consequences. Also like *Gone With the Wind*, *Jezebel*'s tempestuous female lead, Julie Marsden, makes a bad choice—in this case flaunting tradition by wearing a red dress to a

ball where all unmarried girls are expected to wear white. This shameful incident costs her the love of her fiance Preston Dillard (Henry Fonda). After their split he heads North to work, and returns with a bride. However, Julie is repentant. She can never have her "Press" again, but nevertheless she devotes herself to his happiness, even accepting and extending courtesies to his wife. When he gets yellow fever, Julie takes him into her home and nurses him. In the end, Press is diagnosed terminal, and will be taken to a quarantine island (presumably to die). Julie insists on accompanying him, even though this will be a death sentence for her too. This final scene is enacted as a moment of high tragedy, with Julie giving a dramatic performance as she slowly descends the staircase beside Preston's stretcher. The film's final shots are closeups of Julie in the wagon, riding through New Orleans with fires raging all around her as though she has descended all the way to Hell itself.

The staircase in *Jezebel* is again, an omnipresent detail in the showy set, its elegant curve reminding us, metaphorically, of the lofty ideals and aristocratic trappings of this Southern society. It is also often the site of 'theatrical' moments for Julie, like the ending, or the scene where Press and her family are waiting to take her to the ball, and in defiance she descends in the red dress.

Both Julie and Press are presented to us as progressive Southerners. He is a realist who wants to bring the railroad south because he knows what the future is bringing. He is also connected in the narrative to the doctor, another progressive who keeps calling for cleanup of New Orleans and predicting the epidemic of fever that otherwise is sure to come. In Julie's case, she is introduced to us as a 'headstrong' girl, but from our vantage

point we read her defiance of tradition more as an attempt at freedom, at breaking the confines of the male-dominated Southern social structures and therefore perhaps another form of progressiveness. This is presented to us with her refusal to adhere to what seem like archaic dress codes (she shocks guests by greeting them while still in her riding clothes, wears the red dress to the ball) and customs (women aren't supposed to go into the bank). The colour red has been traditionally associated with passion and sexuality, which suggests that Julie's wilfullness could be meant to be taken as an overt display of desire or sexuality. We could then also see her forwardness with Preston Dillard in a sexual way. In this vein, when Preston goes up the stairs, stick in hand, intending to "beat some sense into her", it's hard not to interpret this as a symbolic rape scene. (Of course, Preston is too civilized to do any beating, except for beating on her closed door.)

Whether we read Julie's defiant attitudes as sexual or otherwise, it's clear that despite her strength and her willingness to break with conventions, she (like Scarlett in *Gone With the Wind*) is a still only a strong woman in a man's world, and the choices offered by her society, even to a strong woman, will be severely limited. Her intelligence, wit, spirit, and obvious energy will guarantee her nothing; her real choice finally boils down to a choice of which of two men she should marry. When instead she chooses defiance, it only brings her loneliness and death.

The staircase at the opulent Marsden home stands as a symbol of the family's wealth and status, and by extension the hierarchical structure of their society in general. For Julie, these stairs will serve as the passageway through which she will attempt to break free. It is then significant that the stairway's most memorable appearance is during

her farewell speech, and more significant, that during this speech she descends, not climbs, the stairs. Thomas Schatz suggests that in melodramas, "Once she is literally and figuratively "taken" by a man, the heroine surrenders her initiative, her self-reliance, and in effect, her individual identity."[11] Thus, in *Jezebel*, the irony is that Julie is never "taken" by a man; she keeps her identity, but the result must be death. While she wanted to go up to freedom and happiness, instead she descends and ultimately is cast down.

THE LITTLE FOXES

Wyler and Bette Davis returned to a Southern setting later in their careers, with a screen adaptation of the stage hit, *The Little Foxes*. The resulting film is a rich, dynamic story about a corrupt Southern family beset with greed, who cheat and abuse each other in their quest for a bigger cotton business. Two brothers, Ben and Oscar Hubbard, want to go into partnership with a rich Northerner, in a business they know will make millions. They need the financial participation of their sister Regina, but her noble husband Horace Giddens, a wheelchair-bound invalid with a weak heart, doesn't want to invest in what he knows is an immoral scheme. This sets off a conflict between the four "evil" characters—the three siblings and Oscar's lazy son Leo; and the four "good" characters—Regina's husband, their daughter Alexandra, her boyfriend, and Oscar's downtrodden wife Birdy. The brothers try to steal Horace's money, but finally Regina outsmarts them all and takes control.

Of the three films being discussed, *The Little Foxes* is most theatrical of all. In *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Peter Brooks pointed out that in melodramatic theatre,

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[11]Schatz, 233.

there tended to be "a resolution of meaning in *tableau*, where the characters' attitudes and gestures, compositionally arranged and frozen for a moment, give, like an illustrative painting, a visual summary of the emotional situation."[12] This is very much the case in *The Little Foxes*, with Wyler positioning his fine ensemble cast in artfully arranged groupings which reflect the internal tensions and power shifts. Wyler makes use of every nuance of composition and mise-en-scène, shooting in deep focus and often using the extended depth of field to make dynamic juxtapositions of far and near, which bring out the contrasts of good and evil, powerful and weak.

The massive plantation home of Horace and Regina serves as the arena for the family's battle. Like a stage set, the house is the locale for much of the film; like a stage set, it has a vast open area on the main floor, with a number of smaller alcoves which can be sectioned off by sliding partition doors. The large and impressive curved staircase leads up to a balcony which wraps completely around the second floor; the stairs and balcony in particular offer many chances for Wyler's dynamic compositions. Most often, it is Davis, playing the evil Regina Giddens with hyperbolic fervour, who uses the upper area; she looks down on the others, framed between the railings or within the curve of the balcony. During conversations, she sometimes climbs a few steps, turns, and from her higher position, delivers her final lines. More than once, her brothers or daughter must stand at the bottom, leaning against the elaborate newel post, as though in supplication while Regina regally towers above them.

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[12]Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination:Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (Yale University Press, 1976), 48.

Again, Davis plays a character who is a powerful woman in a man's world; but as with Scarlett in *Gone With the Wind*, her victory in the end is a hollow one. She has married for money, and it is only money that motivates her. In order to get his fortune and her brothers' business, she lets her husband collapse of heart failure on the staircase, not helping him as he vainly struggles out of his wheelchair and tries to get up to his bedroom to get his medicine. This climactic moment is highlighted by the film's only use of shallow focus. As Regina sits in the foreground, the background, which up until now has remained sharply in focus, goes soft. We see the husband stumbling, flailing, finally slumping over on the stairs, but Regina doesn't react—doesn't even turn around—and their separation is made visual by the highly selective focus.

Once Horace is dead, Regina is able to usurp control of the family business. But the result is that she is isolated. Her brothers, defeated, leave; her daughter, who loved her father dearly, knows that her mother has allowed him to die. "Why was he on the stairs, mother?" she asks meaningfully, before she too exits.

Regina climbs the big staircase and goes to her room. Looking out, she sees the daughter leaving forever. The film's last image is Regina, shot from outside the window, framed by the curtains. As she lets go of the curtain, it closes, an obvious metaphor for the trap she has placed herself in, at the same time that the closing curtain signals that this "theater piece" is through.

To summarize, in these three films, the South is portrayed as a contained world with a highly oppressive set of social conventions and rules. Its values are represented most clearly by the grand homes, and in particular by their opulent staircases, which

symbolically serve as passageways for the powerful women who would break free of patriarchal domination. In all three films the homes are not just 'stagey' environments (melodramatically enhanced) but actual "stages" for the women, whose lives are, to a large extent, *performances*. They are forced by their society to act in a certain way; even when they choose defiance, they are still trapped in a role. And all their performances have tragic conclusions. Scarlett in *Gone With the Wind* is so full of empty, old world values that she can't love, even when it's staring her in the face. By taking the place of her father, she has foregone her 'female' qualities and must live alone. Julie Marsden, in *Jezebel,* defies her society and loses her potential mate, then commits a kind of suicide as a means of redemption. In *The Little Foxes*, Regina does the unnatural—usurps the power of men—and the result is that like Scarlett O'Hara, she is trapped in her station, without a husband or daughter. Subverting all her human values into a 'Southern' desire for control, orderliness, old world manners, Regina ultimately kills the good around her and ends up locked in a tower, alone with her power.

In all three films, we might be tempted to interpret the "message" as a warning, that women should not enter into the affairs of men. If they do, there will surely be consequences—they will be punished for breaking the rules. This sort of reading might see the films as efforts by a male-dominated movie industry to *preserve and protect the patriarchy*. On the other hand, we might also more generously claim that the real message is: the world of men, organized and driven by power and money, is a cruel world indeed. And women, who traditionally have guarded the values of love, family, and those other intangibles, when they attempt to take the roles of men, will quickly show this

world for what it is.

GOTHIC HORROR & THE "AFFLICTED" WOMAN—THE SPIRAL STAIRCASE

"All women begin as victims."[13]

Patriarchal domination is portrayed in a more metaphoric, but also more cruel and uncompromising way in *The Spiral Staircase,* Robert Siodmak's 1949 Gothic thriller. In this film Helen, a young woman afflicted with muteness since an early age, is pitted against a psychotic murderer in a Gothic mansion. In the tradition of the thriller, many characters are presented who may be the killer, but when the truth is finally revealed, the villain turns out to be the young woman's employer, an upper class gentleman.

"The spiral staircase" of the title is only one of several stairways in the film. The opening murder takes place at a hotel with an ornate lobby staircase. And the film's main location, the Gothic family mansion of Professor Warren, features the expected grand staircase. In fact, the spiral staircase is the less elaborate rear stairway, made of metal and intended for use by the servants, since it connects the house's spooky basement with its upper floors.

As I quoted earlier in the introduction to this chapter, Mary Ann Doane points out that *The Spiral Staircase* attaches a great deal of 'affect' or suspense to its staircases. The spiral staircase is kept shrouded in darkness, and as lighting crashes outside, shadows flicker ominously. The house's main staircase is also a source of tension. It contains a large mirror on its landing, and during a bad dream, Helen looks into this mirror and sees a nightmarish vision of herself *without a mouth*—her muteness made visible.

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[13]Haskell, 161.

An afflicted or crippled character like Helen is common to melodrama. In fact, Peter Brooks has gone so far as to suggest that "Blindness is common to the tragic universe, muteness to melodrama."[14] These characters are thus handicapped in their ability to communicate; their weakness an inability to fully express themselves, and the film's decor, lighting, music and other elements must "speak" for them. Of course, given its repetition in countless films, the handicapped female character could be taken as a metaphoric generalization of the plight of all women, caught in the world of men and denied their full identity. In *The Spiral Staircase*, this plight is further manifested in the narrative of murder—Helen's muteness makes her a candidate to be the killer's next victim, since he professes to kill only "weak" women.

The murders take place behind closed doors, but the film is clever in its transference of suspense and emotion to the stairs. In particular the spiral stairs, often associated with film noir[15], become the site of much anxiety and tension as Helen wanders the house, trying to escape death. This seems a common occurrence in the melodrama, at least in those suspenseful thrillers Doane calls the "paranoid woman's films":

> ...the staircase in the paranoid woman's films also (and sometimes simultaneously) becomes the passageway to the "image of the worst" or "screen of the worst," in Bonitzer's terms. In *Dragonwyck*, film noir lighting intensifies the sense of foreboding attached to Gene Tierney's slow climb up the stairs in the attempt to ascertain what her suspicious

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[14]Brooks, 57.

[15]Foster Hirsch points out in fact in his survey of noir films, that a spiral staircase is "a sure sign of chaos". *The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir* (Da Capo Press, 1981), 96.

> husband does in the tower room prohibited to her. Both the title and the mise-en-scene of *The Spiral Staircase* depend on an amplification of the affect attached to this central icon of the genre. In *Sleep My Love*, the space of the house is dominated by three tiers of stairs on or near which the female protagonist is attacked by distorted voices, faints, and is finally hypnotized in her husband's attempt to induce her to murder. What Barbara Stanwyck finally discovers in the room at the top of the stairs in *The Two Mrs. Carrolls* is her own distorted and grotesque portrait, painted by her husband and evidence of his psychotic plan to kill her. The woman's exercise of an active investigating gaze can only be simultaneous with her own victimization. The place of her specularization (the stairway) is transformed into the locus of a process of seeing designed to unveil an aggression against itself.[16]

In the end, ironically, Professor Warren's own invalid mother must rescue Helen, by shooting her own son. And naturally, this climactic event takes place on the stairs.

In *The Spiral Staircase,* Helen's doctor-boyfriend plays the part of an analyst, who wants to bring Helen to a specialist who he hopes will cure her. However, during the course of the film, she is placed in a threatening situation which demands (if she is to survive) that she overcome her muteness. Thus the film's events act as a kind of therapy, a journey which takes her back, much like the doctor attempts to do verbally, to the initial trauma where her parents died in a fire. By naming it, in other words *confronting* it, she can truly put it behind her and be "cured". The physical displacements of the film—her movements through the house, down to the basement, up the stairs toward the darkness, etc.—all have a parallel in her psychological movement toward self-healing.

Situating the film's evil (the serial killer Professor Warren) within the context of his own family and family home also suggests a further psychoanalytical layer. In the film Warren is carrying on the work of his father (some sort of scientific categorizing of

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[16]Doane, 135-136.

animal species) the implication being that his evil has sprang as though inherited from this same source. Killing the weak, in fact, suggests a twisted version of Darwin's "survival of the fittest" theory. (Even his name, Warren, sounds suspiciously like Darwin.) Interestingly, this adds to the hierarchical order the domain of science, and the concept of evolution. If the evolutionary process is viewed as a climb, one would assume that the peak, or top of the scale, will be the most evolved, or most superior organism. *The Spiral Staircase* suggests, with cruelty, that women are considered at the bottom of this scale too. But ironically, the villain in the film is stopped when a woman—his own mother—kills *him.*

THE SACRIFICING MOTHER—MILDRED PIERCE

Society expects, *demands*, even, that mothers make sacrifices for their children. This is a central concern in *Mildred Pierce,* which looks at the noble sacrifice made by a mother and the losses entailed.

Mildred Pierce operates both as a film noir and a family melodrama. A woman puts aside her own happiness, choosing instead an ambitious, "masculine" route to a higher class so that her two girls will have what she feels they deserve. After leaving her low-income husband, Mildred works hard to make a restaurant business into a financial success, marries a bankrupt aristocrat (as though to buy both a venerable old home and a respectable name) and finally is able to give her selfish, grasping daughter Veda everything she demands. However, Mildred's "punishment" for breaking out of the womanly role demanded by society is a cruel, film noir-style murder of her husband—by her daughter, who was having an affair with him!

As mentioned earlier, a common interpretation of melodramas is that they serve as an attempt to "protect the status quo". For example, David N. Meyer, in his survey of film noir, *A Girl and a Gun,* interprets *Mildred Pierce* in much the same way:

> Mildred serves as a cautionary tale for the postwar movement that sought to drive women out of the workplace and back into the kitchen. Her resolute pursuit of success is presented as hardening her, as a waste of nurturing maternal energy. Mildred's constantly repeating trap is that she cannot escape her daughter (who represents Mildred's own repressed "feminine" sexuality), and so must continue to play a man's role.[17]

It is perhaps not unfair to classify *Mildred Pierce* as a deliberate attempt by the Hollywood powers-that-be to scare women out of the work force (where many of them had gone, by necessity, during the war) and back into their submissive role as housewives. Of all the melodramas being discussed here, it is the most conventional, both in terms of its style and its sentiments. Directed by Michael Curtiz, who had earlier directed *Casablanca* (1942), it bears his mark in the complexity of its mise-en-scène, its rich, stylized studio work, and its dramatic intensity; but also its adherence to conventional ideology.

However, regardless of its ultimate "message", the film once again utilizes the staircase as a potent symbol. In fact, since it straddles both the noir and melodrama genres, *Mildred Pierce* makes use of both a spiral staircase (attached to the murder and treated in film noir style) and two other staircases in Mildred's homes, which are in keeping with the melodramatic side of the film. These help communicate Mildred's rise to success, with the small flight in her suburban home giving way later to an immense and

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[17]David N. Meyer, *A Girl and a Gun* (Avon Books, 1998), 181.

grandiose stairway in the Beragon mansion. The first stairway is the site of many of Veda and Mildred's battles. Usually, the conniving daughter stands above Mildred, complaining about their lack of money. The other staircase is in direct contrast, a sign of Mildred's success after her second marriage, when she is a wealthy and powerful entrepreneur.

The grand staircase in the Beragon mansion, so familiar to the melodrama, also creates a deliberate contrast with the spiral staircase in Beragon's beach house, where his murder takes place. Interestingly, we see Mildred go *up* the big staircase at her new home, but she is only shown going *down* the spiral staircase, at the moment when she discovers her daughter with her new husband, and just preceding his murder. Comparing this to the events of the narrative, we see that symbolically the "upward" trajectory of her successful life is reversed and she is "brought down" by the affair/murder.

THE NUCLEAR FAMILY IN EXISTENTIAL CRISIS—REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE

As with the musical genre, the 1950's saw the development of a more ironic, self-aware breed of melodrama, as delivered by directors such as Vincente Minnelli, Nicholas Ray, and Douglas Sirk. A great many of their films looked at the family in general—not just female characters—and situated familial conflicts in the greater context of post-war modern American life.

Perhaps the most archetypal of these is *Rebel Without A Cause*, a film which sympathetically looks at troubled teens trying to cope with what seems an essentially empty future, manifestly aware of the hollowness of their world, and receiving no guidance from their weak, materialistic, and selfish parents. The story follows three

teens, each feeling friendless and alienated from their peers, struggling to make sense of their feelings, and all three dealing with emasculated, emotionless, or absent fathers. James Dean plays Jim Stark, a juvenile deliquent whose father "won't stand up" for anything; Natalie Wood's Judy is a girl whose father has withdrawn his affection now that she has matured; and Sal Mineo is Plato, a wealthy younger boy confused by what might be emerging homosexuality. He is the most troubled of the three, having been raised by a maid while his parents were always absent.

Jim is soon in deep trouble, involved in a knife fight and a game of chicken in which another boy dies. However, he also finds love and friendship with Judy and Plato. The three teens bond with each other during a night of trouble; after hiding out at an abandoned mansion, they are harassed by a gang of hoodlums (friends of the boy who died) looking for revenge, and the night ends with Plato gunned down by the police on the steps of the planetarium. Jim and Judy, however, remain together and the film ends on a hopeful (if ironical) note, with the sun rising (the dawn of a new day) as Jim's father promises to "stand up beside him" in the future.

Rebel Without A Cause is visually striking, shot in Technicolor and in Cinemascope widescreen, and decorated lavishly in fifties fashion. It can be enjoyed as a relatively simple, emotional story about a family in crisis, but the film also places the conflicts in a much larger context, such that Jim Stark's teenaged "angst" becomes a more generalized sort of existential angst and search for meaning that seems highly relevant when placed in the context of its time—with America embroiled in cold war paranoia, the space race, and heading toward a breakdown of traditional social structures including the

family.

This theme of the search for "higher" meaning is supported visually with the film's constant preoccupation with elevations, or "up/down" motifs, including stairs in most of its locations, but also many other elevated settings and an almost constant use of exaggerated high and low camera positions. Some of these elevated settings are relatively minor, such as the shoeshine chairs at the police station. Others have more symbolic resonance, such as the cliffside locale of the "chickie run", where two cars are driven off a cliff into the raging ocean below. The school goes on an outing to the planetarium, where they are shown a presentation about the universe; looking up at the stars, the students listen to a narrator who describes the "triviality" of mankind in the face of such large and eternal forces. When they break in to an abandoned mansion, the three teens end up at the bottom of an empty swimming pool. Last but definitely not least, in terms of elevated settings, a number of the film's most dramatic confrontations are set on staircases—at the police station where we first see Jim being arrested for drunkenness; in the Stark's tasteless suburban home when Jim almost beats his father up; in Plato's home, when the gang chasing him throw him onto the grand staircase; in the abandoned mansion where Plato shoots one of the hoodlums; and finally at the planetarium, where Plato is killed while running down the stone steps.

Ultimately, all the variations of up and down seem to point to the film's take on modern life, suggesting the 'lowliness' of human existence on a cosmic level. During the planetarium show, the speaker says, "Through the infinite reaches of space, the problems of man seem trivial and naive indeed, and man existing alone seems himself an episode of

little consequence." If there is one possible road to salvation, the film suggests, it is love. Throughout the film, Jim shows a number of kindnesses to Plato, who treats him as a replacement for his own non-existent father; Judy seeks love from a father who won't give it, but she finds love with Jim; at the end, Jim's parents accept his relationship with Judy and the four of them seem ready to begin a more loving relationship.

If the film's ultimate statement concerns the value of love, then the most telling sequence is the lengthy part of the film when the three teens hide out in the abandoned mansion. Feeling both unguided and unloved by their own parents, they end up play-acting as a family. Jim and Judy pretend for a while to be rich newlyweds shopping for a home, putting on prissy accents and making fun of their own dysfunctional family situations while descending the house's showy curved staircase. This scene in fact acts as a kind of spoof of the use of stairs in earlier melodramas. "Three million dollars a month?" Judy says as they walk down the stairs, arm in arm, "Oh, we can manage that. I'll scrimp and I'll save and I'll work my fingers to the bone." Plato shows them the empty swimming pool and suggests they use it as a "sunken nursery", where children can be locked in so they never have to be seen. Finally, after lampooning the adult world, the three teens settle in to a kind of domestic idyll, with Judy humming a lullaby until Plato falls asleep at their feet, and Jim tenderly covering him with his coat.

Thomas Schatz claims that "At the narrative-thematic core of family melodramas is a metaphoric search for the ideal husband/lover/father who, as American mythology would have it, will stabilize the family and integrate it into the larger community."[18] In

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[18]Schatz, 235.

Rebel Without A Cause the teens search for this character—their own fathers—longing for stability and integration. But their search is doomed to failure, since their fathers are not prepared to fulfill this role. Both Jim and Judy's fathers are shown to be weak and ineffectual, with satiric imagery. At the police station, Jim's father sits on an elevated shoeshine chair which acts as a mock throne. Quickly, though, we learn that he has no kingly qualities; the next time we see him he is shown wearing an apron and on his knees on the stairway landing, hastily cleaning up spilled soup before his wife sees it. Meanwhile, Judy's father is shown at one point under crossed swords and shield, but he is equally unfit to be a king.

The film's use of stairs relates to these minor 'king' references, of course. Situating many of its moments of crisis on stairways, the film suggests the failure of parents or adults in general to provide guidance, leadership, or love to their young—failure to lead them upward to adulthood, in other words. Seeing Mr. Stark on his hands and knees on the stair landing ("Did you think I was mom?" he asks) is a suggestion that he has abdicated his role of power; he is not fulfilling the role of father as top of the hierarchy. The stairways remind us of the patriarchal ordering of society, but in *Rebel Without A Cause*, the patriarchy is not oppressive—it has failed.

MORE FAMILY FAILURES--FOUR FILMS BY DOUGLAS SIRK

> "The uphill road to failure is a very human thing."
> —Jean-Pierre Melville

Douglas Sirk has long been recognized as an auteur director of the most complex and interesting of the last wave of classic melodramas, and is usually applauded for

smuggling anti-Hollywood thinking in the form of advanced notions about gender relations, criticism of the American dream, and so on, inside his highly stylized productions, which are typically viewed as near spoofs of Hollywood cinema. Recognition of an ironic aspect, or *distancing* in Sirk's work links him to Brecht and other post-modern artists, and did a great deal in the seventies to rescue his work from obscurity. In *Melodrama & Meaning*, Barbara Klinger traces the development of Sirk's auteur status, presenting him as responsible, in large part, for the valorization of melodrama as a genre worthy of study. In particular she cites the extensive interview Sirk did with Jon Halliday—published in 1972 as *Sirk on Sirk*—as an essential step in his recognition as a filmmaker of note:

> ...*Sirk on Sirk* established the primary terms for future treatments of the director. These included melodrama as social commentary, reading below the surface for irony, the false and expedient happy end, the symbolic significance of objects, the idea of self-reflexive style and distanciation, and pertinent themes. Throughout the history of Sirk criticism, Sirk would continue to be a director who manipulated the Hollywood melodrama into performing a social critique of the United States in the 1950s through elaborate structural and stylistic devices.[19]

Like Nicholas Ray, Sirk uses a multi-layered visual approach, wherein no detail of craft is left unattended—or unexploited. Sirk employs stairways (in virtually every one of his films) as a visual metaphor, but it is only one such metaphor within his saturated visual universe, where no car, costume, mirror, window, wineglass or any other detail is randomly placed and all are used to elucidate meaning. In fact, Sirk is decidedly theatrical in his use of mise-en-scène; deriving maximum value from lens choices,

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[19]Klinger, 7.

camera movements, and lighting, but also treating both the space of the set and the actors' placement within it as though it were a stage. In Sirk films, characters position themselves in highly meaningful *tableaux*, and each entrance, crossing, or exit of the set is significant.

As mentioned earlier, Sirk made use of staircases in nearly all his films, often as the location of moments of high drama or narrative crisis, and usually performed in an overdetermined, histrionic style, as was observed by Thomas Elsaesser:

> ...letting-the-emotions-rise and then cringing them suddenly down with a thump is an extreme example of dramatic discontinuity, and a similar, vertiginous drop in the emotional temperature punctuates a good many melodramas -- almost invariably played out against the vertical axis of a staircase.[20]

Sirk was also 'discovered' by feminist critics like Laura Mulvey and Molly Haskell, and championed along with other directors (including Max Ophuls) for highly sympathetic and astute portrayals of female characters and their complex role within our society. While earlier melodramas had seemed to instinctively understand the dual role of women as both heroines and victims, Sirk was able to present this in such sharply etched terms that it seemed new; he also seemed able to precisely indicate the root causes of women's victimization within American culture.

I will focus on four Sirk films which feature stairways in highly prominent ways. Each of the films involves a troubled household, but in very different contexts: *All I Desire* (1953), *There's Always Tomorrow* (1956), *All That Heaven Allows* (1956), and *Written On the Wind* (1956). In these films (as in his other films) Sirk uses staircases as

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[20]Elsaesser, 60.

evocative visual elements, in both spatial and thematic terms.

ALL I DESIRE

All I Desire uses the theater as a metaphor for life. Naomi Murdoch (Stanwyck) has had to leave her husband and children because she had an affair with another man. She has gone to Chicago where she works as a performer in a cheap vaudeville show. However, when her daughter writes to tell her she has a part in the school play, Naomi makes the decision to return to the town. She arrives in style, posing as a successful actress from a European run of Shakespeare.

The film's opening shot announces the theater metaphor, with one of Sirk's trademark dolly shots and using a staircase to metaphorically present Naomi as a 'fallen woman'. The camera first reveals the placard outsideNaomi's theater show, telling us the low-class sort of performances she is doing. It dollies in to pick her up as she comes off the stage, then cranes down, following her as she descends a long staircase to her subterranean dressing rooms. Meanwhile, her voice over creates a parallel, acknowledging the 'descent' of her career.

When Naomi returns to the small town, her family home becomes her theater, and Sirk treats the space as though it were a stage. The stairs, which run up to a balcony stretching across the house and looking down on the living room, give Sirk opportunities of all sorts, and he takes advantage of each of them. There are many dramatic entrances and departures; almost every scene begins, in fact, with a character entering via the stairs. Many dramatic revelations are made with one character on the stairs, higher than the other. Often other characters watch the scene from the balcony or through the railings.

When Naomi and her husband argue on the night of her arrival, the camera is situated on the balcony above, a single railing dividing the frame in half—and metaphorically separating the two characters. During the opening night party after her daughter's stage debut, Naomi entertains everyone by reciting Shakespeare's sonnet "How do I love thee?" while descending the stairs from the balcony, the lights dimmed for dramatic effect. Finally, the staircase has an unusual feature—it goes up to the balcony, but at the landing another flight runs down to the kitchen, and even this "rear" set of stairs is also made use of on occasion, with the servants sitting in the kitchen beside the stairs, commenting on the actions of the family. They serve almost as a 'chorus', an outside presence which can sit in judgement and help to guide the viewers' interpretations.

THERE'S ALWAYS TOMORROW

There's Always Tomorrow presents as bleak a look at mid-life crisis as can be found in the cinema. Fred MacMurray plays Clifford Groves, a successful toy manufacturer who is clearly frustrated with his familial responsibilities. After several chance meetings with Norma (Barbara Stanwyck), someone who once worked for him and was in love with him, he begins to think about an affair. However, she rejects his advances and sends him back to his wife and family—the life he himself chose, she reminds him. In the film's final scene, he and his wife have a drink on their balcony. He looks up as a jet flies overhead, carrying Norma back to New York, we presume. "Come inside, dear," his wife says, "It's getting cold."

Groves looks wistfully at the sky, then follows her into the bedroom, the look on his face telling us that however warm and comfortable they may be, a loving wife and

family won't entirely do away with the frustration of unfulfilled desires. The film's final shot, from the point of view of the annoying teenagers downstairs, frames Groves at the top of the stairs, behind the bars of the staircase railing, looking every bit as trapped as he feels.

Working in black and white and with a slightly less over-the-top style than his colour films, Sirk nevertheless uses every detail of the mise-en-scène to help construct his characters, and to frame the difficult choice MacMurray makes. Even the choice of toy manufacturer as his occupation resonates: we could think of the toys as his earlier dreams which have been left behind, or the irony of a man who designs objects for play who himself feels so entirely unable to 'play'.

To help us visualize Groves' internal struggle, Sirk uses two staircases, one in each of the film's principle locations. The first, in the family's well-to-do home, is the site of much activity as the family bustles about. Located in what appears to be the center of the house (certainly it is the center of the frame most of the time), the staircase leads obviously to the bedrooms upstairs but these are never shown. Instead, Groves is stationed at the bottom trying to talk to his wife and children as they rush back and forth. In fact, he is made to seem an outsider by being kept off the stairs, and behind the bars of its railing.

By comparison there is a spiral staircase at his office, somewhat unusual for a business office, and strikingly different from the one in the house. This staircase leads up to his toy laboratory—a room we might consider in symbolic terms as housing his desires. He brings Norma up here to reminisce, and the feelings he had for her re-emerge,

like dreams from the past. These moments are shot, significantly, with the camera on the floor below, so that the characters climb upward out of the frame.

If keeping off the stairs while the family go about their business makes him seem disconnected, keeping the bedrooms hidden from our view creates an even stronger impression that Groves and his wife have no sex life. On the other hand, the film privileges his upstairs toy room, bringing us into it on more than one occasion. Sharing this private sanctuary with Norma has the added effect of sexualizing the space—it, rather than the bedroom he must share with his wife, holds his sexual desires.

ALL THAT HEAVEN ALLOWS

Unrepressed sexual desires play a major role in *All that Heaven Allows* and again staircases help make them visual. Jane Wyman plays a bored widow who begins a romance with her gardener, much to the disapproval of her two teenaged children, everyone in the small town in which they live, and especially her dead husband, whose memory hangs over her head like a black cloud, controlling her even from the grave. The film makes less fuss about the gardener's age (he is younger than her) than his class (he's a common labourer). In fact, the film sets up Kirby as an idealized natural man, reading Walden and living a life more in harmony with nature, especially when contrasted with the 'petite bourgeoise' townspeople.

Sirk heightens this contrast, using many overlapping visual indicators to expose the pretensions of Cary's class-conscious neighbours and dislikable children. For example, when they go to an impromptu dinner party at his friends, Cary Scott (Wyman) and Ron Kirby (Hudson) drink cheap red wine in basket-covered bottles, natural and

earthy compared to the martinis and highballs favoured at her Country Club. Kirby drives a sensible-looking car with wood-panelled sides (it's natural and earthy, as befits a gardener), while Scott and her catty friends all drive big impressive Buicks. Most importantly, he lives in a converted river mill, complete with picturesque water wheel, the entire building and grounds screaming out earthy and natural when compared to her swank 1950's suburban home.

Both homes contain staircases, naturally, and the two continue the visual metaphor. While hers is an ornate suburban staircase, rising up in two sections separated by a landing, and the railing is black wrought iron, it leads to emptiness: a bed without a husband. (Her two children contribute to her feeling of emptiness, as they are young adults no longer living at home.) Meanwhile Kirby's converted mill has a straight and simple wood stair with no railing—not much more than a ladder which goes directly up to only a bedroom.

Once again the upper spaces are for the most part kept off-limits, but again they exude a powerful aura of sexuality. In at least one shot, when her teenage son lectures her disapprovingly, we see the stairs in the background, but Cary is physically blocked from the stairs by a translucent screen. When we are allowed into her bedroom, it is shown as tasteful but cold: a bed without a husband. Meanwhile, the camera never enters Ron's bedroom, but it is clearly presented as the locus of her desire for him; in their scenes together at the mill it is often visible, the wood stairs presented straight-on in long shot so we can see the room above. It is even the background for the couple's first kiss, when a bird startles Cary and she tumbles from the steps into Ron's arms.

Altogether, Sirk's myriad visual details serve to reinforce the film's central conflict, that of the woman's powerlessness against the social conventions that would keep her forever trapped. The film combines her wealthy home, car, correct children, society, husband's memory, into one large, oppressive force. And Kirby, the man she wants, may be completely wrong according to every standard imposed by the oppressors, but he is painted by the film as natural—in other words the true choice as it was meant to be in nature. This is highlighted in an ironic, almost satiric way by the appearance of a deer outside the big picture window in the film's closing scene.

WRITTEN ON THE WIND

Written On the Wind is perhaps Sirk's most entertaining and powerful film, and not surprisingly, it also features the most impressive staircase to be found in any of his set designs. In this film, Robert Stack and Dorothy Malone play Kyle and Mary Lee Hadley, heirs to an oil fortune, and their tortured world is represented by a barren landscape of oil wells and dusty plains. Most evocative though, is the garish Texas mansion they live in, a modernized version of a neo-Grecian home, mixing Ionic columns with red brick walls. Inside, a long entrance hall leads to a spectacular curved staircase, with the stairs winding down in a spiral shape to end on a patterned floor so that the whole ensemble from above looks like a spider's web. Are Rock Hudson and Lauren Bacall's characters 'caught' in the web? This is our general impression as they are the 'normal' couple set against the dysfunctional Hadley siblings.

The film associates the staircase most particularly with Mary Lee Hadley, whose problem is that she is a nymphomaniac, supposedly using her sexual rebellion as a cry for

help (she really wants Rock Hudson's "Mitch Wayne" but can't have him). In many scenes she is portrayed as a nefarious 'black widow', plotting revenge against the others, and the spider-web staircase is used constantly. (During the courtroom scenes, after Kyle's death, we even see Mary Lee in a black "widow" outfit.) A number of times we see her sashaying seductively to her room; a few other times poised halfway up, like a spider on a web, watching the goings on below with amusement.

The most dramatic instance is the film's cross-cutting of her lurid dance of sexual frustration with her father's death of a heart attack—while he is climbing the stairs. The Freudian implications of this are obvious to the point of being laughable, especially if we remember Freud's interpretation of climbing a staircase in a dream as a symbol of copulation. The father's heart attack seems to be a response to the humiliation of Mary Lee being brought home from a motel by the police; we can make the link therefore that she 'killed him with sex'. And the man with whom she really wants to have sex (she dances wantonly with his picture) is Mitch Wayne, who is her father's surrogate son (who he prefers over his own son). The sexual implications in the father-daughter relationship are finalized in the film's concluding image, as Mary Lee holds (and strokes lovingly) a model oil derrick, while a large portrait of her father holding the same oil derrick looms on the wall above her. With his keen sense of Brechtian irony, Sirk mixes Marxist notions about capitalist culture with Freudian psychoanalysis. Are the Hadleys sexually dysfunctional precisely because they are rich? Mary Lee's machiavellian plotting has brought her to this chair, replacing her father as head of the family empire, but as in the earlier melodramas, this unnatural act has required her to reject familial and humanistic

values. Again Sirk seems to endorse and satirize at the same time, with an outrageously colourful and hyperbolic style masking what upon reflection is a very thorough and sober thesis.

Barbara Klinger, in *Melodrama & Meaning*, uses Sirk in order to examine how academia, the film industry, review journalism, star publicity, and the media create meaning for films. She outlines how Sirk films have been viewed historically in six different ways, as "adult" films, as "Hollywood trash", as classic Hollywood masterworks, as subversive criticisms of U.S. bourgeois ideology, as gender-defining vehicles, and as camp. Interestingly, the staircase serves as a primary generator of meaning in all cases.

As mentioned earlier, Universal-International considered the stairway as part of the film's 'spectacle appeal' and mentioned it in press copy as "the most often used stairway in film colony history." They went on to say that "stairs and sex appeal go together, that curves seem curvier as the owner ascends with well-modulated swing and sway..." and that Dorothy Malone and the stairs were "made for each other."[21] This went along with what Barbara Klinger suggests was the studio-promoted "meaning" of the film: racy, adult-themed material suited to the late 1950's loosening attitudes.[22]

In addition, recognition of the film as the epitome of Hollywood studio style produces contrasting interpretations of *Written on the Wind* as either a "classic" or "overblown trash". In either case, the staircase is a fundamental element, standing out so prominently as it does in the hyper-designed decor. In addition, the long "history" of

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[21]Quoted by Barbara Klinger in *Melodrama & Meaning,* 60.

[22]Klinger, 36-41.

stairways in both melodrama and other genres also gives *Written on the Wind's* garish staircase an easily read, iconographic status which makes it part of the film's camp appeal.

Finally, in terms of either political or gender-defining capacities, the staircase is also crucial. It's relation to a psychoanalytical reading of the film is unmistakable, acting as what Thomas Elsaesser terms "fetishistic fascinations"[23]. The curving staircase is associated with both the Hadley offspring and their sexual problems. In fact, the political and the sexual are brought together in the film, with the staircase representing the family's wealth and power, which seems finally to be the specific source of their malaise.

Stairs in all these Sirk films thus evoke a fundamental duality, or enigma: the top of the hierarchy, in materialist or power terms, is incompatible with the higher human values—romantic or familial love, sexual pleasure, spiritual fulfillment which could also be thought of as the top of the scale. The stairway stands ominously in the background, reminding us of the 'paradise' that awaits the characters above. But these pleasures are denied, precisely because of the oppressiveness of the social structures.

For all its cheerfulness, *All I Desire* leaves Naomi living in a small town populated by narrow-minded and vindictive neighbours, and with a daughter who despises her. How will she be happy? Likewise, the "pasted on" happy ending of *All That Heaven Allows* does little to outweigh the negative social forces that have weighed down so heavily on the characters. How will anything be different for Carey now that she chooses Ron Kirby? Her children and the townspeople will still be against her, and there isn't even any indication that she's grown in strength or determination in order to deal

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[23]Elsaesser, 10.

with it. At the end of *There's Always Tomorrow*, Groves is shown upstairs with his wife, but rather than presenting this as the attainment of happiness, the final shot makes him look just as trapped as he did at the beginning. Finally, in *Written on the Wind*, the "straight characters" have escaped the tortured world of the Hadleys, but Kyle is dead, and Mary Lee has now inherited all that her father found dear (money)—and lost everything else.

Meanwhile the stairs also play their part in evoking the characters' status and wealth, are called upon to symbolically stand in for a spider's web or the bars of a jail, serve as a stage on which characters display themselves, and often loom ominously in the rear of Sirk's deep focus compositions, where they can emanate the aura of all these things simultaneously. In a world where capitalist and class pretensions are juxtaposed with sexual dysfunction and repression, their aura is significant. Earlier melodramas showed characters in the midst of trying to fulfill their desires, trapped forever 'on the stairs', but Sirk's film go the distance. His characters try and fail—and wind up truly at the 'bottom of the stairs'.

CONCLUSION: THE MELODRAMATIC LEGACY

What is the legacy of the classic melodrama? As the Hollywood studio system broke down, melodrama found a new home on television, in afternoon and later prime time soap operas which serialized and suspended melodramatic plots into an endless series of romantic and familial crises, using the overblown acting style and filmic

treatment of the Hollywood films. *Dallas* and *Dynasty*,[24] among the most well-known of the later TV soaps, seem to have grown directly out of Sirk's *Written on the Wind.* Staircases continued to appear in these productions, though with television's reduced screen size they receded somewhat in importance.

Within the cinema, the melodrama left its mark, and the style Peter Brooks referred to as "the melodramatic imagination" has coloured films of many genres and in the works of many countries. In such films, stairways continue to appear and their iconic status seems not to have lessened in effectiveness. James Cameron's *Titanic*, for example, addresses many of the same thematic concerns of the early melodramas—a feisty young woman oppressed by the pressures of her aristocratic status falls in love with someone out of her station. During the telling of his tale, Cameron employs the grand staircase of Titanic's ballroom in much the same way as William Wyler or Robert Siodmak might have employed it. Jack's introduction to Rose's high society world begins on those showy stairs; in a dramatic moment Rose is 'put on a pedestal', a few stairs above Jack as he takes her hand and kisses it. ("I saw that in a Nickelodeon once," he tells her.) In their quest for survival the third-class passengers (as well as Rose and Jack) must fight their way up the metal staircases from the lower decks in order to get off the sinking ship—metaphorically trying to overcome their status as downtrodden or disempowered poor. And apart from the stairs, elevation is a dominant motif, from Rose's first appearance climbing the ship's gangplank to the moment when she and Jack cling to the

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[24]Prime-time American TV series *Dallas* ran in various versions from 1978 to 1991; *Dynasty* from 1981 to 1991.

uppermost rail, as the ship poises vertically, before its plunge to the bottom. Finally, the older Rose climbs up onto the railing of the salvage ship, looking up at the stars before throwing the immense gem (symbol of the wealth of the aristocracy, the wealth which would have dragged her down) into the depths of the ocean.

If 'disaster' films like *Titanic, The Towering Inferno* (1974), and the *Airport* series (1970-79) are one area where melodrama still thrives, it is no surprise to find motifs of elevation (and often, stairways) still in use. As with Cameron's film, the same conceptual interests are still at the heart of these films, higher human values versus the rigid dictates of society, materialism and power.

An examination of family dynamics still forms the basis for many dramatic films, and here too, because their principal settings are often the family home, we will find the iconic status of stairs intact. Films like *Terms of Endearment* (1983), *Ordinary People* (1980), and *In the Bedroom* (2001) use their domestic spaces in a metaphoric way, with the stairs playing a role not unlike those in early melodramas. There are also romances, whether serious or comedic: the remake of *Father of the Bride* (1991), *Meet Joe Black* (1998), *Death Becomes Her* (1992), *She-Devil* (1989), *When Harry Met Sally* (1989), *A Family Man* (2000). All of these make use of domestic staircases in key scenes and with the inherited power of the classic Hollywood melodramas. Francis Ford Coppola is a contemporary American director whose work often has a melodramatic flair. Typically combining complex mise-en-scène with a highly mobile camera, Coppola makes intricate and powerful use of stairways in his epic *Godfather* series, as well as *One From the Heart* (1982), *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1993), *Tucker: A Man and his Dream* (1990) and even

his "throw-away" family comedy, *Jack* (1996).

Recent British films, which might be classified as 'realist' dramas, have continued their consideration of the state of the family, using the narrow staircases in their working class homes to symbolically strengthen their themes. Mike Leigh's *Secrets and Lies* (1996) and Mark Herman's *Little Voice* (1998) are two good examples, but there are no doubt many more. Spain's Pedro Almódovar, who claims that he's seen *Written on the Wind* a thousand times and "can't wait to see it again,"[25] takes Sirk's hyperbolic style in new directions. Stairways often play an important part in his colourful productions, as in the final scene of his *All About My Mother* (1999). A look at the melodramatic films of other nations might show similar consistency, with expected cultural variations.

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[25]quoted by Roger Ebert in his review of *"Written on the Wind"*, *The Great Movies* (Broadway Books, 2002) 511.

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK

I Confess, 1952

THE STAIR MASTER

CHAPTER FIVE: ALFRED HITCHCOCK—THE STAIR MASTER

> "The staircase pervades (Hitchcock's) films--as a household location, a site of ordeal, and a model for moral change."[1]

I have shown how a staircase can be a location of great power, drawing as it does on layers of meaning from both real-world and cinematic applications. I have also shown how stairs in a film set can provide multiple opportunities, a repertoire of usefulness ranging from spatial to narrative to thematic, as well as some more basic aesthetic implications that are far-reaching. I have looked in detail at two classic Hollywood genres, the musical and the melodrama, where stairways were so often present in the set design, and used in such characteristic ways, that they achieved iconic status. A look at some other genres might show similar results: gangster and horror films come to mind, for example.

What also has become apparent is that some individual auteurist directors have been or continue to be attracted to stairways as a motif in their work. As we saw in the musical genre, Busby Berkeley and Vincente Minnelli were two such directors; in the melodrama, William Wyler and Douglas Sirk exhibited a similar predilection. And it seems that other directors working elsewhere, including Orson Welles, Billy Wilder, Roman Polanski, Max Ophüls, Bernardo Bertolucci, and others have repeatedly incorporated stairways in their set designs and used them to great advantage on both stylistic and thematic levels.

No director, however, seems as predisposed toward staircases as Alfred

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[1]David Thomson, "The Art of the Art Director," *American Film* (Feb. 1977), 18.

Hitchcock. The first shot in Hitchcock's first feature, *The Pleasure Garden* (1927), follows a group of chorus girls up an elaborate spiral staircase; the last scene in his last film, *Family Plot* (1976), ends with a character climbing a staircase, then sitting down on the steps and winking at the camera. Meanwhile, staircases of one sort or another appear in almost all of the forty-nine feature films in between, running like a musical theme, appearing and reappearing, sometimes a few notes, sometimes a fully stated melody.

In an interview with Charles Thomas Samuels, Hitchcock was asked about the many staircases which appear in his films, and explained with a characteristically glib reply that he thought a staircase was "very photogenic"[2]. A quick survey through his work, however, will convince anyone that there was much more to it than that. Stairs appear in dozens of Hitchcock films, and while yes, they are very photogenic and usually photographed with loving care, they are also very often the site of intense and crucial narrative moments, moments of suspense, suspicion, revelation, fear, murder.

Many of Alfred Hitchcock's comments about himself or his work are well-known, widely circulated, and almost enshrined in popular lore. For example, his line that actors should be treated like cattle, or his assertion that he rarely looked through the camera, having worked out the film on paper in such detail that it was unnecessary, or his comment that the only symbol to be found in *North by Northwest* (1959) is "the train going into the tunnel after the love scene."[3] These remarks, dispersed rather adroitly by

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[2]Charles Thomas Samuels, *Encountering Directors* (Da Capo Press, 1972) 239.

[3]Jean Domarchi and Jean Douchet, "Entretien avec Alfred Hitchcock," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 44 (February 1955), 28. Hitchcock went on to say, "The train is a phallic symbol. But don't tell anyone." Translation: Lahcen Hassad and Darlene Sadlier.

Hitchcock in the interests of self-promotion, have had the effect, certainly with the general public, of perpetuating the simplified myths surrounding his films and working methods.

For those 'in the know', those off-handed remarks were usually taken to be ironic, and few serious critics failed to detect the arched eyebrows that likely accompanied their delivery ("The train going into the tunnel is the only symbolic shot." Ho ho!) Hitchcock seemed to enjoy playing with interviewers, sometimes choosing to make light of serious matters like symbolism, sometimes choosing to shock ("actors should be treated like cattle"), and often attempting to set himself apart from other filmmakers by suggesting his methods were radically different from theirs ("I never bother to look through the camera"). As has been pointed out by revisionist historian Bill Krohn, the remarks have led many of us astray, for just like his grossly simplified reputation as "the master of suspense", they often work to mask a greater humanity, a much deeper interest in the process of filmmaking, and a more layered approach to the art of cinema in general.[4]

Thus, to return to Hitchcock's comment that stairs are very photogenic: first of all, we can take his remark at face value. It's true that much of what Hitchcock pointed his camera at was "photogenic," whether the many picturesque locations all over the world, or the stunning interior sets of films like *Rebecca*, *Under Capricorn* (1949), and *To Catch a Thief* (1955). In his interview for *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Hitchcock told Jean Domarchi

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[4]Bill Krohn, *Hitchcock At Work* (Phaidon Press Limited, 2000), 9-17. Krohn defuses many of these myths with meticulous evidence drawn from interviews with cast and crew, and production documents of all sorts.

and Jean Douchet, "It's always necessary to have striking settings in the film."[5] Even a cursory glance at his films will prove this to be true, and it accounts in no small part for the success of his films at the level of entertainment—they are usually quite pleasing to look at.

Stairways, too, are sometimes quite pleasing to look at, and so often figure in these striking production designs. Beyond this, they help to make the sets more complex, enlarging them visually and facilitating characters' entrances from above, below, or in the rear of the compositions. All this is the case even in those films where stairs appear but do not play a significant role: early ones like *Rich and Strange* (1932) or *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), as well as later films like *The Wrong Man* (1956) or *To Catch A Thief.* Elegant staircases also serve as synechdotal details within the overall set, which help to signify the status of wealthy or powerful characters. This is the case with *Rebecca, Suspicion, Notorious, North by Northwest,* and many others.

On the other hand, like trains and "cool blondes" (two other details Hitchcock found photogenic), stairs are also undeniable symbols of much greater significance in many of his films. Of course, one could argue that any number of innocuous details—cars, houses, trees—appear repeatedly in films, and therefore it might be argued, have symbolic value. But obviously this is not the case.

William Rothman, in *Hitchcock—The Murderous Gaze*, talks about symbols in his analysis of *The Lodger* (1927):

Placing symbolically charged objects in the frame is a means of expression

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[5]Domarchi and Douchet, 26.

> first systematically exploited, in film, by Griffith. Griffith's trees, flowers, garden paths, fences, and rivers are symbols with conventional connotations. Yet as they appear in film after film, they pick up connotations that make them private symbols as well, intimately embedded within the entirety of Griffith's work. In Hitchcock's films, lamps have their conventional association with enlightenment, with literal and metaphorical vision: it is in the light cast by this lamp, after all, that the truth about the lodger will be revealed. But lamps become such a familiar feature of the Hitchcock world and the Hitchcock frame that they too become private symbols, yet another signature of Hitchcock's authorship.[6]

Thus Rothman suggests that Hitchcock utilizes objects with previously established symbolic import, but further invests them with value in his own individual repertoire of imagery.

How does Hitchcock signal that an object within the narrative has greater value than simply *as itself*? That it *represents* a larger idea? If the object does not have connotative qualities on its own (trains and tunnels, for example, certainly have had suggestive sexual implications beyond their use in *North by Northwest*), and even if it does, this will typically be accomplished not just by the object's repeated appearance (although that may be part of the strategy), but also by its positioning within the composition. The famous monogrammed cigarette lighter of *Strangers on a Train,* for example, is handled and talked about, then shown in several closeups, which draws our attention to it. By the time it is used in the murder and slips into the role of what Hitchcock referred to as the "MacGuffin", it is already invested with a wealth of meaning far beyond its status as an ordinary prop.

Hitchcock was also attracted to "z-axis" compositions, with the subject or action

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[6]Rothman, 34.

moving directly toward or away from the camera. This has the effect first of all of giving the shot a dynamic quality (since depth perspective is most pronounced), but it also links objects in space, lining them up one behind the other and often with the result of drawing attention to their relationship. At its most superficial, this will produce a shot like the ones where a villain seems to appear from nowhere in the frame, showing up behind a character who does not yet see them. But more importantly, it is often used to give foreground or background objects ominous weight: the telephone looming in the foreground in *Dial M for Murder* (1954), the ferris wheel turning behind Bruno's head in *Strangers on a Train,* the stairs in *Suspicion* which cut across the foreground or background in scenes showing Lina McLaidlaw's desire for—and then her grave misgivings about—her husband Johnnie.

Another tactic used by Hitchcock to create symbolic meaning is by associating the object in question with particular moments in the narrative, often emotional high points or climaxes which by their very nature attract our full attention. In terms of Hitchcock's use of stairs, it is this last point that is most convincing of all.

In *The Hitchcock Romance*, Leslie Brill points out that Hitchcock often matches important moments in his films with "important" stylistic treatment.[7] This will often involve set designs of an extravagant nature, but also the addition of music, expressionistic lighting, montage style cutting, exaggerated subjectivity, and elaborate camera movements, especially those involving cranes.

The plot of *Vertigo*, for example, hinges entirely around a character's fear of

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[7]Brill, 18.

heights, and required the building of a gigantic sideways staircase in studio in order to accomplish its "vertiginous" point of view shots, the famous "zoom out-dolly in" shot. The "key" moment in *Notorious* (to make a bad pun) is for most people the virtuoso crane movement that starts as a long shot of a party taken from the second floor balcony, then descends gracefully down the curved staircase to end on a tight closeup of a key in Ingrid Bergman's hand. A similar shot in *Shadow of a Doubt* follows Charlie (Theresa Wright) down the stairs and moves closer to reveal her murderous uncle's ring on her finger, proof that she knows his secret. Yet again, in *Psycho,* as Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) climbs the stairs of his spooky family home, the camera tracks behind him, then simultaneously twists and cranes upward to end with a view straight down the stairwell as he carries his mother out. This is our first look at Norman's mother, no doubt handled in this way in order to preserve our sense of mystery—the long fluid take puts emphasis on the moment, while the high angle at the conclusion keeps us from finding out that she is, in fact, *dead.* In *Frenzy*, when the infamous "tie murderer" invites Babs (Anna Massey) into his apartment, the camera ominously backs up, tracking backward down the stairs and out the door into the noisy market, a single take which actually required some studio trickery to be accomplished.

This important treatment is not reserved for staircases, of course; but as I will show, staircases are often reserved for these special moments. And using a combination of the strategies I mention above—repetition, positioning in the frame, stylistic extravagance—Hitchcock makes staircases symbolic and highly privileged locations.

In this final chapter, looking in detail at four Hitchcock films and supported by a

number of others, I will show how Hitchcock made stairs a distinctive and highly personal symbol, relating in a coherent way to his favoured themes. I will show how in Hitchcock's films a staircase is truly as John Templer described, "art object, structural idea, manifestation of pomp and manners, behavioral setting, controller of our gait, political icon, legal prescription, poetic fancy, or the locus of an epidemic of cruel and injurious falls".[8]

STAIRS IN HITCHCOCK: SOME GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

There's a moment early in *Stage Fright* (1950) when Charlotte (Marlene Deitrich) arrives at the apartment of her lover, Jonathan Cooper (Richard Todd), and climbing the staircase up to his apartment, breathlessly tells him she thinks her husband is trying to kill her. Stopping in mid-step, she tells him, "I was out of my mind with fear." It's just a performance on her part, of course—the character is a duplicitous actress and this is the beginning of a nefarious plot—*Stage Fright* is, after all, one of those Hitchcock films that makes a metaphor of acting and the theater. But at the same time, the line puts into words a common Hitchcock emotional state. In his films, characters are often 'out of their minds', and as it turns out, as here, this state is often shown to us while they are on the stairs. Stairways are recurringly associated with emotional high points of fear, suspicion, or mystery—sometimes all three at once.

FEAR

The fear in Hitchcock films is usually fear of murder. Starting with *The Lodger* (and echoed by *Frenzy*, almost fifty years later), Hitchcock repeatedly associated

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[8]John Templer, *The Staircase: History and Theories*, x-xi.

staircases with serial killers.[9] In *Psycho*, Martin Balsam's private investigator character Arbogast is killed by Norman (a serial killer) on the stairs. In *Topaz* (1969), a Cuban revolutionary (John Vernon) kills his mistress after she makes a dramatic entrance down the fancy stairs of her Spanish mansion. In *Shadow of a Doubt*, Uncle Charlie (another serial killer, played by Joseph Cotton) tries to kill his niece by booby-trapping the stairs of her family home. In *Torn Curtain* (1966) (another of those theater-metaphor films) someone tries to kill Professor Michael Armstrong (Paul Newman) by tripping him as he's running down the stairs to the lobby. In *Strangers on a Train*, Guy (Farley Granger) bravely walks down the wood-panelled stairway of the Anthony's Arlington mansion with his back to Bruno (Robert Walker), a psychotic killer who is holding a gun on him.

As a result of this repetition, stairs come to operate as a potent signifier of fear, perhaps so much so that in a film like *The Wrong Man*, where no murder or violent crime ever takes place, the appearance of stairs in the Balastrero family home acts upon us with an unsettling effect.

SUSPICION

As for suspicion, there are a number of Hitchcock films which play upon the "paranoid woman" strain of melodrama which was mentioned earlier. However, while Mary Ann Doane talked about these female characters "penetrating space alone", as in *The Spiral Staircase*, Hitchcock plays with the formula; the staircase may bring to mind

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[9]Rothman, 352. In his notes Rothman refers to the image of the staircase as "charged", but does not make an attempt at interpretation. In his notes he says "I am tempted to say that *The Lodger*'s staircase, and not just a staircase similar to it, reappears in Hitchcock film after Hitchcock film."

these melodramatic associations while it is actually being used in other variations. There is, for example, a Hitchcock film appropriately called *Suspicion* which contains one of his most memorable staircase scenes. In the film, Lina McLaidlaw (Joan Fontaine) is driven to distraction by the thought that her gambling, lying, layabout husband Johnnie Aysgarth (Cary Grant) may also be a murderer. Early in the film, the stairway in her wealthy family home is continually shown during scenes revealing her desire for him (against her parents' wishes). But once they are married, the curved stairway in their own opulent Georgian home becomes associated with her suspicions about her husband. As she becomes increasingly convinced of his guilt, the film mirrors her obsession with increasingly moody compositions, using unusual curved shadows produced by the big fanlight window. These curved lines fall over the equally curvacious stairs to create menacing 'webs' of dark and light. This woman is never shown climbing the stairs. Instead, the peak moment of the character's anxiety comes when she thinks her husband might be planning to murder her, and he approaches, climbing slowly up to her room, the staircase shrouded in gloom, but the potentially poisoned glass of milk on a tray glowing as though it's lit from within.

Torn Curtain also features a woman, Sarah Sherman (Julie Andrews) who is suspicious of her fiance, (Newman), and for that portion of the film when she is in doubt about his activities, stairs are omnipresent. It seems that each time she looks wonderingly at him from a distance, there are stairs in the background of the image. Again, although the female character is not "penetrating space alone", Hitchcock is able to import the staircase and its symbolic associations but put it to work in a highly individualized way.

MYSTERY

In Hitchcock, stairs are also associated with mystery. In most of the films mentioned above, characters work to free themselves from wrongful accusations, find the killer, or discover some hidden secret. This is the central quest of most Hitchcock plots, whether it's a police investigation or a psychoanalytic investigation (often they function in the same way, uncovering the truth as a means to restoring innocence in both legal and psychic terms). Therefore, even when fear of death is not the issue (or sometimes, even in spite of it), another dominant stairway image in Hitchcock may be, in contradiction to my previous comments, a character "penetrating space alone", as they head up or down stairs in search of the answer to a mystery. In the remake of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956), while his wife (Doris Day) sings "Que Sera Sera", Jimmy Stewart searches for their missing son, at one point slowly climbing the big embassy stairs. The final pieces to the puzzle in *Marnie* (1964) fall into place during the cathartic return to her mother's home, and take place on the stairs. Curiously, *The 39 Steps* (1935) is a film with no real significant use of stairway settings; however, the title itself fulfills a similar function. In order to clear himself of the accusation of murder, and save himself from a violent death, Richard Hannay (Robert Donat) must go directly into danger, by attempting to infiltrate the gang of spies called "the 39 steps." In *Family Plot*, there's a self-parodying quality to the final scene, when the phony psychic (Barbara Harris) solves the mystery by climbing the stairs to find the missing diamond on the chandelier. "You're not a fake!" her boyfriend enthuses (actually, she is).

Jean Funck, in *Positif,* talks about all these powerful emotions which Hitchcock associates with stairs. In his brief study of "the functions and significance of stairs in the cinema of Alfred Hitchcock", he claims that

> Stairs, whether they are ascended or descended, generally lead, in Alfred Hitchcock's films, to certain trouble... The stairway, in itself a neutral object, becomes the incarnation of the inquisitive spirit of those whose curiosity is going to cost them... desire becomes both symbolised and, dangerously, exalted.[10]

Hitchcock's own self-avowed goal was, he told Domarchi and Douchet, "to make the spectator suffer"[11]. He was able to accomplish this most intensely at times of high suspense, through our sympathy for characters driven by fear, suspicion, or this inquisitive spirit that is "going to cost them". This spirit, which we could legitimately also label *desire*, is contrasted with its polar opposite—apprehension, or fear, making the rise or descent of a staircase an ambiguous and vulnerable moment for a character, and by extension, for the audience. The end result for the viewers is almost always a feeling of dread. We share the character's anguish, and feel it most keenly as they climb:

> The stair, and this is where it gains its impact, dramatically visualizes, in its elevation, the approach by the character of the dangerous place; it becomes a visual metaphor for the spectator's anguish rising in successive degrees... The spectator's impotency, based on sympathy, appears when the character enters a stairway that represents the frontier beyond which security does not exist, at which moment enters the irreversibility, a sort of edge of the chasm skilfully disguised in an elevation.[12]

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[10]Funck, 31.

[11]Domarchi, Douchet, 28.

[12]Funck, 35.

THE DUALITY OF STAIRS

Toward the end of Hitchcock's career, he began returning again and again to a particular character type—the so-called "cool blonde", as typified by Grace Kelly but repeated in Tippi Hedren, Eva Marie Saint, and Kim Novak. Hitchcock indicated in a number of interviews what might have been some of the underlying reasons for his obsession with the cool blonde character:

> "Suspense," he said that year (1957), is like a woman. The more left to the imagination, the more the excitement. ...The conventional big-bosomed blonde is not mysterious. And what could be more obvious than the old black velvet and pearls type? The perfect "woman of mystery" is one who is blonde, subtle and Nordic."[13]

On more than one occasion Hitchcock referred to "what such a woman might do in the back of a taxi". Clearly, Hitchcock liked a reserved, controlled elegance on the exterior—upper class, expensive, designed—but fantasized that lurking beneath was a torrid sexuality or passion. The scene in *To Catch A Thief,* where Grace Kelly talks to Cary Grant about the jewels she's wearing, illustrates this perfectly. "Look, John, hold them... ever had a better offer in your life?" They are really discussing her body, and sex; the line between the reserve of social propriety and an unbridled release of passion is a fine line indeed.

Curiously, stairs may very well play a similar role in Hitchcock's visual iconography. As mentioned earlier, stairs heighten or accentuate the vulnerability of a character—as she descends the stairs of Manderley in *Rebecca*, Joan Fontaine is getting

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[13]Quoted by Donald Spoto, *The Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock* (Little, Brown & Co, 1983), 398.

closer and closer to her husband, but the dress she's wearing to surprise him will only plunge him (and consequently, her) deeper into despair. During the "poisoned milk" moment in *Suspicion*, Lina is pushed to the limits of her fear.

The stairs in both these contexts, like the cool blondes, present an elegant exterior, in both cases emblematic of the upper class world the characters inhabit. But their elegance is in some ways a superficial and misleading outer layer, masking a more complex nature. Under the formality lurks desire, and with it, owing to the character's vulnerability, danger. As he did with his archetypal blonde, Hitchcock may have seen an interesting duality in stairs; like the blonde women, their outward design—elegant and proper—masked a darker side.

UP-NESS AND DOWN-NESS

Leslie Brill has identified in Hitchcock's work a tendency toward either romance, or irony, which he considers present in varying degrees in all his films. Interestingly, much of his analysis points out Hitchcock's adherence to the up/down dichotomy I developed in an earlier Chapter Two:

> Rising to truth and love characterizes all Hitchcock's romantic movies. His ironic ones insistently raise the motif to parody it. Going up opposes the demonic descents that his heroes suffer or are threatened with; such movement symbolizes the triumph of a higher world of recovered innocence over the fallen world of experience. Ascents are usually part of an action crucial for Hitchcock's (and for all) romantic fictions: the story of the death, disappearance, and return of a heroine or hero.
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> ...Demonic falls, heavenly risings, hints at death and rebirth,--all these make up what we may call the vertical component of the adventurous quests that normally move romantic fictions. These up-and-down movements serve the symbologies of identity, love and innocence. Horizontal movements, usually of flight and pursuit simultaneously, tend to trace the plot of Hitchcock's films and are consequently often associated

> with the MacGuffin. Nonetheless, the horizontal motion in Hitchcock's romantic narratives carries an important cargo of meaning. The quest for knowledge discovers innocence. A loss or mistaking of identity results in a finding of self, family, society, and the mate who makes possible and defines all three. The world of romantic seeking turns and returns. As falling in love becomes a rising to heaven, so seeking or fleeing ends in coming back to the renewed security of beginnings.[14]

Brill's assessment of Hitchcock as a romantic would further suggest that within his production design, stairways might be used in such a way as to support his romantic inclinations: "falling in love becoming a rising to heaven". But this is not necessarily the case. While his romantic impulses may share many qualities with their fairy tale roots, Hitchcock's tendency toward irony, cynicism, or anti-representationalism tends otherwise. Stairs may be in other romantic applications a symbol of ascension toward 'celestial glory', but Hitchcock individualizes his treatment of them, reserving them for darker things.

Rarely, for example, does a character in a Hitchcock film go up a staircase to anything good at all. As Jean Funck observed, "most characters using his stairs, whether they are shown going up or down, are heading for trouble." This is the case in *Psycho*, *Vertigo*, *Rebecca, Frenzy*, *Strangers on a Train*, *The Birds* (1963). Even in those moments when an ascent or descent leads to happiness, as during Ingrid Bergman and Cary Grant's escape in *Notorious*, the staircase has been tainted by its association with evil, and its aura now transferred to Alex Sebastian (Claude Rains). As the lovers flee, it is Claude Rains who is left onscreen, the staircase behind him as he turns to face his vindictive Nazi partners. One of the few exceptions of a staircase not leading to trouble

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[14]Brill, 38.

is during the undeniable happy ending of *Family Plot*, although its tongue-in-cheek treatment makes it hard to take seriously.

It's true, that as Funck notes, "in no instance of the Hitchcockian saga is going up or down stairs a symbol of the ascension towards celestial glory of a terrestrial character or of the exceptional, gracious stay on earth of a divine character..."[15] On the other hand, as Brill suggests, there is a fundamental up/down motif in much of Hitchcock's work which *does* adhere to and align itself with notions of order versus chaos, success versus failure, and so on. According to Brill, Hitchcock sees "falling down" as related to loss of self, failure, tumbling into oblivion or death. This is not shown exclusively with stairs, but with all sorts of elevated locations (cliffs, for example, occur in many Hitchcock films) as well as high angle camera positions. In the more romantic or happy films, such as *North by Northwest*, characters pull themselves up to goodness or success. In the ironic or tragic films, they fall.

In fact, Hitchcock does not necessarily equate the top of a stairway with goodness and success, nor the bottom with evil or failure. While most of his work may utilize up/down motifs, what he does with the ubiquitous stairway is less direct and much more complex.

A good example of this complexity is *Strangers on a Train*, where Guy Haines is held back from his ambition of "rising" in politics by his association with the psychotic Bruno. In *Strangers* the titular train seems to represent mankind's headlong rush toward an unknown fate, and the narrative takes the form of a number of "journeys". Guy, the

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[15]Funck, 31.

protagonist, is making the journey upward from his small town roots to stardom as a tennis pro and later, hopefully, politics. At the beginning of the film he is stopping in the small town of Metcalf (his former home) to try to finalize a divorce with his conniving wife Miriam; afterwards he will carry on to his new home, Washington, where he has a new high-society fiancée. This journey is disturbed by Bruno, a murderous psychopath who later journeys from Washington to Metcalf to kill Guy's wife, setting Guy's life in turmoil. In the end, to restore a sense of order to his life, Guy must travel back to Metcalf and fight Bruno to the death.

Hitchcock loses no opportunity to contrast the forces of good and evil, as represented by Guy and Bruno. Guy, in his tennis whites, has ambitions involving the civilized world of government (stately white buildings); once he slays the dark Bruno (his name meaning "the bear") he will win the hand of a princess (actually a senator's daughter). Bruno, on the other hand, is identified as a sexual deviant, is often associated with darkness and most prominently with the carnival where he murders Miriam. To this dark/light, civilized world/carnival dichotomy, Hitchcock also adds another layer. Bruno is often shot from a low angle, or low in the frame.

Stairs are used to support this last stylistic choice. The train may be the film's most obvious symbol, but during the course of the film, stairs become equally important. Guy is seen going *down* stairways on four separate occasions, as though entering the underworld in his attempts to deal with Bruno. And Bruno himself appears at one point standing on the steps to the Jefferson Monument—a dark blot on the otherwise luminous white edifice—figuratively blocking Guy's rise to politics. Stairs are not directly used to

symbolize Guy's success, nor even his ambitions. Nevertheless they relate to the upper world/underworld imagery that Hitchcock attaches to Guy and Bruno.

To summarize, Hitchcock is drawn to stairways formally, using them to compose in depth, and often for striking visual compositions including his famous extreme birds eye view shot. Narratively, he often places characters on stairs at crucial moments, usually at times when they are moving toward knowledge, but with a high risk associated—their desire conflicting with fear or suspicion. As is his custom, he typically treats these moments with stylistic excess, often involving pyrotechnic cross-cutting or crane movements, such that they are extremely vivid and carry an extra charge of meaning. Finally, Hitchcock also makes use of stairs to serve thematic conflicts which are often visualized as up and down—an idealized romantic love or a "discovery of self" versus an 'underworld' of chaos and disorder, for example.

Having identified these general concepts relating to stairs in Hitchcock's work, I will now turn my attention to four films in which stairs appear most prominently and are used in the complex ways I've described above. Two of these are films Leslie Brill would categorize as "happy" ones, or romances—*Rebecca*, and *Notorious,* where past events are "cleansed", allowing characters to regain innocence and move on. The other two are perhaps the darkest, and most ironic of all his ouevre: *Psycho*, and *Vertigo*. In these films, Brill suggests, "the disease of the past is incurable."[16]

REBECCA

It can be argued that a great deal about *Rebecca* is owed to its producer, the

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[16]Brill, 200.

powerful David O. Selznick, who first signed Hitchcock to an American contract and helped launch his Hollywood career. In addition, much of its mood and melodramatic plot is attributable to the source novel by Daphne du Maurier. Nevertheless, the film offered Hitchcock the chance to indulge many of his thematic and stylistic concerns, and no one could argue as to its "Hitchcockian" flavour.

Rebecca is at its most basic a story about a 'common' woman, (Joan Fontaine) who wins the heart of an aristocrat, Maxim de Winter (Laurence Olivier). Her fairy-tale like ascendance up the social scale operates in much the same way as a number of melodramas. At one point, as she climbs the grand staircase, another character in the film even refers to her as "Cinderella", accentuating this ascent.

As we saw in my previous chapter, such a melodramatic tale would normally be given a spectacular home, and the film has one, a sprawling, multi-towered Gothic mansion called "Manderley". Such a home would require an equally spectacular staircase. And it has one: a huge, ornate, centrally located staircase which rises up to a landing and then splits, left and right, to the house's East and West wings.

However, while the film uses Manderley according to at least some of the conventions of the melodrama, at the same time the film also becomes a typically Hitchcockian exercise in anguish. Like so many of his films, the real story here is the solving of a mystery, one involving fear and suspicion, obsession, and a violent crime. Again, *Rebecca*'s mystery functions as both police investigation and psychoanalytic investigation: the solution to the mystery will finally piece together the events of the past, solving (and *resolving*) the past murder of Rebecca and exonerating the husband. At the

same time as it clears de Winter's name legally it will also erase the damaging past trauma, freeing him of guilt and allowing him to move forward, what Brill considers a "regaining of innocence", which will allow his new relationship to blossom.

These victories do not come without a price. Mrs. Danvers (Judith Anderson), Rebecca's maid and an obsessed 'mother' figure who was herself in love with Rebecca, cannot bear to let go of the past. She has kept Rebecca's room in the West wing like a shrine, and rather than see Rebecca's name tarnished, she burns Manderley to the ground, committing suicide in the process.

Formally, the film is stunningly designed, with the lavish production design expected of a Selznick production as well as required by the melodramatic aspects of its plot. When the film opens, the house is immediately given symbolic import. "Last night I dreamed I was at Manderley again," Joan Fontaine's disembodied voice begins. While she continues to describe her dream, the camera floats through a large gate and along a windy, overgrown road, finally approaching the house to find it, she describes, a "desolate shell"[17].

We are then cued to expect in the house something larger than life; something important enough that it could dominate one's dreams; and something associated with a tragedy. All of this will turn out to be the case.

Manderley fulfills the role of family home in much the same way as we saw in the melodrama genre. Joan Fontaine, trying desperately to please her complex new husband,

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[17]The double meaning of "shell" is the first of many references to the sea. The house, operating as container of her memory, then could symbolically be like a "shell" containing a pearl.

who alternates with lightning speed between solicitousness and anger (and who clearly is carrying the torment of a past traumatic event), is thrust into this bewilderingly large, Gothic domain (appropriately called "man"-derley, since it reflects its masculine owner). The complexity and grandiose nature of the house is an ideal evocation of the patriarchal pressures she's up against, as she tries her best to cope with too many servants, fragile art objects and unfamiliar routines. Not to mention the dangerous moods of her husband, the lord of the manor, and the machiavellian machinations of the wicked servant Mrs. Danvers.

If the house represents its owner, especially in the way it contains his destructive memories, Manderley's staircase can also be read symbolically, its lefthand and righthand flights reflecting the split in the film, Rebecca the past wife, and the new wife (who remains nameless in the film, other than to be called the "second Mrs. de Winter"). With Rebecca's memory perfectly preserved in a 'secret' room in the West Wing, we can also take the split to refer to present and past, especially since the staircase also houses a gallery of family portraits.

Once the couple arrives at Manderley, the staircase hovers in the background in many scenes, an extravagant detail in an already impressive, castle-like home. On one occasion, it becomes the site of suspense, as the new wife climbs it and enters the forbidden secret room where Rebecca's things are kept.

But the film's climactic moment on the staircase merges the contrasting ideas of past meeting present, new wife substituting for old wife: Joan Fontaine descends the stairs to a costume ball, wearing a dress identical to one she's seen in a painting in the

stairwell, a dress Rebecca once wore. This has the effect of making her "become" Rebecca. Not knowing the costume's true significance (she's been set up by the evil Mrs. Danvers), the new wife does not realize her husband will be unhappy to see her this way.

Although superficially this is an archetypal melodrama moment—the transformed woman descending the stairs—Hitchcock treats it as one of high suspense, the camera tracking her as she slowly makes her entrance, but cutting away at intervals to show her point of view of her husband's back, as she waits for him to turn. We know the dress will get her into trouble, and so dragging out the moment—her descending, a hopeful smile on her face, and him not turning around—creates a powerful feeling of dread on our part.

The inside staircase, meanwhile, is paralleled by an outside series of stone steps which descend perilously down the cliffs to the seashore. This staircase also relates to the traumatic past memories, for it leads to the spot where Rebecca died. At first everyone thinks that Rebecca drowned when her boat sank just off this spot. But later we found out she was killed in her beach house. Both spots, though, are accessed by the same set of stairs.

Manderley's staircases are thus central to what Brill suggests as the "symbology of identity". In the costume ball sequence the new wife's "descent" down the stairs is a false step in her attempts to find her own place. Ultimately, innocence is regained only by descending further, to the beach house, where the secrets of the past are dredged up (appropriately, Rebecca's sunken boat must also be brought back to the surface) and the trauma of the past erased. The role of the house as a repository of memory is finalized when Mrs. Danvers burns it to the ground—the past is literally being destroyed.

Interestingly, although *Rebecca* does not seem on the surface to be one of Hitchcock's "ironic" films, there is nevertheless a jarring contradiction: the past has been destroyed, innocence regained, the couple can now be happy... but if we think back to the beginning, we realize the film began with a voice which intoned, "Last night I dreamed I was at Manderley again." This suggests that the past can never be fully eradicated; it always exists, if only in dreams.

NOTORIOUS

Notorious has numerous parallels with *Rebecca*, though superficially it is a modern story. Ingrid Bergman plays Alicia Huberman, a young woman whose father, a Nazi, committed suicide after being found guilty of war crimes. This past trauma has tainted her and left her bereft of ordinary feelings.

Set in the post-World War II era of Nazi trials, emerging concerns about nuclear weaponry, and complex espionage, the film has a lurid, dissolute quality to it. This is established immediately at the drunken party Alicia hosts, filled with sexual innuendo and her 'world-weary' attitude. Everything about this scene—from her costume to the almost suicidal drunken drive she takes afterward—marks her as a character with nothing much left to live for. (We might recall that during our first look at Maxim de Winter in *Rebecca* he was standing on a cliff, contemplating suicide.)

T. R. Devlin (Cary Grant), takes advantage of Alicia's fragile state to put her to work as a spy. Her mission is to seduce and marry a man involved with a group of former Nazis, in an attempt to find out what they are up to. What complicates the issue is that she and Devlin fall in love.

Like *Rebecca*'s Maxim de Winter, Alicia can not live in love with Devlin until the past trauma (the death of her father) is figuratively erased. Her role in the espionage acts as a kind of atonement, reversing the misdeeds of her father and allowing her to cleanse herself of his memory. Devlin's character must also grow, overcoming the contradictory feelings produced by having convinced her to marry (and make love to) another man.

Interestingly, Alex Sebastian (Claude Rains), who she marries, is an older man like her father—and also connected to the Nazis. Like her father, he too commits a kind of suicide, when he allows her and Devlin to leave (the film has made it clear that he will now be executed by his co-conspirators).

As in *Rebecca*, Sebastian's house is a striking location, filled with potential as a representation of Alicia's trap in the past. The large curved staircase so prominent in the entrance hall continually reminds us of the bedroom above, where she is doing her unsavory work (having sex with "her father" while really she loves Devlin) and eventually where she is kept a prisoner. Her espionage activities also take the form of a metaphoric descent from this upper area into the underworld, paralleled by the set design. From the bedrooms above (where she makes love to Sebastian) she must steal his secret key, go down not just to the main floor but further down, into the cellar, and uncork a wine bottle, ultimately uncovering the Germans' attempts to make a nuclear weapon.

All these events can be taken for a form of "experience therapy"—like the goal of a psychoanalytic session, her mission takes her to the deepest region. It is interesting in this light that Alicia spends much of the film drugged. Her drunkenness at the beginning, with its celebrated "rotating" point of view shot as Devlin walks in, later seems analogous

to the scenes where she is kept in a drugged state by Sebastian's evil mother and her servants. Do the drugs and liquor work as 'medicine', putting her in a hypnotic state so that she is ready for change?

The large curved stairs in Sebastian's mansion are visually conspicuous, casting their "shadow" over all the scenes at the house. Then on two occasions they are used for intense moments in the narrative.

The first is the celebrated crane shot I mentioned earlier, which moves from the second story above and closes in on the key to the wine cellar, hidden in Alicia's hand. Here the moment is one of revelation for the audience—a long dramatized disclosure that she has managed to get the key, and is ready for the next step in the intrigue. Like the lighter in *Strangers on a Train,* the ring in *Shadow of a Doubt*, or the glass of milk in *Suspicion*, the key is invested with narrative significance, and descending to it in a single eye-popping shot highlights that significance. This is the key which will 'unlock' the mystery; but having it in her hand is also an admission of her duplicity, in so far as her husband is concerned. Hence our accompanying feeling of dread or suspense. It is also significant that the shot is a downward one, since it hints at the 'downward' journey she still must make. This is further accentuated by the suspenseful cross-cutting as Alicia watches the quantity of champagne *going down* during the party, knowing her time in the basement will be cut short if her husband has to go to the wine cellar to get more.

The second moment on the stairs is the film's climax, when Devlin arrives and rescues Alicia, escorting her down the stairs and out the door in front of Sebastian and the other Nazis. This moment too is played for maximum drama, broken up into numerous

shots and intercutting between Sebastian watching, and Devlin and the heavily drugged Alicia slowly descending. In fact, it seems stylistically a repeat of the wife's descent in *Rebecca*, although in *Notorious* the moment is considerably longer. (The length of the stairs partially motivates this longer treatment, but it's also an attempt to build greater suspense—this is, after all, the veritable climax while the moment in *Rebecca* was not).

Thinking of the staircase as a symbol of desire, this scene is suddenly rich with meaning. Sebastian, the older man who desires her, watches her leave with T.R. Devlin, the younger man who also desires her. Both men are torn with jealousy, and the moment is one of bitter defeat for Sebastian—he's not just letting Alicia go to the other man, but he is also signing his own death warrant. It's not a big jump from here to the Freudian interpretation, once again, of a staircase as sexual symbol. The older Nazi's similarity to her dead father adds a disturbing overtone of incest, lending a sense of illegitimacy to their relationship. This is further deepened by the "evil" mother, from whom he takes his orders. As is the case with a number of Hitchcock villains, Sebastian is presented on the one hand as suave and cultivated, but on the other there are hints of sexual deviance. In this context Alicia's marriage to Sebastian is presented as a travesty. Her descent down the stairs, leaning on the arm of the man who represents a truer form of love, is therefore an escape from this twisted family.

The staircase has served as a symbol of the house, which had to be penetrated in order to solve the mystery. It was also suggestive of the complexities of this 'aberrant' family. Now it provides the place of passage for Alicia, who escapes both the past, and the false relationship she has entered in her capacity as a spy. Her passage is one of

"becoming", a transfigurative moment of identity, regaining the innocence she so desired. The descent down the staircase becomes a playing out in space of the emotional process she has undergone, as step by step she escapes the trap of the past and regains her innocence.

VERTIGO

When we think of staircases in the films of Alfred Hitchcock, the film which most likely comes to mind first is *Vertigo*. It's very title referring to a fear of heights, *Vertigo* seems to be an embodiment of a long-running theme of elevations as a source of both the achievement of desire, and the danger that accompanies it.

Like many Hitchcock films, the story concerns a damaged individual, Scottie (Jimmy Stewart), whose fear of heights has ruined his life. A past trauma, the death of a fellow policeman because of his inability to act, has caused him to lose his job and begin a life of wandering. As always, a mystery presents itself, in the form of a surveillance job offered by an old school friend. As is typical, during the course of solving the mystery, Scottie will confront the trauma of the past and be born anew. The variation in *Vertigo* is simple: he fails. In *Vertigo*, Scottie's past trauma has condemned him to a life of wandering, as though metaphysically disconnected. The job he's offered by his old school friend seems to offer a chance to resolve the problems of the past, but the film is unremitting, and the past will prove impossible to overcome. In the end, at the moment of victory, the moment where normally Hitchcock's characters would regain their innocence, Scottie loses his true love again and the film ends in bitterness.

Vertigo is also different from many Hitchcock films in the level of intensity of its

symbolic or ambiguous narrative. The film is dreamy and slow, and filled with details which don't seem called for by the plot. Rather, the film's interconnected imagery seems to cry out for another level of interpretation.

The film associates elevations of all sorts with Scottie's quest. In the opening surveillance of Madeline, he is always climbing to reach her: there are stairs at the church cemetery, the museum, the boarding house. This suggests that the deepening sense of obsessive love which he develops is a kind of climb, as though perhaps it's being posed as a sort of salvation. Madeline tries to commit suicide by jumping in the bay under Golden Gate Bridge, another symbol of height, but she is lifted out by Scottie. Even the hills of San Francisco seem to play their part, so that during the lengthy driving sequences Scottie is also moving upward after Madeline.

The climactic kiss which ends this initial section (ultimately, it has been a kind of courtship), takes place on top of a cliff—the ultimate elevation—with the ocean raging in the background . It looks like the standard Hollywood moment until we remember that this kind of perilous clifftop is another common Hitchcock motif. In his repertoire of symbols, it's usually reserved (like stairs) for moments of high risk—Maxim de Winter contemplating suicide in *Rebecca*, the Statue of Liberty scene in *Saboteur* (1942), Eve Kendall clinging to Roger Thornhill's hand as she dangles on the face of Mount Rushmore in *North by Northwest,* or the out-of-control cars which almost go off cliffs in a number of films, including *Suspicion,* discussed earlier.

As well, Madeline has been surrounded with an atmosphere of death in this first part of *Vertigo,* to the point where Scottie's love for her seems unhealthy, not romantic.

Madeline visits the cemetery, thinks of herself as the ghost of a dead woman, talks about dying, throws herself into the bay. Her embrace with Scottie has a sense, at least for him, of giving in, almost as if it too were a suicide. Madeline is death, and his embracing her is acceptance of death. This is the kiss of death.

Vertigo also uses stairs within its repertoire of images of elevation. In fact, the film starts with a single bar across the frame, which is revealed, by a shifting of focus, to be the top of a metal fire escape stair. This is the scene in which Scottie will watch someone fall to their death. Later, Scottie tries to overcome his fear of heights using a small stepladder at his friend Midge's apartment. For all its ludicrousness and humour, the scene ends up being one of high drama, and it ends on a disturbing note. Scottie's idea is that he'll try, one small step at a time, to prove he's cured. He takes a small metal stepladder, and climbs it slowly. "One step..." he counts, "second step." Hitchcock catches us off guard with the humour; we're amused, even hopeful for Scottie. But when he reaches the third step, one look out the window sends him reeling and crashes Scottie, us, and the film, back into despair.

Following Madeline, Scottie is always going up, as though she is a mystery to be solved, but also as though she's a prize to be won. It's interesting then, that stairs are associated with Scottie's fear of heights, which has led to the death of a policeman and Scottie's loss of self. *Vertigo*'s central thesis seems to boil down to that one simple contrast: Scottie must go up to reach love, but the act of going up causes him paralyzing fear. As in the other films, the staircase becomes the passage through which he will attempt to achieve his desire, but it will 'cost him'.

Vertigo beautifully realizes this symbolic set of oppositions, setting its two climactic moments on a staircase which fully embodies the film's metaphysical ideas. The staircase in question is a narrow wooden one which spirals up the interior of a bell tower at a Spanish Mission outside San Francisco. When viewed from above, it produces a complex and evocative pattern.

Setting the scene in the bell tower of a Spanish mission relates to the story of Carlotta Valdez, the dead woman who Madeline is obsessed with. The fact that it is a church also gives Scottie's attempts to pursue Madeline up the stairs the symbolic overtones of a spiritual climb. But as we will see, this romantic motif is raised only to be parodied.

The choice of spiral stairs also relates to other images in the film and has symbolic import. The opening credit sequence starts on a closeup of Kim Novak's lips, moves to her eye, and then from within her eye a spiral is superimposed, spinning around and around. Symbolically, the spiral can be thought of as a representation of chaos, since it is both endlessly moving (without stasis) and has no start or finish (as endless as Scottie's wandering). Linking it to Madeline's eye in the opening sequence then perversely suggests that the love Scottie desires is actually going to lead him deeper into chaos. The slice of a redwood tree, part of a historical display which the characters visit later also looks like a spiral, perhaps indicating that even history itself is doomed to an endless spiral. Situating the two moments on the spiral stairs then makes them the climax of this spiral imagery. To carry the symbolic reading to its conclusion, Scottie's attempt to reach love will be chaos, an endless turning, out of balance, never reaching a conclusion.

Since the two scenes set on the spiral stairs of the bell tower are crucial moments in the film, Hitchcock invests them with stylistic significance. In fact, the bell tower is actually a studio construction, lying on its side so that the camera could zoom out and track in simultaneously, an attempt by Hitchcock to accomplish the visual equivalent of Scottie's feeling of vertigo.[18] Of course, the effect is now well-known, and has almost become overused; however, in context here it is appropriate and powerful. As the camera zooms out, the shift of perspective produced by changing to the wider focal length makes the bottom appear to fall out of the image; at the same time, the forward dolly movement keeps the framing the same, so there is no apparent change of content.

As in the other films, the two scenes function as a sort of "experience therapy" for Scottie. In the first, he attempts to follow Madeline up the bell tower steps, but his fear of heights slows him, and eventually he can go no further, so that he is powerless to stop what he thinks is her suicide. Hitchcock shoots the scene mostly from below, with medium shots of Jimmy Stewart climbing, intercut on two occasions with his closeup and then the "fear of heights" point of view shot down the stairwell, accentuated by the eerie punctuations of Bernard Hermann's musical score.

The second sequence is handled quite differently. If earlier the past trauma to be overcome was Madeline's obsessive identification with Carlotta Valdez, this time it is Scottie who will face his demons. This scene is the culmination of his process of unlocking the truth. As he pieces together the crime, he is playing the role of investigator

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[18]Mission Dolores, the actual location where Hitchcock shot, does not have such a place; visitors asking about the "Vertigo tower" are apparently, routinely disappointed.

(he is after all, a former police detective), and at the same time, since the crime has left him traumatized, he is also playing the part of a psychoanalyst. Ironically, though, he is both analyst and patient, and must goad *himself* onward despite his phobia.

Pushing forward despite his fears, Scottie conquers his vertigo and is able to get to the top of the tower. Unfortunately, this moment of transformation is fleeting; after declaring her love for him, Judy/Madeline accidentally falls to her death. The previous tower scene had been photographed from mostly low angles. In this case, Hitchcock takes the reverse tactic. As the two characters go up, the camera is positioned above them, and it rises up to keep them in frame, shooting downward in much closer views than the previous sequence. Formally, this is an appropriate handling of this powerful moment, reversing the first; it is the moment where Scottie ostensibly would purge himself of the past and regain his innocence, winning true love. Instead, Hitchcock cruelly "kills" Madeline a second time. In embracing her, Scottie has embraced death; now, death is his prize.

As in his other films, in *Vertigo* Hitchcock uses the stairs as a passageway where the character must face his fears and climb to reach the object of his desire. In *Rebecca* and *Notorious*, these moments of passage were also tinged with the aroma of death. But in *Vertigo* death has become the dominant scent. The film is both poignant and disturbing, precisely because it links so inextricably its romantic ideals and its view of life as inescapably chaotic and tragic.

PSYCHO

Like *Vertigo, Psycho* is a bleak and unrelenting film, where romantic love and

innocence do not triumph. Leslie Brill suggests that in Hitchcock's ironic films, romantic ideals are usually raised in order to be thrown down; but in *Psycho*, there are few romantic ideals in evidence at all. And while *Vertigo* may have been a dark and brooding reflection on the chaos or fundamental emptiness of life, at the same time it is often referred to as "beautiful"," haunting", and so on. *Psycho*, on the other hand, is rarely given the appelation "beautiful". Its black and white images are stark, its humour sardonic.

The volume of critical literature on *Psycho* is great enough that I don't feel compelled to offer a new (or even an old) interpretation of the film. It's perhaps worth remembering that the film, like the others, does have a traumatic past event which will be investigated. As is also often the case, this will be done in both legal and psychoanalytic terms. The film also "houses" its main character in a home that is symbolically appropriate—in this case, the Bates Motel and the spooky Victorian Gothic home on the hill.

As with *Notorious*, the house is a cage for its tenant, the psychotic Norman Bates. Like the Sebastian home in *Notorious*, it is also features a big staircase, one which ties together the main floor and upper floors, as well as an attic where Norman lives, and a "fruit cellar", where Norman's dead mother is hidden. Although other people use the stairway, it is nevertheless more associated with Norman and his mother—and the center of this haunted house which contains their bizarre relationship.

While the house may be thought of as a trap or cage, it also could be thought to represent directly Norman's personality. Swiss psychologist Carl Jung theorized that a

house could symbolize the self, an outward manifestation of the unconscious. After dreaming of a particular house, which he explored in great detail, Jung interpreted his dream as follows:

> The ground floor stood for the first level of the unconscious. The deeper I went, the more alien and the darker the scene became. In the cave, I discovered remains of a primitive culture, that is the world of the primitive man within myself -- a world which can scarcely be reached or illuminated by consciousness.[19]

Jung's notion that a multilevel house could represent levels or layers of the personality, ranging back even to "the world of primitive man", can be applied here in looking at the Bates house. The house is elegant, almost palatial, but at the same time its Victorian finery is outdated and shabby, its rooms stuffy and cluttered with memorabilia. Like the Motel which the highway now bypasses, the house is 'off the beaten track', forgotten. This could be taken to represent the family Norman once had. He has preserved his mother, and all her things, in a grand old room, while he himself lives in a small room in the attic. It is as if his personality is so dominated by his mother that he considers himself small and insignificant, worthy only of a hidden room above the rest.

In this context, the stairs provide the connection between Norman's public persona and his deviant inner persona, the interconnected "rooms" that house his split personality, including the basement's "fruit cellar" where he brings his mother's corpse. While the attic contains his own small and underdeveloped personality, the basement is the hiding place where his dark past crime is buried.

Symbolically then, Arbogast the private investigator (Martin Balsam) is not only

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[19]Carl Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (Collins Fontana Library, 1969), 184.

invading Norman's personal space when he climbs the stairs in the house, but he is threatening to reveal Norman's inner self. His death is punishment for his aggression. Likewise Lili Crane (Vera Miles) also ascends and descends the stairs as she explores the house, entering the mother's room, Norman's attic space, and finally the basement, where she too is attacked by Norman.

Although its choice of locations doesn't offer many opportunities for up/down images, the film nevertheless is clever in its creation of "falling" images. The first shot sweeps the city, then descends into the room where Marion and her boyfriend have just finished making love. After her murder in the shower, Marion's body falls, pulling down the shower curtain with her. Her blood is shown washing down the drain (another spiral image, as in *Vertigo*). Norman sinks her car in the swamp; carries his mother's corpse down the stairs in a high angle. Finally, Arbogast falls backward down the stairs as he too is murdered.

This murder scene is particularly vivid, even for a Hitchcock film. (This is justified by its placement in the plot; since it takes place after the shower scene it requires an even greater impact in order to be effective.) Hitchcock shoots the scene with the camera on a crane, moving up smoothly with Martin Balsam, keeping him in the frame in a series of medium closeups as he rises. There is a shocking cut to the extreme overhead shot as he is stabbed, then a rapid series of closeups as he falls down the stairs. Curiously, we do not see his feet on the stairs as he rises, and after he is stabbed he is shot from angles that make him appear to float as he falls. It is an expressionistic, exaggerated treatment, similar in its ultimate effect to the shower montage in that it is unexpected and

throws us entirely out of balance.

One of the surprises of *Psycho* is that its villain, ultimately, is its main character, and all the other characters and their desires turn out to be 'red herrings'. Marion's guilt over stealing the money, her desire for a respectable relationship with Sam, his own desire to escape the mistakes of his past (ex-wife, etc.)—all these details amount to nothing. In the end, the film is a psychoanalytic uncovering of a deviant personality, one whose past trauma has altered him irrevocably, and from under whose shadow he can never escape. In *Psycho,* life is a hard ride—a journey into the unknown, with no salvation provided by romantic love or truth. All its locations work in a symbolic way, representing this voyage into the void: the shadowy hotel room where Marion and Sam first meet; her car, especially as she travels through the rain; the Bates Motel (what is a motel but an in-between place, a limbo for travellers); and the haunted house where Norman lives, where he has 'frozen' time. Since the house has the look and feel of a Gothic horror story, it is no surprise to find Hitchcock using the stairs at such suspenseful and violent moments.

As in most of the other Hitchcock films, in *Psycho* the stairs are a place of passage, and during characters' quest for knowledge they are at their most vulnerable. But more than in any other film, in *Psycho* the stairs do double duty as a representative of the inner passageways of Norman's psyche, connecting the divergent aspects of his damaged personality.

CONCLUSION

In Hitchcock's films the staircase is a potent symbol indeed. His beautiful and

carefully crafted images are often enhanced by staircases, which look striking and create depth (perhaps what John Templer meant, in the quote at the beginning of this chapter, when he called stairs an "art object"), and help to signal the status of characters (stairs as "manifestation of pomp and manners"). They make chase sequences more exciting (stairs as "controller of our gait"), symbolize higher values, like the world of government represented in *Strangers on a Train* (stairs as "political icon") and are often the site of violent crime (stairs as "a locus of cruel and injurious falls").

While all of these possibilities are not exclusive to Hitchcock, his repeated use of stairs also made them a personal symbol, distinct from any other filmmaker. In his suspenseful narratives, characters are driven up or down stairs by their desires, and typically they must overcome fear or suspicion as a part of their quest. The stairs then stand in for what Jean Funck called the "dangerous exaltation of desire". Additionally, with his interest in control of subjectivity, Hitchcock also implicates viewers, such that stairs also represent our own rising anguish as spectators (and ultimately, as fellow humans).

Hitchcock was also not content to re-use stairs in the same way from film to film. As is the case with his other symbols, he simultaneously made use of their latent power *and* varied them according to the needs of particular subjects and treatments, so that we see twin staircases representing the 'twin' Charlies of *Shadow of a Doubt*; a spiral staircase symbolizing the chaos of life in *Vertigo*; a character blocking another character's rise to politics on a staircase in *Strangers on a Train*; a staircase representing the complexity of the human psyche in *Psycho*. I opened this chapter by suggesting that

stairways appear in Hitchcock's films like a musical theme, returning again and again with both the repetition and variation that is customary in music. This being the case, we can perhaps bend the analogy somewhat, to say that in Hitchcock's clever hands, the staircase was truly an instrument of great range.

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Titanic, 1997

CONCLUSION

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

Stairways have appeared with great regularity throughout film history, and they continue to appear, often in scenes of tremendous intensity and significance. I have sought to investigate the use of stairs in film, accounting for their repetition as a privileged location and explaining the multi-layered nature of their usefulness. It has been my contention that staircases are both a complex element of architecture and an equally complex cultural signifier, thus offering filmmakers rich possibilities in both spatial and metaphoric terms.

As I demonstrated in my chronological survey of Hollywood musicals, stairs played a major role in the genre. The musical tended to use stairs of a "monumental" nature, importing designs both from the Broadway stage and from the architecture of royalty. These designs brought with them qualities of spectacle, as well as thematic or metaphoric associations such as ascendancy or utopianism. As archetypal American stories about success and attainment, the musicals were able to appropriate these qualities and put them to use. Thus musicals often use stairs to help visualize stories of material success, the stairs playing a predominant part in the evocation of larger than life, fairy-tale environments, but also symbolically representing the 'rising up' of the characters. Similarly, they act as a bridge to bring together the romantic couples who populate virtually every musical, again using the stairs to represent an upward movement, toward a kind of 'heavenly' bliss.

At the same time, the kinetic possibilities offered by stairs—which cut through the set designs in diagonals or curves—facilitate complex choreography, act as display

platforms or risers on which to position large groups or lines of dancers, and can even serve as interesting objects with which dancers can interact. In the work of Vincente Minnelli and others, stairs helped motivate the fluid interplay of dancers with moving camera. Within the complex and visually extravagant creations of Busby Berkeley, fanciful stairs are a recurrent element, treated in a fantastic, even surreal manner. Operating in a dream-like mode, the stairs in these applications are often sexually charged, and support the presentation of female stars as fetishized objects of beauty and sexual allure.

Finally, stairs were such a familiar sight in musicals that they achieved an iconic status, so that in the more self-reflexive musicals of the 1950's (or for that matter, in the numerous musical spoofs by Mel Brooks), they themselves can be the object of lampoon, or the source of humour.

In my chapter addressing the classic Hollywood melodramas, again I outlined the multiple possibilities provided by staircases within the stylized and expressive mise-en-scène. Stairs are again employed for various staging options, such as illustrating power relationships or creating a narrowing "stage" on which to focus attention, but since the genre frequently deals in repression, failure, and loss, the staircase is often a treacherous locale. Staircases in melodramas are alternately confining and steep, leading to territories that are off-limits; their railings serve as metaphoric jail bars, and they are often the cause—or at least, the location—of tragic injuries or deaths. Stairs in the melodrama might be luxurious—sensuously curved or otherwise grandiose in design—serving to represent the wealth and status of their characters. But at the same time, they serve as a

symbol of the dangers of this wealth and status, representing the oppressiveness of the social hierarchy and its patriarchal nature.

As they do in the musical, staircases also enjoy an iconographic significance within the melodrama, again linked with a display of female sexuality but in a much more complex consideration of female subjectivity within a male-dominated social structure. Finally, in the self-aware melodramas of Nicholas Ray and Douglas Sirk, the staircase is integrated into an ironic reflection on life in post-war America. Juxtaposing capitalist and class pretensions with sexual dysfunction and repression, the films use staircases as powerful signifiers. Their aura of patriarchal power and material success seems to mock the characters, whose desires remain unfulfilled.

My indepth look at stairway imagery in the films of Alfred Hitchcock was meant to show how stairs (and by extension, any visual element) can become a personal symbol. Attracted to the photogenic qualities of stairs from the very beginning of his career, Hitchcock used them as an evocative visual detail, returning again and again to stairways as the site of violent confrontations, moral turning points or other moments of high drama, but adapting his imagery to suit the particular films and his various thematic concerns. Hitchcock's work has both a romantic and an ironic dimension, and it is interesting that his use of stairways managed to serve both. As one of the directors most associated with Freudian psychoanalysis, Hitchcock also presents an opportunity to read staircases as a rich psychosexual symbol. Very often Hitchcock placed his characters in environments which matched their psychology, "housing" their personalities in architectural creations such as "Manderley" in *Rebecca* or the Bates home in *Psycho*. The

stairways in these (and other) memorable Hitchcockian locations tend to take on an additional significance, as they seem to represent the inner workings of the characters as much as other symbolic possibilities.

I have largely restricted myself to Hollywood cinema, but as I indicated in Chapter Two, stairs have appeared with regularity throughout film history and across virtually all boundaries. With its emphasis on routinized mass production, the Hollywood system was able to produce large numbers of films of fairly high quality, films which had an immense influence on the rest of the world. However, it would be interesting to look at the stairway imagery one would certainly find in international cinema with an eye to specifying its cultural variations. The spiral staircases, sometimes winding around a tiny elevator cage, which we see in many European apartment buildings, have been the site of evocative moments in the films of Polanski and Bertolucci, just to name a few examples. In the films of other cultures we would surely find different thematic concerns, as well as different architectural models and different visual and cultural codes. "Stairway moments" in a host of films spring to mind, including the exterior steps in Godard's *Contempt* (1963), the housing complex stairwells in Ettore Scola's *A Special Day* (1977), the zig-zag landscape in Kiarostami's Koker trilogy, the Hong Kong action films of John Woo, Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974), the Japanese melodrama *When a Woman Ascends the Stairs* (1960), by Mikio Naruse.

Likewise a more purely chronological survey might also prove interesting. The "youth revolution" of the sixties, just to give one example, produced *Up the Down Staircase* (1967), a film whose 'anti-establishment' sentiments are evident even in its title.

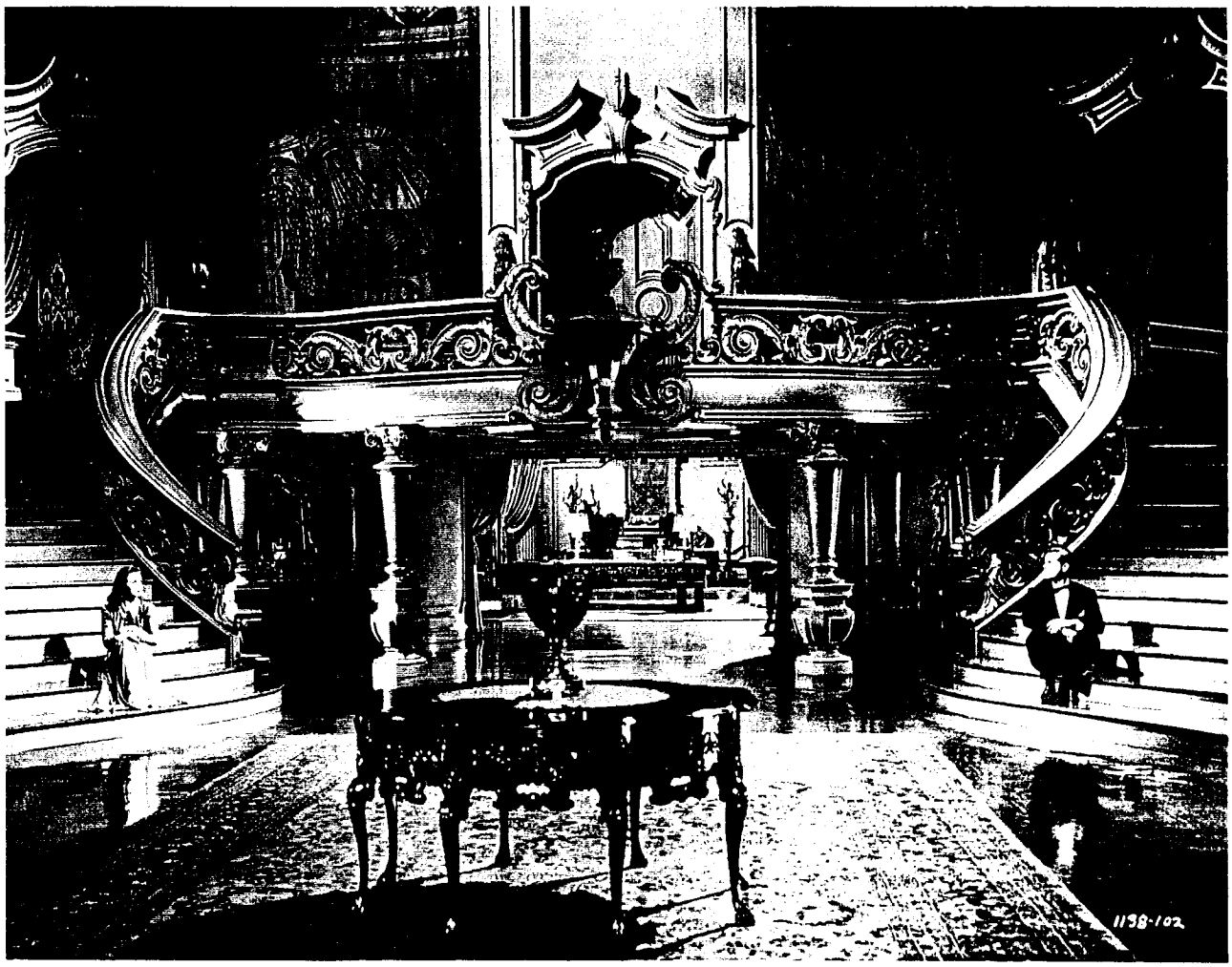
It is possible, too, of course, that stairways will eventually diminish in importance as a location, or at very least lose some of their symbolic associations. It seems inevitable that as time marches on, some of the historical allusions or connections—for example, to royalty or ancient religions—will fade. There are a number of other reasons, too, that stairs might not play such a large role in the cinema, some due to forces which began long ago. Firstly, since the demise of the studio system, we have seen less recycling of sets. Secondly, a number of newer architectural forms now exist which don't place such an emphasis on grand stairways. These include, for example, penthouse apartments and single story "ranch" homes, both of which are now commonly utilized as the homes of wealthy characters. Even government or civic buildings adhere less to classical tradition and now often make use of elevators rather than impressive staircases. Finally, the musical and melodrama genres, certainly as they existed in the classical Hollywood period, are virtually gone, mutated into other genres which use set design in different ways.

Ultimately my goal has been to indicate how stairs have served as a flexible and quintessentially rich architectural element within the cinema, offering filmmakers moment-by-moment staging options during the flow of their narratives, as well as larger, more overarching thematic possibilities. I suggest that staircases, rich in history and complex in design, are a particularly powerful visual element within film environments. As a design tool, stairs have adapted to serve the needs of various genres, at different periods in the history of film, and in the work of individual directors.

An additional goal, however, has been to illustrate the multi-layered nature of

film imagery in general. Stairs are by no means alone in their ability to signify, at the same time providing more practical spatial or narrative possibilities. A careful look at the work of Orson Welles will show doorways being used in a similar manner. As pointed out earlier, both windows and mirrors are used in a recurrent and consistent way in the films of Douglas Sirk. While staircases seem particularly rich, within the realm of filmic space, myriad details present opportunities of a similar kind. Hopefully my investigation of stairs will serve as an indication of the powerful way in which architectural space, in the hands of talented filmmakers, can serve a film.

7



It Started With Eve, 1941

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