

One of Alfred Hitchcock's nicknames was the Master of Suspense. He knew how to make an audience jump. Rather than resorting to gore and horror, he played tricks with the mind and the viewer's expectations. Born in England in 1899, his films reflect a combination of Victorian propriety at odds with Modern implications. He directed some 62 films over the span of his 54-year career. Most, though not all the films survive and there are still a few that are difficult to find. But in film after film, stairs play an important role for Hitchcock. Stairs act as a path between two states of mind -- blissful ignorance into knowledge, much like Adam and Eve taking a bite of the apple. But it is not the extremes of good and evil. It is something greyer, more ambiguous. This dichotomy is best represented of William Blake's Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience. "The *Innocence* poems were the products of a mind in a state of innocence and an imagination unspoiled by stains of worldliness. Public events and private emotions soon converted Innocence into Experience, producing Blake's preoccupation with the problem of good and evil."¹ For Blake, there are advantages to being on each end of the spectrum, but they are equal. Being innocent allows for a childlike view, full of wonder, of the world. But it also allows for irony to be present. An innocent view of a terrible thing points out just how awful it is. Perkins writes, "The state of innocence does not represent Blake's final conception of Man's highest joy. To attain this, Man must go through experience."² Having experience is a different way of looking at the world, hopefully with more accuracy. As time goes by and people have more experiences their innocence is chipped away. It is sculpted into something more specific and personal. The catch is that it is impossible to go back.

¹ Keynes, Geoffrey. Introduction to *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, by William Blake. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967. Pg. 12.

² Perkins, David. Introduction to "Songs of Innocence", by William Blake. *English Romantic Writers*, Second Ed. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1995. Pg. 86.

Hitchcock seems to subscribe to this world view as well in his films, and uses the stairs to demonstrate it. His characters must traverse the stairs in order to achieve their goal, however they will be forever changed by what happens when they do. They will trade their innocence for the knowledge that awaits them at the other end of the stairs.

In *Number Seventeen* (1932), a man, chasing his blowing hat down the windy street arrives at an empty home, with a 'to let' sign. As he dusts off his hat, he sees a figure moving in the windows and becomes suspicious. When he walks up to the front door, it blows open and reveals a long, curving staircase -- the central focus of the film. We follow him into the home, innocent of what awaits. He cautiously pokes around, then looks up. The camera follows his gaze by sliding the shot up the bannister to an oval opening before returning to the man at the bottom, who slowly begins to climb the steps. As he creeps to the top he finds the moving figure, and a dead body.

At the beginning of the ascent the man is innocent. He knows nothing of what he will find. His only purpose seems harmless -- to investigate strange activity. But the moment he decides to climb the stairs he is accepting an encounter with the unknown. When this happens he agrees to exchange his innocence for knowledge -- good or bad.

The entire course of the evening has now changed. Almost all of the action throughout the film centers around this staircase. Low -key lighting shines through it, making slatted shadows cut across walls and faces. Worn shoes trod on it. Heads peek and dead hands flop between the rails. In this early film of Hitchcock, one can see the beginning of his obsession with the architecture of stairs.

Two projects later, and the one that would bring him international attention, Hitchcock made *The 39 Steps* (1935). A frantic spy thriller starring Robert Donat and Madeleine

Carroll, it follows the misadventures of a man and a woman thrown together by circumstance -- being chased across the country by bad spies and policemen. They figure out their role as the film progresses, and audience is kept in the dark as well. While no scene centers around a stairwell, the film's title implies there will be an appearance of one and that it will be of significance. In fact, the one theory is that it is the number of paces to a rendezvous point. It turns out to be the name of an "organization of spies who collect information," says Mr. Memory, in the film. Hitchcock uses this misnomer to lead the audience into a certain way of thinking.

In 1940, Hitchcock made his first American film under David O. Selznick. *Rebecca* would be the only Best Director nomination of his career. In this Gothic adaptation of duMaurier's novel, the naive female protagonist (Joan Fontaine) finds herself in an unfamiliar world -- and under attack from forces who wish to see her destroyed. Her attempts to navigate her new surroundings are constantly being foiled by the evil Mrs. Danvers. When the young protagonist finally tries to stand up for herself, Mrs. Danvers retaliates, in the guise of helpfulness. Mrs. Danvers suggests she dress like the woman in the portrait hanging at the top of the stairs for a costume ball. The audience is suspicious but Fontaine's character, all goodness, thinks she has finally managed to befriend the housekeeper. On the evening of the ball, she is giddy with excitement about pleasing her husband (Lawrence Olivier) with her beautiful costume. She stands anxiously at the top of the stairs, while Mrs. Danvers looks on. Modleski writes:

Thus, the camera insists on the heroine's point of view as she descends the stairs, looking at the people - Maxim, his sister, and Frank -- standing at the bottom with their backs turned away from her, and it continually cuts back to her smiling face, radiant with the anticipation of her husband's approval. When he turns to face

her, becomes angry, and orders her to take off the costume...³

This slow descent from innocence to experience is excruciating for the audience especially since the reason for Maxim's reaction is unclear. Hitchcock used these stairs in *Rebecca* to draw out the suspense of the moment. The audience is suspicious of Mrs. Danvers motives, and the protagonist has had every lovely moment crushed so far, it seems unlikely this one will work out. The audience sees something coming and it is prolonged by the measured steps downstairs.

This use of stairs differs from his previous films because although the protagonist is unaware of the consequences that await, she descends using false information. Unlike the man in *Number Seventeen*, who knows that he may encounter danger, the naive female protagonist in *Rebecca* expects a pleasant welcome. Hers is a more shocking, violent and unwilling loss of innocence.

In *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) Hitchcock takes a departure from his typical formula. There is no love interest, no spy game and no psychologist. Instead the terror comes from within the family. Joseph Cotten plays Uncle Charlie who unexpectedly comes to stay with his sister and her family. Teresa Wright, named after her uncle, begins to suspect his visit is more an attempt to lay low rather than see his sister. Their once close relationship becomes strained as her suspicions grow and Uncle Charlie retaliates. When his threats and insinuations don't dissuade his niece from investigating, he resorts to attempted murder.

His first attempt involves a staircase. The perfect suburban home has a set of outdoor stairs, leading up the side of the house to Young Charlie's bedroom. When she began to

³ Modleski, Tania. *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory*. New York: Routledge, 1988. Pg.49.

suspect her uncle, she would avoid seeing him by using these stairs. One day, after discovering her uncle's crime she goes to retrieve her purse and on her way back down the steps, one breaks and she tumbles, backwards, down the stairs. The shot starts medium, then pulls back quickly as she falls. When the shot expands, we see Uncle Charlie standing at the bottom of the stairs, watching her struggle. He only slips out of frame when he hears the mother coming to help. As Young Charlie gets to her feet, she notices the damaged step and sees that it has been cut. This realization completes her journey from innocence to experience. Uncle Charlie was her namesake, and a beloved member of the family. Her innocent impressions of him were slowly eroded by her realization of his guilt. It is completed, however, when she finds out that he is willing to kill his own niece to keep his secret. This short scene on the stairs marks a turning point for Young Charlie. Her doubts about her suspicions are erased, along with her innocence.

Spellbound (1945), Hitchcock's first postwar project, starred newcomer Gregory Peck as an amnesiac, John Ballantine, in search of his past. The film explores both the science and mystery behind Freud and psychoanalysis. With the help of Ingrid Bergman's Dr. Constance Petersen, Ballantine's confused character uses clinical psychology efforts to piece together his identity. Near the end, he suffers a violent flashback which reveals the reasons for his amnesia problems. He remembers playing with his brother in front of his home as a child. The camera takes his point of view as he slides down the bannister of the front stairs. As he reaches the bottom he knocks into his brother and sends him flying onto spiked wrought-iron railing, impaled to death. His extreme horror and guilt blocked out his memory of the event and confused his identity.

The scene is short, and disjunct, to evoke how a memory might play out in one's head -- a series of visual impressions. Yet the stairs are important. As he sits at the top of the bannister, he is an innocent child. He begins his journey of sliding down as a child looking for a bit of fun, but it ends in tragedy. By the time he reaches the bottom of the stairs he has killed his brother and suddenly his childish impulses are selfish and unthinking. There is a swift journey from innocence to experience, one that is so traumatic it becomes the underlying basis for the whole film.

The use of stairs abound in *Notorious* (1946). The mansion is Rio, where Alicia Huberman (Ingrid Bergman) eventually lives with her husband Alex Sebastian (Claude Rains), is the main setting. The grand foyer is anchored by a sweeping staircase, where more than one defining moment will take place. Additionally, there is the stairway that leads to the wine cellar, which will be the point at which Alex figures out Alicia's true identity. During the party sequence, Alicia tells her handler, T.R. Devlin (Cary Grant) about the wine cellar, the two spend the rest of the evening trying to get downstairs. Everything they say, do, imply, or look at revolves around this singular goal. They believe traversing those stairs will reveal information necessary to the operation. Finding the uranium in the wine bottles does suggest Alex's plans but the real importance is that by being downstairs in the wine cellar they set in motion the plot to kill Alicia. Alex becomes suspicious and pieces together that she must have discovered his secret. In this case, both characters go from a state of innocence to experience. Alex believed his wife was innocent but now he suspects her. Alicia was safe, even protected by him, but is now a target to him.

Immediately after his discovery of the broken bottle in the wine cellar, Alex slowly

climbs the main stairs to tell his mother of his discovery. In this long tracking shot, the audience is shown how Alex is reluctant to kill his wife, whom he actually does adore. Yet with each step upstairs he becomes more resolved to protect himself from being caught, even at the cost of killing Alicia. At the top of the stairs, he has transformed from a disillusioned husband to a determined spy.

The final scene in which Devlin comes to rescue Alicia is the most dramatic and takes place entirely on the grand staircase. Devlin has managed to reach the bedroom where they are keeping a nearly comatose Alicia. Now he must get her out of the house safely. As they reach the top of the stairs, Alex meets them. Afraid that his fellow conspirators will kill him if they learn his dying wife was an American spy, he is paralyzed. His comrades stand in the foyer on black and white checkered tile, looking like chess pieces ready to strike and call checkmate. The party slowly descends, step by step. Devlin has the upper hand, threatening Alex with exposure unless he helps them reach the car safely. At an excruciatingly slow pace, they make it to the front door when Devlin makes a comment about the phone in Alicia's room. She is put in the car, Devlin drives off to the hospital and one of the spies says, "She had no phone in her room." Alex is caught and returns inside with resignation to his fate.

In this scene, Alex begins assumed innocent by his cohorts. By degrees, as they come downstairs, his innocence is doubted. Each moment of indecision and non responsiveness leads to suspicion of his true intentions. By the time he reaches the foyer, his innocence, in their eyes, is gone and he is now subject to their punishment. The stairs in *Notorious* complete the journey from innocence to experience three times.

Strangers on a Train (1951), based on the book by Patricia Highsmith, changes venues of

action several times. Stairs are used just once, briefly, but figure into a major turning point in the story. Guy Haines (Farley Granger) has agreed to 'switch' murder victims with a random person he met on a train trip. However, he has a change of heart and decides to warn his victim, instead of kill him.

Creeping in the darkness, with a flashlight that illuminates a hand drawn map, Haines picks his way through the Tudor-style house. The flashlight follows the drawing of the stairs, before it finds the foot of the actual staircase. Haines approaches the steps and sees a large dog at the landing. Their eyes lock and Haines must decide whether to proceed towards his quarry. He does, with caution, and as he reaches the dog, he puts out his hand, the film goes into slow motion, and the dog nuzzles and licks him. He has passed the first test. Haines continues up the stairs, finds the bedroom door, check the gun one last time -- then shakes his head and puts it in his pocket. He cannot do what he came here to do. In near utter darkness he calls to the man in bed, who stirs, and listens as he confesses his would-be crime. Then the man in bed turns on the side table lamp and reveals that he is not the intended victim, but the partner in crime. Hitchcock recalls, "In that scene we first have a suspense effect, through that threatening dog, and then we have a surprise effect when the person turns out to be Robert Walker instead of his father."⁴

In this ascent to the bedroom, Haines have traversed from innocence to experience. At the bottom of the stairs, he is ignorant of what truly awaits him. Instead of finding his quarry and exacting mercy, he is met with his nemesis and is now in danger. This thrusts him into a hazardous position, and represents a loss of his innocence regarding the entire situation.

⁴ Truffaut, Francois. *Hitchcock*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967. Pg. 145.

In 1954, Hitchcock released two films, both with the indomitable Grace Kelly. The first was *Dial M for Murder*, with Ray Milland as the murderous husband whose plans go awry. While there is no featured scene on the stairs (it, like *Rope* is primarily a filmed stageplay) the swapping of the keys that becomes important to solve the crime at the end centers around the stair carpet outside their door. Milland hides a key there for the murderer to use to kill his wife -- and this small detail will prove to be his undoing.

Also in 1954, *Rear Window* was released. Here the stairs are much less literal. While spying on his neighbor, LB Jefferies (James Stewart) believes he has seen a man kill his wife. He convinces his girlfriend, Lisa (Grace Kelly), that he is correct and she decides to break into his apartment to find evidence. She is desperate to prove she has a sense of adventure, despite her Madison Avenue lifestyle and she takes off across the courtyard with Stella (Thelma Ritter). They climb a short set of steps up a terrace, then climb a fire escape ladder to get over a garden fence. They cross the courtyard, then Lisa climbs another fire escape ladder to a small balcony, then uses that to reach an open window into Thorwald's apartment. Her object is to find evidence that he killed his wife, or at least that she is dead and not traveling, as he claims. Lisa finds a wedding ring but not before Thorwald returns. The cops are called and she is saved from Thorwald's assault. Standing near the window, she shows the ring to Jefferies across the courtyard by wiggling her finger and pointing to it. Unfortunately this catches the attention of Thorwald as well, and he follows the line of sight to Jefferies' apartment.

Now the tables have turned. The watchers are the watched. Throughout the entire film, they have spied on Thorwald in complete anonymity. Now, not only does he know he is being watched, he knows who is doing the watching. Their innocence is gone. It is

no longer an amusement from afar. The knowledge that has been gained may help catch a murderer but it places them in peril, and they are unable to return to a state of anonymity.

It is also a moment of realization for Jefferies. Hare writes:

At a key moment toward the end of the picture Lisa jolts Jefferies to a new level of awareness. In her anxiety to solve the case and prove Thorwald is the killer that she, Jefferies and Stella believe him to be, Lisa climbs up the fire escape and sneaks into the salesman's apartment while he is gone. Jefferies not only has to eat his words concerning the elegant and sophisticated Lisa Fremont, who is now showing her daring side, he realizes after Thorwald returns and finds the beautiful blonde intruder how much she means to him.⁵

Jefferies can no longer return to his state of casual affection, of blissful ignorance. He has seen Lisa in action, doing exactly what he accused of being unable to do. And Lisa, can no longer hide behind her beautiful clothes and cool demeanor. She has crossed the line into the world of experience.

Hitchcock remade one of his own films in 1956, *The Man Who Knew Too Much* with James Stewart and Doris Day. Ben and Jo McKenna's son is kidnapped while on vacation by operatives who believe Ben has information. Since it is a case of mistaken identity, he must instead figure out the plot to rescue his son. The chase eventually leads them to London, and a party where Jo, a world-famous singer, is asked to entertain. Still in great distress over her missing child, she sings "Que Sera, Sera", a song he knows, in hopes he can hear it in the upper floors. Her signal works and the son whistles back, telling Ben where he is being held. Ben finds him and brings him out

⁵ Hare, William. *Hitchcock and the Methods of Suspense*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2007. Pg. 185.

of the room. Now they must descend the stairs, much like in *Notorious*, to escape the kidnappers. This time, the kidnapper has the foresight to realize his position. He has a gun on the two as they start to walk down the grand staircase. Slowly, step by step they approach the foyer and the sound of Jo's singing voice gets louder. Then, nearing the bottom, Ben lunges forward and pushes the kidnapper. He stumbles, falls on his gun and kills himself. His wife peeks out from the top of the stairs with a bit of shock but little emotion. The party guests, hearing the shot, run out into the foyer as Ben ushers his son away from the crowd.

In this scene, the stairs are used to act as a bridge from one state to another. Although these kidnappers are hardly innocent and Ben has dealt with more than his fair share throughout the film, the decision to attempt to traverse the stairs is a choice. At the top of the steps, they all know where they stand but both parties want to see a change in the current circumstances. The kidnapper wants to get the child outside without any guests seeing them. Ben wants to rescue his child and bring down the kidnapper. The stairs are the only path for both for them and they must use each other to get what they want. Stair imagery is prevalent in 1958's *Vertigo*. Again, Hitchcock cast James Stewart against Kim Novak. As the title implies, it deals with a man's inability to handle heights, being struck by extreme dizziness every time he looks down from even the smallest elevation. This condition will be used against him by those who wish to commit, and conceal, a murder.

The first instance of imposing staircases are those of the McKitterick Hotel. Scottie (Stewart), a retired detective, is following Novak to various, seemingly unrelated sights around San Francisco at the behest of an old college friend, now her husband. When

they reach this hotel, an old Mission-style mansion turned boarding house, Stewart waits until she has gone in before he follows her. He sees her in a window just before he gets to the front door. As he steps inside he is met by a large, heavy wooden staircase. He then meets the hotel manager and asks about the woman. When she replies that she hasn't seen her today, he insists she go up and check the room, which she does. When she finds it empty, she calls to Scottie and asks him to come up. The camera cuts to a high angle that reveals the upstairs landing, the curve of the bannister, the stairs leading down to the foyer and Scottie standing at the bottom. It's an imposing, and somewhat dizzying sight but Scottie bounds up, two at a time, with high school-like athleticism. Indeed the room is empty and there is no trace that she was ever there.

His climbing of these stairs to find an empty room mark a moves from innocence to experience for his character. Initially, he was just following around a friend's wife who was acting a little funny. But when she disappears, he realizes there is something more happening. He is determined to figure out her motives, even at the expense of upsetting his very rationally minded girlfriend.

The next day Madeleine (Novak) begins her wanderings again, this time to a park that is situated under the structure of the Golden Gate Bridge. After sprinkling a few flower petals below, she throws herself into the waves. Scottie races down the stairs that lead into the water to save her. He grabs her floating body, then lifts her out of the bay, carrying her via the same stairs. By saving her life he has made another step from innocence to experience. He has now accepted her strange behavior enough to interact with and affect it.

At this point, Scottie decides he will figure out Madeleine's mystery with her help. They

start visiting places together and his depression and paranoia become more and more evident. They finally end up at a small village green with an old stable, courthouse, church and convent. With little warning she breaks free from their embrace and runs into the chapel. Scottie runs after her and sees her heading for the bell tower stairs. In great contrast to the ornate and beautiful sanctuary, the stairs are rough hewn beams and timbers, crudely put together. Scottie tries to pursue as she races to the top of the tower but his vertigo affects him. He clammers a few steps and then the camera shows a completely vertical shot of the winding stairs, making it zoom in and out quickly to simulate what it might feel like for Scottie with his condition. He makes it to the last flight but is stuck, clinging to a beam when he hears a scream and then sees a woman fall to her death from the tower.

In this scene Scottie experiences his penultimate movement of innocence to experience. He has fallen in love with Madeleine and expects to be able to “cure” her of her strange wanderings. Even as he attempts to overcome his greatest fear and a debilitating disease to try and save her once again, he believes they can one day lead a happy, normal life. When she dies in front of him, he not only has to deal with her loss, but the realization that he failed her, both literally by being unable to climb the stairs, and figuratively by not being enough for her to want to stay alive for. The stairs are a representation of his journey from innocence to experience.

At the end of the film, Scottie discovers that he had been set up and finds the girl who only pretended to die that day. To rid himself of the nightmares, he brings her back to the church and the bell tower and makes her climb the stairs, with him. He is determined to make it to the top this time, and erase the demons. He has a couple of

flashes of vertigo but he keeps on. When they reach the spot he got to last time, he confronts her with the knowledge that he knows -- that she was a double used to conceal his wife' murder, to make it look like a suicide. Madeleine tries to run but he forces her to stay and listen to everything she did, step by step to the belfry. He gets her to confess and she begs for forgiveness, and to be allowed to love him again. He knows there is no way to replace what she was but as she stands in his arms, a dark figure rises from the shadows. Madeleine is scared and backs away and falls out the window. Scottie then stands on the ledge and looks down at the place she fell -- with no ill effects of his disease.

This last trip up the stairs completes his journey from innocence to experience. He will no longer allow himself to be taken in by the lies that have been fed to him. He uses the stairs to heal himself, to finish the journey he was not able to make before. But in doing so he was forced to let go of the intoxicating fantasy that he had allowed Madeleine to build around him.

Stairs also figure prominently in *Psycho* (1960). Shot in black and white, on a shoestring budget, this film seeks to shock and frighten rather than psychologically stimulate. Lines and shadows are sharp and final. Dialogue is clipped and to the point. There is an "end of the road" feeling to it. Indeed, it is for more than one character.

Stairs first appear when Detective Arbogast (Martin Balsam) has been inquiring about the disappearance of Marion Crane (Janet Leigh). Getting nowhere by asking Norman (Anthony Perkins), he snoops around for himself, eventually being drawn to the main house that sits on the hill behind the motel. He surreptitiously climbs the landscaped stairs to the Victorian mansion (that looks much like the McKitterick Hotel in *Vertigo*).

As he opens the front door the first thing he sees are wooden, heavy stairs (also just like the stairs in *Vertigo*). Determined to talk to the old woman he saw sitting in the window, he starts up the steps. The camera cuts to a tight shot, showing the audience how he places his feet on the first two steps. He is wary but intent. The camera now turns to face him as he climbs the stairs. It pulls back with every step he makes toward it so it appears he is making no headway. The camera then moves to the overhead shot (like in *Vertigo*) at the top of the stairs, but instead of finding an empty room, Arbogast is met with the knife of a killer. It reverts to the head-on shot of him as he now falls backwards, down the stairs to the floor below, where the murderer finishes the job.

Unfortunately for Arbogast, his trek from innocence to experience is short and final. He begins by thinking that the mother he saw sitting in the window may have some helpful information for him. But he barely reaches the second floor before he is assaulted. The moment of realization for him is terrifying. Not only does it signal the end of his life but he could see the killer's face and must have figured out the murder of Marion Crane as well, but will never be able to reveal it. By climbing up then falling down these stairs, Arbogast completes his cycle of innocence to experience.

When Marion's sister, played by Vera Miles, sneaks into the house by walking up the hill, not using the stairs as Arbogast did. She intends to question Mrs. Bates, she too is immediately drawn to the stairs once inside. But unlike Arbogast we do not see her actually climb the steps as the film is cutting back and forth between Miles and Marion's boyfriend who is keeping Norman company back down at the motel. When we come back to her she is already upstairs, exploring Mrs. Bates' room. Next we see her at the top of the next landing, about to go into Norman's room. Then we see her about

halfway down the stairs but noticing that Norman is coming up the hill to the house. Looking for a quick hiding place, she slips around to hide under the back of the staircase, on the steps to the basement. With the coast now clear, she is about to leave the house when something in the basement catches her eye. She descends into the cellar, and this time we see the journey. Slowly she picks her way through the darkened rooms, down another couple of steps to a storage room. She sees the back of Mrs. Bates and taps her on the shoulder. Mrs. Bates' body turns around and it is revealed she is a skeleton.

It is significant that Hitchcock does not show Miles make a complete journey on the stairs until her trip to the basement. Until she goes down there, she could have left the house an innocent, with no more knowledge than when she arrived. But once she decides to explore the basement, there is no turning back. She has left the realm of innocence and accepted knowledge and experience.

Through the examination of these Hitchcock films, it is clear that stairs play an important role in his storytelling and character development. He uses them as an element of suspense, by slowing down the action. But he also uses them as a bridge for the characters to move from a state of innocence and unknowing to experience and knowledge and reflects the philosophical ideas of William Blake.

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