

Fatal Spaces:  
Alfred Hitchcock, Fritz Lang, and the Art of Murder  
by  
Ryan McBride

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of  
The University of Manitoba  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English  
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## Abstract

Alfred Hitchcock and Fritz Lang had an enormous influence on one another's filmmaking throughout their careers. Both directors shared an abiding obsession with themes of murder and guilt, but their manner of envisioning these themes diverged in significant ways. This thesis compares several murder scenes from their films in order to demonstrate their contrasting approaches to a number of narrative, thematic and aesthetic issues. The first chapter compares Hitchcock's *The 39 Steps* to Lang's *Ministry of Fear*, and explores how the manipulation of viewer perception leads to ambiguities neither film fully resolves. The second chapter compares Hitchcock's *Blackmail* to Lang's *The Blue Gardenia* in order to map out the different ways both directors use space and architecture to portray the condition of guilty entrapment. The third chapter takes the architectural image of the staircase and examines its metaphorical and metaphysical implications in a number of Hitchcock's and Lang's murder scenes. Ultimately, either director's use of filmic space, point of view, and suspense lead us farther into their murder scenes than we might otherwise be willing to go, and we end up as much their victims as the characters on the screen.

# Table of Contents

Abstract.....	page 2
Acknowledgements.....	page 4
Introduction.....	page 5
Chapter 1:	
Incriminating Nightmares:	
<i>The 39 Steps</i> and <i>Ministry of Fear</i> .....	page 15
Chapter 2:	
Wonderlands and Looking-Glass Worlds:	
<i>Blackmail</i> and <i>The Blue Gardenia</i> .....	page 42
Chapter 3:	
Watch Your Step:	
Hitchcock, Lang, and the Fatal Staircase.....	page 77
Conclusion.....	page 109
Works Cited.....	page 115

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## Introduction

### Alfred Hitchcock, Fritz Lang, and the Art of Murder

People begin to see that something more goes to the composition of a fine murder than two blockheads to kill and be killed—a knife—a purse—and a dark lane. Design, gentlemen, grouping, light and shade, poetry, sentiment, are now deemed indispensable to attempts of this nature.

— Thomas De Quincey, “Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts”

One night in the winter of 1920, police were summoned to the Berlin apartment of Austrian film director Fritz Lang. In the upstairs bathroom they found the body of Lang’s wife, Lisa Rosenthal, dead of a bullet wound to the chest. Lang’s Browning revolver lay on the floor nearby. By Lang’s account, Rosenthal had returned home unexpectedly, catching him in *flagrante delicto* with his lover, Thea von Harbou. An argument ensued. The incident was hushed up and officially labelled an “accident”; Lang’s personal detractors, however, whispered that the director had murdered his wife and arranged the evidence to look like a suicide.

In his biography of Lang, Patrick McGilligan states: “From the first film to the last, guilt, complicity, false accusation, irredeemable crime, inadvertent killings, and suicide haunt Lang’s work,” but that “these plot twists and ideological motifs were elevated to ceremonial status afterward by the director some believed killed his first wife” (79). Even if McGilligan’s willingness to link Lang’s thematic concerns to the enigmatic details of his private life amount to little more than speculation, his comments do underscore the pervasive darkness of Lang’s cinema—a darkness that was to gain prominence in the films he made after fleeing Nazi Germany for America in 1934.

Especially in the forties and early fifties, murder and the ambiguity of guilt become the central themes of Lang's narratives. Indeed, nowhere else in Lang's films is his mastery of cinematic technique more in evidence than in his staging of murder scenes, which obsessively return to the same scenario: the sudden eruption of violence in the lives of characters who give in, if only for a moment, to the temptations of desire.

What distinguishes Lang's murder scenes in particular is their visual style. Having come to America fully expert in the nuances of German Expressionist filmmaking and the documentary realism of the New Objectivity (a strange fusion of seemingly irreconcilable aesthetics that Lang had nevertheless put to use in his later German films), he now demonstrated a striking ability to enhance the metaphorical implications of his murder scenes through the use of cinematic space, camera work, lighting, performance, editing, and *mise-en-scene*. As a consequence, while Lang's murders unravel with an airless, perfunctory quality, and spring from set-up to climax with the precision of a well-calibrated machine, they also express a distinctively deterministic vision of the world, one whose depth, complexity, and perceptual challenges often slip past unnoticed on first viewing.

Lang's film-making style and professional career have frequently been compared to another master of cinematic murders, Alfred Hitchcock. As film scholars have noted, their connection has a historical basis: in 1924, Hitchcock visited the Ufa studios in Berlin as an assistant-director on a British-German co-production called *The Blackguard*. While he was there, Hitchcock paid a visit to the set of Lang's *Metropolis*, which would eventually become the Austrian director's best-known film. Although Hitchcock was

often reticent to name him as one of his models, Lang's films were to have a lasting impact on the English director's work. The massive scale and architectural grandeur of Lang's visual style "would have impressed [Hitchcock]—in particular the flair for ornament, design and the movement of crowds—[but ]their immediate themes and obsessions were never his" (Orr 56). What *did* inspire Hitchcock was Lang's dexterous handling of themes of "suspicion, flight, dissembling, madness, [and] betrayal" in his early spy thrillers, especially *Spies*, *Spiders*, and the Dr. Mabuse films (Orr 60), to which Hitchcock's espionage thrillers were clearly indebted. For this reason, Hitchcock soon came to be known as "the English Fritz Lang" (Bogdanovich 170). Even in late films such as *Frenzy*, the German influence (and Lang's in particular) can still be felt—Orr suggests that *Frenzy*, Hitchcock's "final reckoning with Weimar," looks back (if obliquely) to the themes and aesthetics of Lang's 1931 masterpiece, *M* (66). As Hitchcock himself would remark many years later, "My models were forever after the German filmmakers of 1924 and 1925. They were trying very hard to express ideas in purely visual terms" (Spoto 68).

Many critics have since noted that Hitchcock was influenced not only by the Germans' pure visual storytelling, but also by the atmosphere of disequilibrium, menace and anxiety of German Expressionism, with its forced perspectives, claustrophobic lighting, and psychologically charged interiors. John Orr comments that these qualities become most apparent later on in "the special design of the Hitchcock murder. At its most effective it is an event that seems on first sight to be contingent but then convinces us it is grounded in necessity"; by absorbing Expressionism's metaphysics of space into



his murder scenes, "Hitchcock transcends the shock-effect of the generic horror movie and creates his own vision of destiny. At first the killings seem sudden and arbitrary. In retrospect we feel they could not have happened otherwise" (Orr 55).

Influence has been shown to have flowed in both directions, however. After arriving in America, Lang tried to achieve the popularity and critical status he had enjoyed in Europe, but without success. Five years later, Hitchcock also emigrated to America, where he quickly became known as the "Master of Suspense." Clearly, the portly British upstart was overtaking Lang's reputation as the cinema's pre-eminent practitioner of the thriller-genre. Lang recognized that the only way forward was to beat Hitchcock at his own game. He thus began to make a series of anti-Nazi films, such as *Cloak and Dagger*, *Man Hunt* and *Ministry of Fear*, which more or less copied from similar films by Hitchcock (and why not, since Hitchcock had already copied from him?). Ironically, Lang's modest success with these pictures did little more than garner him rather neutral comparisons to the English director: he was now being referred to as "the German Alfred Hitchcock," an epithet he obviously despised (Bogdanovich 171). Only once did Lang praise Hitchcock by openly admiring his skilful evocation of the absent title character's presence in *Rebecca*, which he then folded into his own tale of the female Gothic, *Secret Beyond the Door*. It was around this time that Lang, with the help of studio marketing staff, began searching for his own "handle", something as evocative as "the master of suspense" or "the Lubitsch touch". As Tom Gunning observes, "His reputation for tyrannical control over details suggested one tack with the (incredibly unappealing) proposal, 'perfectionist deluxe'" (343). Lang was quickly finding that his

personal reputation was often overshadowing the reception of his work as a film-maker.

While Hitchcock's box-office popularity, creative control, and budget allotments increased over the years, Lang's flat-lined. Only rarely did he have the luxury of working with A-list stars, or even of producing his own scripts, and so many of his finest American films have remained largely unrecognized until recently. (Lang's commercial and critical failure relative to Hitchcock could be attributed to many causes, including his inability to adapt to the American storytelling idiom, and his unshakeable habit of alienating almost everyone who worked with him on more than one film. With fewer options available to him, he was often forced to accept assignments he considered to be well beneath his talents.) Although many of Lang's films are now considered some of the most skilful examples of pure cinematic storytelling at its most sophisticated, film scholarship has proven strangely reluctant to give Lang his due, even when extending the possibility that Lang is a superior artist to Hitchcock (Allen v). Only recently have critics begun to correct this discrepancy somewhat. In his nearly exhaustive overview of Lang's films, Tom Gunning explores the Austrian director's works in terms of their allegorical depiction of death, desire and modernity. George M. Wilson and Douglas Pye have contributed penetrating analyses of Lang's use of point of view and narrational technique, which frequently calls to task the viewer's insufficiencies of attention and perception. John Orr offers an extended (if necessarily impressionistic) account of Lang's film-making vision in relation to Hitchcock's in his study of the English director's significance as a "matrix-figure" of twentieth-century cinema, and traces out many subtle ways in which Lang's films influenced Hitchcock until the end of his career.

Indeed, this latter kind of approach is perhaps as good a place as any to begin coaxing Lang out of Hitchcock's shadow—by using some of the reflected light to draw in starker relief the specific and often subtle ways in which these two directors, who are so often compared to one another, are in fact artists of strikingly different cinematic visions. As I have said, it is frequently noted that Hitchcock and Lang freely borrowed narrative and genre patterns from one another throughout their careers. Even more compelling, though, is their shared obsession with themes of desire, murder, fate, and the ambiguity of guilt. In my view, these themes outline more than any other the storytelling concerns most at stake for either director, and offer a tantalizing opening into the fundamental contrasts between their distinctive points of view.

My thesis therefore aims to explore these themes in the works of Hitchcock and Lang by focussing in considerable detail on the manner in which they stage scenes of murder. Not only will such a focus allow me to account as specifically as possible for the ways in which Hitchcock and Lang envision these themes philosophically; it will also provide me with a contained space in which to address their individual aesthetic approaches to pivotal narrative moments. I would argue that nowhere else are their filmmaking strategies more resonant and finely-tuned than in scenes depicting murder. Given Orr's comment that Hitchcock's murder scenes are especially indebted to the influence of German Expressionism, of which Lang was a notable practitioner, it thus seems doubly appropriate to bring their skills in the art of murder into parallel focus. My interest, however, lies less in specific questions of influence and idea-theft (which are almost always prone to speculation, especially when both directors remain bound and determined

not to cite one another by name) than in contrasting the particular implications of similar aesthetic approaches and narrative scenarios.

One of the central claims I wish to make is that Hitchcock and Lang stage their murder scenes according to distinctive but divergent metaphysics of filmic space: that is, the metaphorical significance of acts of murder in their films expresses itself most fully through the ways in which both directors portray the movements of their characters through specific architectural spaces. To put it another way, particular spaces (and a character's movement through them) correspond to psychological or moral conditions or trajectories that shift and deepen as a scene progresses. Hitchcock and Lang frequently set their murder scenes in domestic interior spaces such as apartments and staircases; while neither director remains wholly committed to a particular kind of space in an all-or-nothing fashion, certain patterns begin to emerge when their films are viewed as a whole. Moreover, when their preferences overlap (as they often do), the metaphysical function of the space itself remains consistent with either director's particular thematic vision.

In the first chapter of the thesis, I will compare murder scenes from Hitchcock's *The 39 Steps* and Lang's *Ministry of Fear*. I have chosen to begin with these films in part because they represent an instance in which Lang is clearly reworking the Hitchcockian model of the espionage thriller (which, as I will explain then, has its own roots in Lang's German crime epics). More importantly, both films feature murders that falsely incriminate their protagonists. What is most striking about the murder scenes themselves, however, is the fact that Hitchcock and Lang willfully obscure the viewer's

perception of what is taking place. In *The 39 Steps*, the murder takes place off-screen; in *Ministry of Fear*, it takes place in total darkness. While the viewer is ostensibly encouraged to assume that neither protagonist is really guilty of the crimes they are accused of committing, the perceptual lacunas that withhold the murders from view open up room for Hitchcock and Lang to explore the ambiguity of guilt. In this chapter, I will focus less on the metaphysics of space than on problems of subjectivity, viewer knowledge, and the implications of the ambiguities generated by the ellipsis of the murder act.

In the second chapter, I will look at two films that portray a similar narrative scenario. In Hitchcock's *Blackmail* and Lang's *The Blue Gardenia*, a female protagonist is forced to kill a man as he attempts to rape her. Both films illustrate what I take to be the central contrast between the two director's metaphysics of murder. Hitchcock portrays the guilty entrapment of his female protagonist, Alice White, as a journey through vertical spaces—staircases, in particular—that stress his vision of murder and guilt as the consequences of desire and transgression. Lang, on the other hand, portrays the trajectory of his protagonist, Norah Larkin, through a labyrinth of horizontally oriented interiors that reflect his vision of murder and guilt as the result of deterministic systems of control to which she is largely unaware. In *The Blue Gardenia*, Lang employs the image of the mirror to visualize Norah's psychic blindness; more importantly, he uses it to point up the flaws in the perceptions of the film's viewers, who too readily jump to conclusions about Norah's guilt without taking into proper account a number of details, placed right before our eyes, that might have led us to other inferences.

In the third and final chapter, I will focus not on a particular theme but on a specific architectural structure—the staircase—which figures prominently in the spatial metaphysics of both directors. The staircase is perhaps the most consistently recognizable and expressive element in Hitchcock's cinematic architecture, and functions throughout his films as an intersection of desire, suspense, transgression, control, and the powers of vision. In Lang's early films, by contrast, the staircase operates as a vertical backdrop for shifting hierarchies and power relations. This chapter will focus on two films by Lang—*M* and *House by the River*—in which he deviates from his standard practice and links the staircase to murder. I will compare the murder scenes in these films to a number of staircase scenes in the films of Hitchcock, including *The Lodger*, *Shadow of a Doubt*, *Psycho*, *Vertigo* and *Frenzy*, in order to demonstrate how Lang uses vertical space to link death and desire with his objective deterministic vision, while Hitchcock uses it to explore similar issues from the perspective of character subjectivity.

At this point, I wish to note that one of the abiding objections to the kind of author-based criticism I will undertake in this thesis is that it assumes the directors in question had complete creative control over the films they produced, and that it unforgivably overlooks the contributions of producers, screenwriters, technicians and anyone else involved in the film-making process. Where Hitchcock is concerned, the issue of artistic control is largely settled: an enormous body of work exists that confirms the impact of his presiding vision over every aspect of the films he made. More than almost any other director, he insinuated himself in the entire scope of a production, from story development and scriptwriting to set design, costuming and make-up. As Robin

Wood notes, this doesn't guarantee that Hitchcock foresaw every conceivable implication of his creative choices—certainly the unabated avalanche of Hitchcock scholarship and criticism supports the contention that his films are still capable of conveying meanings even he never considered (20-26). Nevertheless, the distinctive nature of his body of work continues to make it possible—and perhaps even necessary—to attend to his films as the expression of a specific, individual sensibility.

While Lang had far less control over the process of producing his own films, he also exerted a remarkable degree of control over his film projects, revising the scripts that were assigned to him, designing the sets, meticulously planning the angles of his camera, even sketching out “the gestures of his actors” (Gunning 6). The films I have chosen to include in my thesis are definite examples of those in which Lang's participation was especially pronounced. If I refer throughout the chapters that follow to the authorship of Hitchcock and Lang and to the integrity of their individual cinematic visions as truths to be taken for granted, it is also—and more importantly—because the details in the films themselves speak so eloquently and persistently on their behalf.

## Chapter 1

### Incriminating Nightmares: *The 39 Steps* and *Ministry of Fear*

"I was the common quarry of mankind, hunted, houseless, a known murderer, thrall to the gallows."

— Robert Louis Stevenson, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

"[T]he narration of dreams can bring calamity, because a person still half in league with the dream world betrays it in his words and must incur its revenge."

— Walter Benjamin, "One-Way Street".

Critics and film historians looking to find evidence of Fritz Lang's influence on the early films of Alfred Hitchcock usually begin with the German director's spy films of the 1920's and 30's, including *Spies*, *Spiders* and the first two *Dr. Mabuse* films. John Orr notes how, in particular, "the poetics of dissembling, flight and suspicion" found in Lang's spy thrillers inspired Hitchcock's similar approach to films such as *The 39 Steps* (1934) (57, 63-64), prompting critics to hail Hitchcock as the "British Fritz Lang" (Bogdanovich 170).

Nearly a decade later, Lang found himself struggling in Hollywood to achieve the level of critical and commercial success that had marked his earlier German career. When Paramount assigned him the task of directing an adaptation of Graham Greene's *The Ministry of Fear* in 1943, Lang jumped at the opportunity; he had enjoyed the novel, and its depiction of a protagonist mired in ambiguous guilt appealed to his own sensibilities. He also saw the project as the perfect opportunity to reclaim his title as cinema's master of tension and suspense—a title Lang felt that Hitchcock had stolen from him by copying from his German spy thrillers. But the script handed to Lang was a disappointment to the



director, who tried and failed to back out of the project. Because the film's screenwriter (Seton I. Miller) was also its producer, Lang's creative input at the script development stage was unusually limited; certainly bitterness toward the chafing circumstances of the film's production, rather than any particular critical insight, seem to account for Lang's later dismissal of the film as "utterly impersonal" and "a botch" (McGilligan 307). As biographers and interviewers of Lang have so often noted however, his recollections and opinions of his work were frequently subject to unreliability and distortion. Despite Lang's personal views about the film and the creative limitations imposed upon him during its production, *Ministry of Fear* nevertheless demonstrates an extraordinary and sophisticated fusion of theme and visual narration equal to that found in any of Lang's more widely acknowledged masterpieces.

The plot of Seton Miller's screenplay modelled itself rather earnestly on the kind of espionage thriller for which Hitchcock was becoming increasingly well known. In fact, the Hitchcock film that *Ministry of Fear* could be said to resemble most closely is *The 39 Steps*, which owed so much of its own spirit to Lang's stylistic influence. Both films share remarkable similarities in tone, structure and scenario. Their plots, for instance, both centre on protagonists who find themselves drawn unwittingly into the machinations of foreign spy rings bent on sneaking national security secrets out of England. Before long, both men find themselves incriminated in murders they did not commit and on the run from enemy agents and law enforcement alike. Their triumph and survival finally depend, therefore, on their ability to expose the spies as much as their ability to prove themselves innocent of the crimes they stand accused of committing.

The murders, then, are obviously of central importance to narratives they precipitate; yet what strikes me as intriguing about the scenes in which they are depicted is that in both cases, the actual crime is hidden from view. In *The 39 Steps*, Richard Hannay awakens in the middle of the night to the sight of Annabella, a mysterious woman he has brought back to his London flat, staggering towards him, where she collapses across the bed, a knife in her back. We are witness only to the immediate aftermath of her murder, which has already taken place off-screen. In *Ministry of Fear*, Stephen Neale participates in a seance that takes place in almost total darkness. When one of the guests is shot to death, the darkness itself conceals the murder-act from view. Hitchcock and Lang deliberately transform potential spectacles of tension and violence into moments of astonishing perceptual and narrative ambiguity. In the discussion that follows, I would like to compare the two directors' individual approaches to the visual staging of these murder scenes, and explore the different ways in which the ambiguities they generate leak into the fabric of the surrounding narrative, where they begin, insidiously, to spread.

As is often the case in the films of Hitchcock and Lang, the local effectiveness and ultimate significance of the two murder scenes in question depends largely on their meticulous preparation in advance. In *The 39 Steps*, for example, Hitchcock uses architecture, decor and mise-en-scene to fill what will become the scene of the crime—Hannay's London flat—with resonances of danger and vulnerability to attack well before a murder ever takes place there. Near the beginning of the film, after a gunshot disrupts the performance at a local music hall, Hannay returns to his flat with an alluring stranger who calls herself Annabella and claims to need protection. As they enter

Hannay's darkened sitting-room, Annabella immediately makes her way across the room to a row of large uncurtained windows on the right. Only when she has positioned herself safely between two of these windows does she give Hannay permission to turn on the lights. Her furtive movements and fixed position between the windows makes it clear that she feels threatened by exposure to gazes from outside; at this point she tells Hannay that it was she who fired the shot in order to escape the two men who were chasing her.

Strangely, Hannay's flat seems almost incapable of providing her with the protection she requires. Even her reflection in the mirror on the opposite wall threatens to expose her to outside gazes; as a consequence, she asks Hannay to turn it against the wall. For most of the scene, Annabella remains trapped between the two windows in the foreground while Hannay remains close to the back wall, traversing the dangerous space in between by sliding objects back and forth beneath the windows' gaze. The room becomes, in effect, a game-board whose zones of danger and safety limit the movements of its players, a metaphor reflected graphically in the Art Deco wallpaper on the back wall, with its grid of lines and rectangles in various shades of gray. Hitchcock eschews an overhead angle that might make the metaphor even more obvious, filming Hannay and Annabella from more or less the same frontal angle, always towards the back of the room, even when cutting to medium shots and close-ups. By placing the spectator on the same level as the characters and shooting across the zones of danger and safety rather than down onto them, Hitchcock obscures their boundaries and heightens our suspenseful involvement in Annabella's apparent vulnerability.

If the physical arrangement of Hannay's flat allows Hitchcock to dramatize the

perils of exposure to outside forces, it also subtly suggests the possibility of danger from *within* its walls as well: up until now, the film has invited us to identify openly and comfortably with Hannay; but given Annabella's apparent need for protection and invisibility, we are at this point made more consciously aware of exactly how little we know about the man she has asked to protect her. On the one hand, the narrative hasn't yet had time to disclose to us the many layers of personal history, feelings and motives that might otherwise deepen our identification with Hannay as the film's protagonist. By the time Hannay brings Annabella to his flat, we know only that he has come to London from Canada for an extended stay. But if the flat is Hannay's temporary "home", it is remarkably and assertively devoid of the signs and artifacts we usually look for in a space to reveal something about the occupant's personality and past. Hannay explains away the white sheets that cover his furniture by telling Annabella that he is renovating (in other words, he hasn't had a chance to make the space his own). Yet the sheets, with their funereal and ghost-like associations, also reflect the concealed aspects of Hannay's character. Robert Donat's sardonic and flirtatious performance conceals Hannay's true feelings and motives behind a mask of charming indulgence, but Hannay also remains literally covered from view: for the duration of their sojourn in his apartment, he refuses to take off his coat, as if to suggest that he doesn't feel "at home" in this space. Curiously, one almost gets the sense from this that Hannay is as much a stranger to this space as Annabella; that it could, in fact, be anyone's flat. In just such a fashion, the space's overdetermined anonymity makes it impossible for us, too, to take off our own coats and settle into a more comfortable relationship with the man at the centre of

Hitchcock's film, placing us at a distance from Hannay that will have significant implications in the murder scene that follows.

What is remarkable about Hitchcock's preparation of this space is that the implications described above are never forced on the viewer. Rather, they remain unobtrusive, concealed within the background details of the space itself, so that even when they do surface, they appear to harmonize with the local dramatic tensions of the preparatory scenes themselves. When murder finally arrives in Hannay's flat, it unleashes and exacerbates the latent ambiguities already buried there, even as it creates new enigmas for the viewer to absorb. The shot that begins the murder sequence, for instance, returns us to the darkened entry-hall of Hannay's flat, a space we have been shown previously in the scene depicting Hannay and Annabella's arrival from the music hall. In that scene, the entry-hall appeared first as an empty space, its sole occupant a statue standing on a table between the door on the left and the curtained window at the end. The statue, a human figure, points to the ceiling with one arm and to the right with the other; when Hannay and Annabella finally enter from the left, it seems then to direct them further into the apartment. Later, Hannay returns to the hallway and looks out the window at Annabella's instigation, where he sees men in trench-coats waiting in the street below, their presence appearing to corroborate her claim that she is being pursued by dangerous men. After Annabella promises to disclose more of her mission to Hannay the following morning, Hitchcock cuts from the brightly lit kitchen (where they have been talking) to the dark and empty hallway once more. This time the space contains a telling difference: the window is now open, the curtains billowing inward in the night breeze.

The interior of Hannay's flat, to which Annabella has come for protection from outside forces, has been mysteriously compromised. The statue, even if it still refuses to yield an overtly symbolic meaning, now takes on an enigmatic if sinister significance by directing *us* to the right, through the door, and into Hannay's sitting room.

Hitchcock cuts from this image to another space, which is indeed Hannay's sitting room, but filmed from a position so close to the back wall that it compresses the space and makes it difficult for us to recognize where we are. The closed door in the background now occupies the position of the window from the preceding shot, as if one opening has magically transformed into the other. The door opens, and as Annabella staggers in from the hallway that has just been shown to be empty, Hannay sits up from where he has been sleeping, unseen until now, in the foreground. Annabella holds in her hand a scrap of paper, which she holds out to Hannay as she gasps out a warning—"Clear out, Hannay, they'll get you next!"—before collapsing across his bed, a knife in her back. Hannay's shock and bewilderment at this point matches our own; it is as if we, too, have been violently roused from a dream into an incomprehensible waking reality. Our inability to immediately find our bearings only increases this sense of confusion and disorientation. Only when Hannay gets up to answer the phone (which starts to ring almost instantly) does the space fill out and assume the sitting room's more familiar proportions. As the space expands, however, it becomes an echo-chamber in which a host of troubling questions begin to resonate. Who is responsible for killing Annabella? How did the murder take place? The ringing of the phone (which Hannay does not answer) and the presence of a figure in a phone-booth outside initially appear to

corroborate Annabella's story about foreign agents (at this point, Hannay's memory of the details of Annabella's story take on the fittingly spectral form of ghost-like projections on the window he looks out of and the map of Scotland he removes from her grip). But these answers only raise further questions: if the men outside killed Annabella, why did they not kill Hannay in his sleep, rather than attempt (as they do now) to lure him outside with their phone-calls?

As Hannay's sudden decision to leave the apartment quickly involves us in a new and pressing dramatic situation, we are likely to dismiss the peculiar and unresolved ambiguities posed by Annabella's death. Hitchcock prompts us to conclude with relative conviction that she was murdered by the foreign agents who are now after Hannay. Yet the most compelling aspect of the murder itself—its conspicuous absence from the film's visual narration—creates an ineluctably blank space for the viewer's imagination to project tantalizing alternatives to this possibility. For instance, the image of the empty hallway shown to us before the dying Annabella intrudes on Hannay's sleep appears on closer examination to be remarkably layered in its meanings and implications. The curtains at the end of the hall shift and billow like a pair of ghost-like arms, filling the hallway with presence, as if the space is already being haunted by the not-yet-dead Annabella. The curtains also recall the white sheets covering the furniture in the sitting room, and, in a more obscure fashion, Hannay's coat. The statue also acquires a heightened sense of presence: does the arm that points up not also point towards the window through which Annabella's murderers have entered? If in that case its action is accusatory, what do we make of the arm that points to the right, towards Hannay?

Gradually, and in a strikingly poetic fashion, the images seem to imply that Hannay is as much responsible for Annabella's murder as the assailants in the street outside.

One of the most striking differences between *The 39 Steps* and Lang's *Ministry of Fear* is the latter film's openness about its protagonist's guilt, which is not implied ambiguously or through metaphor, but declared outright in the opening scene. Stephen Neale, upon his release from the Lembridge Asylum (where he has been incarcerated for two years) receives a warning from the asylum's director not to get himself involved with the police again because, he says, a "second criminal charge" would be more difficult to clear him of than the one that brought him to the asylum in the first place. Significantly, we are not told anything more about this previous crime; it remains concealed, in effect, behind another tantalizing ellipsis, where it can only invite speculation. Neale's incarceration in an asylum (as opposed to a prison) invites speculation of another sort: it leaves us to question not only the nature of Neale's culpability, but the soundness of his mind as well.

As if to exacerbate these enigmas, Lang's subtle manipulation of point-of-view in the scenes that follow Neale's release from the asylum renders it increasingly difficult to determine the reliability of Neale's perceptions. The most telling example of this takes place at a local fair, where Neale wins a cake by guessing its correct weight. The crowd that surrounds him, so full of conviviality only moments before, responds with an appalled silence in no way commensurate with the apparent naivete of his guess. The shot that tracks across their stunned faces appears, at first, to have been framed from Neale's point of view. Rather than looking into the camera, however, the crowd looks



toward the left to where Neale is revealed seconds later, without a cut, to be standing. Even as the shot evokes a sense of subjectivity, it refuses to unequivocally attach that subjectivity to Neale, leaving us suspended between the possibility that the narration reflects his paranoid perspective on the world, or that it reflects a world itself out of kilter in which innocent actions incur disproportionate helpings of shame and guiltiness.<sup>1</sup>

As the film progresses, Lang's narration continues to oscillate between affirming and subverting the reliability of Neale's point of view. On the train to London, for instance, a man pretending to be blind attacks Neale and steals the cake, an action that confirms our sense (and Neale's) that the cake bears a disturbing significance. When his hotel room in London is ransacked, he hires a private investigator to help get to the bottom of his persecution. His inquiries lead him to the mansion of Mrs. Bellane, the clairvoyant from the fair who disclosed to him the cake's correct weight and thereby made sure it ended up in his possession. However, the Mrs. Bellane who greets him in the foyer of her mansion turns out to be not the querulous old charlatan from the fair, but a different woman entirely: a tall, elegant figure who emerges from the shadows of an open doorway like a seductively angular and threatening statue. She responds to his queries with cool, mechanical poise (curiously resembling, at this moment, the alluring robot Maria in Lang's *Metropolis*) and confirms that she is indeed the fortune-teller from the fair. Her statement, of course, contradicts what Neale and the viewer have already

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<sup>1</sup> My comments on Neale's subjectivity are particularly indebted to George M. Wilson's study of cinematic point of view. For a more thoroughgoing exploration of direct and indirect subjective point of view in classical Hollywood cinema, see his *Narration in Light: Studies in Cinematic Point of View*, John Hopkins UP, Baltimore and London, 1986, pp. 87, 126 and 195.

seen “with our own eyes”; even though she later explains to Neale in their second encounter that the old woman temporarily took her place in the fortune teller’s booth, at this moment it is reasonable for us to wonder whether Mrs. Bellane is deceiving Neale, or whether Lang’s narration is deceiving *us*. To further compound the difficulties of this scene, Neale himself appears remarkably confident that he is being lied to. As much as Lang encourages us to share this conviction (especially in the beginning of the scene that follows), he warns us, like Neale, to keep our eyes open.

After deflecting Neale’s questions with the promise of answers later on, Mrs. Bellane invites him into the seance chamber where a summoning is about to take place. The room shares its mistress’s aura of artificiality. The otherwise blank walls feature electric candles and cobra head sculptures, and a black labyrinthine motif snakes around the room. On the centre of a carpet patterned with the wheel of the zodiac, a round table bears a dragon statuette clutching an electric crystal ball. Like the Lembridge charlatan’s “magic wand” with the electric light at its tip, the space and its contents expose the phoniness of the spiritualist’s powers: they are nothing more than the tools of artifice and deception, their stage-prop flimsiness apparent to all but the blind and the gullible. If the half-smile on Neale’s face as he enters this space is anything to go by, he, for one, is fully aware of its capacity for deception—just as the alertness in his eyes declares a willingness to “play along.” As Neale and the other guests settle into a circle of chairs surrounding the crystal ball, Mrs. Bellane introduces to a late arrival, a certain Mr. Cost. Neale recognizes him instantly: Mr. Cost is the man who arrived late at the Lembridge fair and claimed to be the cake’s rightful winner after Neale had already won it. The coincidence

of Mr. Cost's appearance at the seance and his dubious claim not to recognize Neale seem to confirm Neale's suspicion that he is the victim not of paranoia, but of deliberate persecution and deception.

However, Lang reinforces this conviction only to dissolve it more emphatically moments later. In the darkness of the seance Mrs. Bellane summons the ghost of Neale's prior guilt—a guilt of which we still know almost nothing—and uses the darkness itself to open a more disturbing and consequential breach from our epistemic alignment with Neale. After she instructs the other guests to take their places around the circle and join hands, the lights begin to dim, gradually afflicting seance guest and viewer alike with artificial blindness. The globe at the centre of the circle begins to glow, illuminating a ring of sinister, inscrutable faces. Her own eyes remain closed; Lang frames her throughout the seance from a menacingly open frontal angle, intercutting her “trance” with close-ups of the light-emitting globe. As silence and darkness envelop the scene, Neale watches the faces around him for some sign of the form this drama of deception will take. At that moment, the disembodied voice of a woman begins to whisper: Mrs. Bellane murmurs that the presence in the seance of someone “whose motives are evil” makes it difficult for the spirit to communicate freely. Deep in the thrall of her spiritualist trance, Mrs. Bellane prompts the voice to say more, and it does: “Stephen.... You sat there, watching the clock. I know. You waited for me to die. Was the poison strong enough? The clock stood still. You killed me. The poison. The clock stood still. You murdered...” Neale, galvanized with horror by these words, breaks free from the grip of his neighbours' hands and backs away from the circle, demanding to know who

speaks. He takes another step back and the darkness swallows him completely. The flash from a gunshot reveals to us Neale's presence outside the circle, his hands half-raised.

When the lights go on, Mr. Cost lies dead on the floor. The other guests all claim to have remained in the circle; only Neale has broken free.

In *The 39 Steps*, Hannay's false incrimination in Annabella's murder begins only after the body is discovered later. By contrast, the murder of Mr. Cost takes place before a host of witnesses who all immediately attest to Neale's guilt. Lang uses the darkness of the seance to make such a misapprehension possible. I have already pointed out how, in Hitchcock's film, the insinuation that Hannay may truly be guilty of the crime remains buried in the ambiguous staging of the scenes surrounding the murder itself; in *Ministry of Fear*, Lang makes a spectacle of this ambiguity by afflicting the viewer and the on-screen witnesses with the same blindness. In the context of what we do and do not see in the darkness, the possibility of Neale's actual guilt becomes one of the film's main dramatic questions. On the one hand, his position at the centre of the narrative, and the conspicuous aura of duplicity that adheres to the seance itself, suggest that we aren't to believe everything we see (or don't see). On the other hand, Neale's past guilt, his traumatized reaction to the accusing voice from beyond, and his final position outside the circle seem to convincingly corroborate the suspicions of the other guests. Either way, the darkness that obscures the murder acts as a fulcrum that suspends the viewer's ability to determine the ultimate validity of either judgment.

More importantly, the careful staging of the murders in *Ministry of Fear* and *The 39 Steps* described above both suggest that the crimes in which their protagonists are

insinuated have been committed under altered states of consciousness. In his penetrating analysis of *The 39 Steps*, William Rothman argues that Hannay awakens into the nightmarishly rendered aftermath of Annabella's murder in a manner that prompts us to consider her death as an event that Hannay dreams. That a murder committed in a dream should signal its guilt in images as elusive and enigmatic as the imagery of dreams seems, then, to be only fitting. But unless Hannay's awakening merely signals a transition from one dream-state to another which continues for the duration of the entire film, Annabella's death must be seen as an emphatically "real" event in the film's narrative diegesis. Even in that case, it is possible, Rothman suggests, to imagine that Hannay actually commits the murder himself while sleeping: "Perhaps Hannay possesses a murderous 'inner self' of which he represses all consciousness, a self that is liberated by his sleep"(124). The knife in Annabella's back belongs to Hannay, after all; an earlier scene shows him using it to cut bread for her while she tells him the dangers she faces. Such a reading would seem, in retrospect, to account more fully for the ambivalence towards Hannay that Hitchcock insinuates into the scenes leading up to the murder, as well as for the ambiguities that resonate in the murder's narrative ellipsis.

In *Ministry of Fear*, Lang implies Neale's altered state of consciousness more directly, and to vastly different effect. Before the "voice from beyond" accuses Neale of murder, the camera reframes Neale so that his face appears to hover in the upper half of the screen, balanced by the glowing orb in the lower foreground. The rhythmic chimes of the film's score take on a hypnotic cadence, and into the space between Neale and the globe, a clock pendulum materializes, swinging slowly back and forth. Neale blinks and

shakes his head, as if to shrug off the pendulum's mesmeric powers before it vanishes from the screen as enigmatically as it appeared. The pendulum operates, most obviously, as a visual reminder of the film's opening, where it first appears behind the main titles, as if measuring out the foreboding strains of the opening theme. As the titles end and the first scene begins, the camera reframes the pendulum so that we see that it belongs to a clock mounted on a wall. The clock tells us that it is a few minutes before six o'clock. The camera then reveals Neale seated in the dark, staring at the clock from across the room. When the asylum director appears at the door and asks him if he's ready to leave, Neale remarks how interesting it is "to watch that last minute crawl by, after so many of them," to which the director, following his gaze, replies, "I always meant to have that thing speeded up." Finally the clock strikes six. It is interesting to note that, in this scene, the clock pendulum calls attention to itself by its deliberate slowness. Each pass of the pendulum takes slightly longer than a second to complete itself. The effect is so slight that we barely notice it—if time does not exactly stand still, it does indeed "crawl by." Neale's commitment to these last, evidently superfluous seconds of his incarceration implies a wilful separation from the conventional, objective regulations of the outside world, if even at the expense of his freedom.

The voice that accuses Neale of murder acts as a link between the pendulum that appears in the seance and Neale's guilty past. The clock that "stood still" when Neale murdered a woman by poison now haunts him as an image of his guilt. The layout of the seance, viewed in a long shot that Lang returns to several times throughout the scene, itself echos the circular design of a clock face; more intriguingly, Neale's position in the

circle directly opposite Mrs. Bellane visually recreates the hour of Neale's release—six o'clock. The very layout of the seance traps Neale: it returns him not only to the source of his guilt, but to the endless hours of guilt-ridden imprisonment from which, it seems, there can be no release. Even if Neale isn't aware of the pendulum hovering over the seance, its presence suggests, in symbolic fashion, that the visual elements of his surroundings—especially the darkness and the clock-like layout of the seance—have opened up a psychic hole through which Neale's past guilt now emerges to engulf him. The staging of Mr. Cost's murder prompts us to consider the possibility, at least, that the trauma of Neale's past guilt induces a kind of temporary psychosis akin to Hannay's murder-by-somnambulism, a possibility likely to be reinforced by our knowledge that Neale has spent time in a mental asylum. Regardless of Neale's actual role in the murder, it is the very act of escape or release he attempts to undertake by breaking free of the circle that seems to ultimately shackle him to guilt more tightly than before.

In his study of Lang's films, Robert A. Armour notes that superimposed images such as the pendulum in the seance scene are hallmarks of Lang's cinema: "Frequently a Lang character who is under special stress, especially a stress caused by an interior struggle, will have some type of psychological visions that will give the character himself, or perhaps the viewers, insights into the character. This hallucination then becomes a visual representation of what is going on in the mind or the subconscious of the character [...]" (36). Neale himself appears to be oblivious to the pendulum's presence, his eyes remaining fixed instead on the globe. The pendulum is not simply Neale's hallucination, then; it is an image imposed upon the screen by the film's director to represent to the

viewer Neale's susceptibility to the hypnotic forces of deception that surround him. Tom Gunning describes such "visionary moments" in Lang's cinema as instances "that trigger a moment of realization and interpretation, a reading of signs, in which the true mechanism controlling reality is perceived by a character. These readings contradict the ordinary view of things and astonish the characters who perceive them [...]" (22). Yet the pendulum's position on the screen, afloat somewhere between Neale (who doesn't see it) and the viewer (who does) suggests that its hypnotic effect is surely meant for us as much as it is meant for him. By dangling the pendulum before our eyes, Lang declares himself to be the film's master hypnotist whose god-like powers of suggestion make it impossible for us know when we are being deceived. The first time we view the scene, we cannot know for certain that the seance has been staged (as we will later learn) in order to manipulate Neale. We may suspect that there is more to meet the eye, but only because Neale himself suspects, but his own perceptual reliability is clearly open to doubt. Lang's assertion of his role as master hypnotist enunciates the degree to which the film's narration is ultimately under his complete control. Just as Neale is vulnerable to the deceptions of the Nazi agents whose plot he has inadvertently disrupted, we are vulnerable to the deceptions of the filmmaker. In this scene these deceptions are one and the same. Ironically, then, our own perceptual abilities have no firmer footing than Neale's. We can be duped just as easily—perhaps more so, because even when we have most cause to doubt Neale's reliability, he turns out to have been right all along.

Lang uses the visual details embedded in his murder scene to open up his narration to a moment of self-reflexivity. Hitchcock, in *The 39 Steps*, does something



similar but in far more oblique a manner. The incriminating ambiguity of Annabella's murder, Rothman argues, requires that we put our faith in Hitchcock's narration: "Our faith in Hannay's is also our faith in Hitchcock's narration, and both are vindicated by later events" (125). In other words, Hitchcock places his viewers in an uneasy alliance with his protagonist: we are "suspended" between our desire for a comfortable, wholehearted identification with the film's central character and our suspicion that this same character may embody motives or propensities that might otherwise disrupt such an identification. For Hitchcock, one of the objects of the game is to stretch the limits of our identification with his protagonist in order to see how far it can give before snapping apart completely. If Hitchcock's ambiguous staging of Annabella's murder allows him to test the limits of his audience's identification with the film's protagonist, it also provides him with an opening through which to explore what it means, ultimately, to be a protagonist in a Hitchcock film. Nowhere is it required of us to consider Hannay's guilt in the death of Annabella as anything other than a mistake which the film will resolve in the final reel; if Hitchcock implies, however obliquely, that Hannay might have had more to do with her demise than the narrative makes necessary, it is in order to draw our attention to the faith that goes into our identification with any film character. Once we apprehend the possibility of Hannay's *real* guilt, the film becomes a running commentary on the arbitrary nature of viewer "morality". How much does it bother us that Hannay might have killed Annabella? How much does it matter that it might not bother us at all? What do we make of Hitchcock's insistence on "showing his hand", and how does his obvious acts of enunciation and plot-manipulation absolve us of our own "guilty"

commitment to a character who (indirectly or otherwise) triggers the deaths of innocents?

Annabella's murder awakens Hannay into a reality that is more like a dream (or a nightmare) than the one he left behind, and he must come to terms with the dream-logic of the film's various predicaments if he is to survive. Hannay's ability to triumph over his ordeal depends largely on his ability to "perform" his way across Hitchcock's thriller landscape and to fully assume the role the narrative requires of him. (One of the magical effects of the film is that it is chiefly by performing various parts that Hannay becomes, for the viewer, most fully real and dimensional.) The film's self-reflexivity culminates in its climax, where Hannay takes an indirect role in yet another murder. By prompting Mr. Memory to define the Thirty-Nine Steps before a packed music-hall, Hannay moves from a performer in the scene to its director; but this act of directorial enunciation disrupts the staging of a competing script written and directed by a man called the Professor. In order to reassert his own directorial control over the film's climax, the Professor shoots Mr. Memory, thereby preventing him from acting contrary to the script he has been assigned.

Earlier in the film, the Professor holds up his hand to Hannay and reveals that it is missing a finger; by doing so, he identifies himself as the evil mastermind behind the spying. (Annabella has warned Hannay that the spies' leader, a very dangerous man, is missing exactly this finger). Significantly, the Professor's gesture also echoes that of the statue in Hannay's entry hall, and seems at last to identify the real culprit behind Annabella's murder. But, as Rothman notes, the Professor's gesture is also Hitchcock's way of "showing *his* hand" (144, emphasis mine) as the film's true "murderer", for it is *his* script and *his* direction, after all, that are ultimately "responsible" for Annabella's

death and Hannay's guilty entrapment. Thus, although we might also be tempted to regard Hannay's indirect role in the murder of Mr. Memory as another example of his ambiguous culpability, Rothman points out that Hitchcock's invisible presence as the scene's true author ultimately allows Hannay to retain his innocence of the crimes that are committed within its diegesis (167). To put it another way, the conditions for Hannay's exoneration are contingent upon the ambiguity of the murder itself. It is Hitchcock's visual staging of the murder that implicates Hannay in the crime, just as it is Hitchcock's script that requires Hannay to "direct" the death of Mr. Memory. In a film that so conspicuously reflects on the powers of authorship, responsibility for the events that take place onscreen lie, in the end, with Hitchcock himself.

Hannay's exculpation is a relatively simple matter compared to Neale's. After he escapes Mrs. Bellane's mansion, Neale arranges to meet Carla Hilfe at a street-corner. But Nazi warplanes are bearing down upon the city, and the ensuing blackout forces Neale and Carla into the London Underground. Settled among concealing shadows and an anonymous crowd of urban refugees, Neale confesses a guilty secret: he has spent two years in an asylum for the mercy-killing of his wife. The fact that he has spent time in the asylum has already been made known to the audience—the film opens with his release—but only now does Neale reveal the nature of the crime that put him there. Neale goes on to explain to Carla that his involvement in the death of his wife is not quite the simple matter the law made it out to be. His wife, suffering for years from a horrible illness, begged him "day after day" to release her from her pain. After procuring a poisonous drug to fulfill her wish, Neale found that he was unable to go through with the

act of administering it and hid the drug in a drawer. But his wife discovered the drug's hiding place and took it herself. Neale recalls how he "sat there for hours holding her hand, watching the clock. Then it was dawn, and there wasn't any more pain."

While Neale's confession might seem, in some respects, to exonerate him of the murderous insinuations that have encumbered him since his release from the asylum, it comes in the form of a verbal testimony that cannot help but feel flimsy and unconvincing when weighed against the film's visual narration, which has already presented us with ample evidence of the possible unreliability of Neale's own point of view. But even if we chose to believe that Neale is telling Carla the truth, and not merely deceiving her (and perhaps himself) with a narrative that allows him to distance himself from direct agency in the death of his wife, his confession nevertheless pinpoints the haunting source of the guilt that has marked him throughout the film like an indelible stain. While he is not guilty of actually killing his wife, he nevertheless retains an ambiguous culpability that his confession cannot fully erase. As he explains to Carla, "A murderer. Perhaps I was, if thinking of the thing for months before you do it makes you one." Neale is ultimately guilty, in other words, of a wish that comes true even after he has revoked it. If this guilty wish is at the heart of Neale's trauma, it is also at the heart of Lang's narrative. In a sense, Neale never truly escapes the frozen moment before his wife's death in which he watches the clock and waits for her to die.

Lang has already established the wish-fulfilling powers of his narrative earlier in film. As Neale is being released from the Lembridge Asylum, the doctor asks him what he intends to do with his new-found freedom. Neale expresses the wish to travel to

London and surround himself with as many people and as much noise as possible. In the following scene, while waiting for the train to arrive that will take him to London, Neale finds himself smothered in silence. At the precise moment in which the silence becomes stifling, a crescendo of voices and laughter rush in to fill the void in the film's soundtrack, drawing Neale's attention across the street where a charity fair is in full swing. The sudden surge of noise into an otherwise complete and utter silence implies, obviously, that Neale has shifted to a more external awareness of his surroundings. But it also conveys the mysterious impression that, somehow, the fair simply wasn't there before Neale took notice of it, and that it specifically materialized in response to Neale's previously declared wish for people and noise. Moreover, the later silence of the crowd, which descends upon Neale as he guesses the cake's correct weight, bears the stifling air of recrimination. It is as if the fulfilment of his desire cannot fully repress the buried guilt he seeks to leave behind. The seemingly innocent act of winning a contest—which one would expect to result in noisy well-wishes and congratulations from fellow revellers—instead returns him to the condition of silence he hoped to have left behind. Like any dream or fantasy of escape, this moment contains beneath its pleasing surface precisely that which it desires to repress most fervently—and which always threatens to burst forth, like a poisoned cloud, at the precise moment in which fulfilment is most tantalizingly within reach. I would suggest that the winning of the cake which will embroil Neale in so many difficulties later on here becomes linked, in troubling, subterranean ways, to the double-edged fulfilment of his desire to move beyond a place of guilty silence.

Significantly, the events that eventually exonerate him of Mr. Cost's murder take the form of improbable revelations, as if to imply that escape from guilt is only possible for him through the extended fantasy of wish-fulfilment the film provides. After Neale has confessed his crime to Carla, a harrowing series of events effectively succeed in unburdening Neale of his responsibility for the death of Mr. Cost, which turns out, in fact, to have never taken place. Captured by Scotland Yard, Neale discovers that he stands accused not of killing Mr. Cost, whose murder hasn't even been reported, but of bludgeoning to death the private investigator he hired to help uncover the source of his persecution after his release from the asylum. Desperate to clear his name of yet another murder, and more certain than ever that he has been set up by some kind of Nazi conspiracy, Neale convinces Scotland Yard to help him search the site of the cottage to which the "blind man" fled with the cake. In one of the film's most improbable moments, Neale succeeds: even though the cottage was reduced to a crater by a falling Nazi bomb, a portion of the cake is found miraculously intact. Neale feverishly breaks it apart and retrieves from the crumbs a microfilm of vital importance to national security. Aided by Scotland Yard and the Ministry of Home Security, Neale traces the conspiracy to a tailor named Mr. Travers, who turns out to be none other than Mr. Cost himself, miraculously resurrected from his death at the seance.

Lang employs a stunning element of set design to emphasize the impact of this revelation. Neale, seated in what appears to be another brightly-lit, wide-open space, sees Travers/Cost through a doorway leading into a back room. A long shot revealing Travers crossing the room to Neale dramatically subverts our sense of the space's physical

arrangement: Neale, at the left of the frame, appears to be staring to the left at Mr. Travers, but Travers instead approaches from the right side of the screen; when a second Mr. Travers steps into view from the left, we realize that the background space behind Neale, with its duplicate Travers, is a mirrored wall, and that we have been deceived by an optical illusion. But Neale, strangely, is not deceived: his perception of the deceptive nature of Lang's cinematic world is, at this point, disquietingly superior to our own. While Travers politely asks Neale to wait, he makes a phone-call, dialling the numbers with a sinister pair of oversized tailor's shears. We wait, like Neale, for Travers to strike, but an attack isn't forthcoming. Travers instead throws down the phone and darts into the back room, slamming the door behind him. When Neale shatters the door's glass window, he finds the body of Travers inside, sprawled on the floor, impaled by his scissors in an apparent act of suicide. For the second time, suicide appears to absolve Neale of a death for which he has previously been found to be culpable. A dressing mirror reflects the body of Travers from three different angles, as if only a spectacular surfeit of visual evidence can make up for the guilty implications of Mr. Cost's corpse on the seance floor.

The seance, of course, is now revealed to have been nothing more than an act of deception designed to frighten Neale. During a private confrontation with Neale after his confession to Carla, Mrs. Bellane has already admitted that the accusation from "beyond the grave" was just a trick. She has used her knowledge of Neale's guilty past to scare him—as she herself remarks, "I always try to frighten people the first time they come to a seance. They love it. I never thought it would make you start shooting." Mr. Travers'

suicide clears Neale's name, once and for all, even of that crime, which turns out to have been staged in order to incriminate him and thereby scare him away from London, where he poses too much of a threat to the Nazi spy-ring. I noted earlier how the pendulum's appearance during the seance signals Lang's enunciation of his own cinematic powers of deception. If that is the case, then Mrs. Bellane acts, in that instance, as the medium through which these powers are summoned into the scene and made manifest before the eyes of the audience. Curiously then, Lang aligns his own mastery of deception with the secret organization of Nazi villains, who use the primary elements of cinema—the projection of light and sound into darkness—to undermine the innocence of the film's protagonist. Of course I don't mean to argue that this affinity implies an ideological alignment as well, but aspects of Lang's visual strategies of narration create ambiguities that seem to find no final resolution within the confines of the film itself.

The film's climactic scene makes this ambiguity even more obvious. Having memorized the telephone number dialled by Travers, Neale dials it, hoping to confirm the identity of the agent who will carry the second microfilm—stitched by Travers into the shoulder-seam of a new suit—out of the country. Carla Hilfe answers. Neale rushes to the Hilfe's apartment, where he is held at gunpoint by her brother Wille, who explains what the viewer has probably suspected all along: that he is the one who gives the orders to the other members of the spy-ring. He is also the one who will carry the microfilm to Germany. Carla, hoping to prove her claim to Neale that she is a victim and not an ally to Wille's deception, throws a candle-stick at her brother, distracting him so that Neale can attack. In the scuffle that ensues, Neale kicks Wille's gun to Carla, who picks it up.



Wille frees himself from Neale's grip and turns out the apartment's light. "You wouldn't kill your brother, Carla, would you?" He opens the apartment door and is silhouetted by the blinding light from the passageway beyond. He slams the door shut behind him.

There is a gunshot and a flash of light. In the pitch-black darkness that follows, we see a pin-prick of light at the centre of the space where the door should be. Neale opens the door and reveals the body of Wille crumpled on the floor beyond.

Just when murder seems to have received a kind of moral sanction in the film's political subtext, Neale once again distances his own responsibility in Wille's death by displacing agency onto Carla. This move is similar to the one in *The 39 Steps*, in which Hannay's question to Mr. Memory—"What are the Thirty-Nine Steps?"—triggers the Professor's silencing shot. The plots of both films are only resolved when their protagonists indirectly prompt a final act of killing. Rothman notes that Hannay's indirect involvement in Mr. Memory's death serves to align him (albeit provisionally) with the film's villain; in other words, the Professor's murderous act declares to Hannay their shared monstrosity. Although Carla's role as an agent of murder makes it possible for Neale to keep his hands clean of this final act of killing, it also clears her of the suspicion—Neale's and our own—that she is somehow involved in her brother's spy ring, despite having earlier declared her hatred of the Nazis. Wille's question ("You wouldn't shoot your brother, Carla, would you?") meets with an answer that simultaneously aligns her with and separates her from her brother's monstrosity. She puts the Nazi's cold-bloodedness to use against him, firing without hesitation in order to stop him from committing a crime that the film views to be greater than murder. In other words, Wille's

death is not a crime but a duty.

If the film tempts us to read its narrative as a kind of fantasy through which Neale attempts to escape an overwhelming burden of guilt, his ultimate release can be vouchsafed only within the confines of the dream. In other words, there is no real, lasting escape, even if the events in the narrative itself suggest otherwise. The staging of Wille's death, like the shooting of Mr. Memory in *The 39 Steps*, suggests, perhaps, Neale's only possible avenue of release. The flash of light from Carla's gunshot and the bullet hole that punctures the door recall the moment during the seance in which Mr. Cost is "murdered." In that scene, the gunshot also causes a flash of light which freezes Neale in an incriminating position beyond the circle, photographically trapping him in a single frame of film. In the climactic scene, the bullet that Neale is accused of firing at Mr. Cost in the deceptive darkness of the seance completes its imaginary trajectory, crossing into another dark space and striking a target whose capacity for murder is not only real but emphatically aligned with an ideology whose evil cannot be questioned. The hole in the door, which allows light to pierce through the darkness from outside, transforms the room into a kind of camera obscura, conflating an ambiguous act of violence with the processes of cinema itself. Just as Hitchcock's authorship of *The 39 Steps* truly absolves Hannay of lasting guilt, Lang's authorship of *Ministry of Fear*, invoked in this single image, declares guilt as the unavoidable condition of living in Lang's cinematic world.

## Chapter 2

### **Wonderlands and Looking-Glass Worlds: *Blackmail* and *The Blue Gardenia***

Another Alice enters Wonderland.

– Tania Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much:  
Hitchcock and Feminist Criticism*

The mirror will always remain haunted by what is not found within it.

– Sabine Melchior-Bonnet, *The Mirror: A History*.

Near the beginning of Alfred Hitchcock's *Blackmail* (1929), a young woman named Alice White stabs to death an artist named Crewe as he tries to rape her. Creeping out of Crewe's apartment afterwards, Alice begins to descend a staircase that coils around the edge of the frame. Our view from above forces us to stare down the empty space in the middle of the frame to the tiled floor far below, and recalls the moment in which her literary namesake tumbles "down, down, down" through a rabbit-hole into a world whose laws will only bewilder and confound her (Carroll 7).

In many ways, Alice's ordeal closely resembles that of Norah Larkin, the heroine of Fritz Lang's *The Blue Gardenia* (1949), who strikes an artist named Prebble with an iron poker as he attempts a similar violation. The mirror behind her briefly reflects his face, contorted in pain, before the arc of Norah's swing shatters it to pieces.

Overwhelmed, she falls to the floor in a dead faint, waking up some time later surrounded by the mirror's broken shards. As she flees Prebble's apartment, the room around her swims in a hazy distortion of rippling glass, like the glass "beginning to melt away" as Carroll's Alice crosses over into Looking-Glass Land in her second adventure (Carroll

176).

At first glance, the phantasmic dream-worlds of Lewis Carroll might seem an unlikely point of departure from which to stage a comparison of how Hitchcock and Lang portray the guilty entrapment of their female protagonists. Both Alice White and Norah Larkin nevertheless find themselves in worlds strangely similar to Carroll's wonderlands, where they are unable to adequately explain who they are or what they have experienced in terms that others might understand. Although Alice and Norah act only in order to defend themselves from men who attempt to rape them, both women understand implicitly that their "crimes" must be kept secret if they are to avoid being condemned for murder. It is not surprising then that considerable critical attention has been paid to the attitude either film takes toward their "guilty" protagonists. Tania Modleski and Robin Wood have argued, for instance, that *Blackmail* maintains a deep-seated ambivalence towards Alice: although the film appears to punish for her "transgression", it also contains an implicit critique of the social values and institutions that would condemn her in the first place. On the other hand, Douglas Pye and Janet Bergstrom demonstrate that *The Blue Gardenia* is anything but ambivalent: it offers, instead, an emphatic and scathing indictment of a society that holds women up to stereotyped images of female behaviour that confer guilt instead of understanding. Although Norah discovers at the end of the film that she is not responsible for Prebble's death, she remains oblivious to her entrapment in a sense of identity predicated on images of male desire, which is entirely Lang's intention. If Hitchcock's Alice hangs forever suspended in a rabbit-hole of guilt and ambivalence, Norah remains lost in a labyrinth of mirrors that coldly refuse to

relinquish her from their reflections.

Like their literary counterpart, who finds the world a dull, familiar prison, the heroines of *Blackmail* and *The Blue Gardenia* initially seek their own means of escape from the strictures of what they regard to be a kind of confinement. Hitchcock's Alice, for instance, rebels against the limitations of her relationship with her policeman boyfriend Frank, who wishes to "dominate, enclose, and contain Alice within the horror of bourgeois respectability" (Wood 261), by engaging in the "fun and excitement of a 'daring' flirtation" with Crewe (260). Norah, on the other hand, attempts to break free from a limiting romantic ideal. By accepting a dinner invitation with a man who promises nothing more than a night of casual romance, she hopes to escape the emotional wreckage of her naive devotion to an absent boyfriend, who has just informed her, by letter, that he has met someone else. I would like to begin by exploring the sequences that portray Alice's and Norah's movement towards escape and hoped-for fulfilment at some length. They demonstrate the ways in which Hitchcock and Lang establish the psychological trajectory of either woman as a movement through space that ultimately prefigures the rabbit-hole and looking-glass passageways described above. In other words, they describe a contrast between two different *metaphysics of space*. While Hitchcock's vision of transgression, guilt and entrapment finds its most meaningful expression in a spatial and architectural emphasis on verticality, Lang structures his filmic spaces along a decidedly horizontal axis.

For instance, before Alice White finds herself falling "down, down, down" into a wonderland of guilt, she must first undertake an ascent that proves in many ways to augur

the hazards that traversals of vertical space often entail in Hitchcock's films. The sequence I wish to examine in this regard begins with the arrival of Alice and Crewe inside the lobby of his apartment building. Alice has jilted Frank in order to spend the evening with Crewe, but when the artist invites Alice up to his studio, she visibly hesitates before agreeing. As Robin Wood notes, "Alice is caught in a particular cultural moment: a moment when everything in popular fashion encourages permissiveness, 'naughtiness,' rebellion [...], and everything in one's home and educational environment repudiates such license" (261). While Alice aspires to a less circumscribed romantic experience, she continually balks at the prospect of crossing the boundaries of propriety. Should her transgression be discovered, the consequences would be, at the very least, a loss of that all-important social virtue, respectability.

Hitchcock further implies Alice's ambivalence in his use of the staircase she must climb in order to fulfill her aspiration. Leafing through his mail, Crewe points to the main staircase and says, "I'm right up there, at the top." The shot that follows, which occupies Alice's point of view, focusses our gaze up the staircase towards the first landing, but from an angle that excludes the steps. The shot draws us, along with Alice, into the centre of a web of diagonal bannisters and twisting, rising acclivities. The disquieting downward stretch of the bannister and its shadow on the opposite wall extend beyond the frame on either side. The staircase, her pathway to a higher realm of experience, confronts her with a threatening vision of consumption and entrapment. But there is something undeniably hypnotic about the staircase as well. Like so many of Hitchcock's characters, Alice has turned away from a safe but too-familiar, limited

romantic partner towards a figure who represents a possibly dangerous (and therefore more alluring) mystery. Part of Crewe's attraction is, after all, his unknownness: if she balks at the staircase's warning, she is also drawn (like the viewer's eye) further into its reaches, towards a tantalizing space that has been, as yet, only partially revealed to her field of vision.

Hitchcock's camera soon relinquishes its intimacy with Alice's point of view, however. As she and Crewe begin to climb the staircase, the camera adopts a peripheral vantage-point from behind the staircase's "missing" fourth wall. We might just as well be watching an x-ray of objects passing through a bodily tract, or the otherwise hidden workings of a machine. The camera follows their ascent up five flights of stairs, gliding upwards in a smooth, uninterrupted craning shot. Given its obvious lack of dramatic content, the shot's depiction of a vertical transition through space quickly becomes overloaded with metaphorical implications. Each flight of stairs conveys Alice and Crewe across the screen in a diagonal trajectory, first one way, then the other, implying ambivalence and bewilderment. As one flight of stairs disappears below the frame, another appears from above. Each of Alice's steps increases her distance from safety and closes the distance between herself and the "private and prohibited realm" (Pallaasma 33) of illicit experience that awaits her at the top. Moreover, the staircase challenges Alice and the viewer to locate the precise moment where she passes the point of no return. Although we cannot know for sure when this boundary has been crossed, we sense that each step only further closes off the opportunity to change her mind and retreat from the potential dangers ahead.

Leading her up the staircase, Crewe grips Alice's elbow in a gentlemanly gesture of support that implies, at the same time, a desire to control: whatever his true motives may be, the staircase is clearly his architectural accomplice. Earlier, Crewe finds himself the victim of unwelcome solicitations from a "sponger" lurking outside the apartment building doors (a man who will later try to blackmail Alice). A conversation with his landlady at the foot of the stairs confirms that Crewe's involvement with this man has a dubious history. The further we follow Crewe and Alice up the staircase, the more troubling our lack of knowledge about the artist's character becomes. Thus, by extending Alice and Crewe's ascent over the course of its entire duration, and making it impossible to foresee when the top will finally appear, Hitchcock turns the staircase into *his* accomplice as well. As the shot from Alice's point of view makes clear, Hitchcock's staircases not only reflect the interior landscapes of his characters (who can never see clearly enough what lies in wait on the next level), but also the viewer's own epistemic limitations. We are placed in a condition of suspense as maddening as Alice's own, if not more so (she has not been privileged to the revealing exchange between Crewe and his landlady). But even when we have some idea of the dangers that lurk in wait at the top of Hitchcock's staircases, our curiosity—always a dubious commodity—seems endlessly willing to take us by the hand and pull us up the next step, despite the dread that tugs at the other hand, imploring us to remain at ground level.

The vertical structure of Hitchcock's spatial metaphysics stresses hazardous movement through moral and psychological realms; the outward form of the space and architecture through which a character travels corresponds, in other words, to an even



more perilous inward journey whose pitfalls consist of a too-narrow perspective on the surrounding landscape, or an incomplete knowledge of one's weaknesses and blind spots, which the viewer is often obliged to share. By contrast, Lang's films (particularly his German crime epics) demonstrate an abiding obsession with horizontal urban topographies, frequently viewed from an overhead position of omniscience and detachment, like the chess-board landscape of Looking-glass Land that Alice views shortly after her journey through the mirror. What this perspective makes visible is the feckless nature of the individual struggle and the manner in which "escape" only constitutes a transition into ever-widening topographies of entrapment. Lang's camera is less concerned with an intimate identification with its subject than with a cold, distanced perspective, one that exposes the subject's desperate but ineffectual movement through a vast, deterministic terrain.<sup>2</sup>

In his American films of the 40s and 50s, budget restraints and a smaller narrative scale forced Lang to abandon the grand vistas of his German crime dramas. He nevertheless managed to find ingenious ways to invoke the labyrinth's presence by shifting viewing it from within, rather than from above. The resulting shift in perspective reminds me of Robert Harbison's comments about mazes in art and landscape architecture:

[T]he maze is a form which sets up a great divide between perpetrator and victim. From the adjacent artificial hilltop it seems as clear as a wiring diagram. But once one comes down and submits, one's superiority is lost and it becomes a cruel and befuddling hoax. Isn't it surprising there aren't

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Gunning makes similar claims throughout his study of Lang's films. See especially pp. 163-199.

more stories of murders in mazes, committed by those driven to distraction, circling back on earlier thoughts and finally overpowered by paranoid delusion which sees enemies everywhere? (24).

What this implies in the context of Lang's filmmaking rhetoric is that the director himself is the ultimate perpetrator of the murders that take place within his cinematic labyrinths.

He sets up elaborate topographies in which murder and guilt are the inevitable outcome of human movement; that is, his spaces have a determining influence on the actions of his characters. Such spaces allow Lang to visually dramatize the traps we set ourselves by committing what appear to be the most minor of transgressions—traps from which we then struggle to escape as swiftly and decisively as possible, if only to find that our efforts have secured the locks more firmly than before. In hindsight it is easy enough to trace the fatal chain of one's footsteps back to a single, seemingly insignificant deviation from the familiar, well-trodden pathways of habit and routine (Gunning 289). As Gunning remarks, "Lang de-emphasizes individual responsibility and even psychology, in favour of a fatal environment which seems not only to reflect characters' anxieties, but to trigger a series of fateful coincidences which follow from an unguarded erotic surrender, like collapsing lines of dominoes" (301).

Consequently, Lang's method of envisioning Norah's entrapment is to trace her trajectory through a horizontal series of interiors. Lang de-emphasizes her transition from one space to another so that she finds herself already lost or swallowed up by an interior before she recognizes the dangers of entering it in the first place. It doesn't help that Norah has willfully blinded herself to the perils of spending the evening with a man like Prebble, who represents the antithesis of the absent boyfriend who has just dumped her:

he is a womanizer patently uninterested in commitments of any kind, and it is precisely this aspect of his personality that makes him a fitting helpmate in her efforts to throw aside an idealism that has proven delusional and imprisoning. If Alice's climb up the staircase exhorts her to watch her steps, Norah journeys through the labyrinth of Lang's interiors with her eyes resolutely closed to the trap closing around her.

The sequence that dramatizes Norah's entrapment begins in the warm, brightly-lit apartment she shares with her two roommates, Sally and Crystal. Norah has decided, against her friends' urgent invitations to go out and have fun, to celebrate her birthday at home alone with her boyfriend. She dresses up, prepares an intimate candlelight dinner, and delivers a toast—not to her boyfriend, but to a photograph that stands in for his absence. However, the moment Norah reads the letter and learns that her boyfriend intends to marry someone else, the warm, inviting space of the women's apartment undergoes a dramatic shift. The romantic lighting Norah has arranged for her dinner transforms the space into a stifling den of shadows as her boyfriend's voice speaks the words he has written her. Prebble's phone-call triggers, in turn, a further descent into darkness. Once she leaves the glow of the candle-lit table to answer the phone, Norah crosses into a realm of darkness: shadows seem to have seeped in through cracks and under the doorways while her attention was turned elsewhere.

Ann Kaplan argues that the shift in atmosphere signals the symbolic invasion of male discourse of *film noir*, with its rhetoric of betrayals and erotic entrapment, into what has been, until now, the space of the "woman's film" of the forties and fifties (83). While this is certainly valid, the point of Lang's staging of the scene is that Norah herself is

responsible for the lighting. Lang's staging of the "dinner scene" suggests that the delusive nature of Norah's romantic faith is what blinds and entraps her. In order to escape her suddenly discovered confinement, Norah hastily accepts an invitation (intended for her roommate Crystal) to spend the evening with a man who promises nothing more than a casual encounter. What Norah fails to realize is that the shadows closing around her signal the labyrinth she is walking into as much as the prison she thinks she is leaving behind.

Following Norah's flight from the apartment, Lang continues to trace her journey through spaces of confinement and bewilderment. The Blue Gardenia restaurant, where Norah has agreed to meet Prebble, is an expansive maze of crowded tables, exotic plants, and mock-Polynesian decor. Before she arrives, the viewer has been made privy to a brief exchange at the restaurant bar between Prebble and Casey Mayo. Both men are "on the hunt" for women—and the restaurant is clearly their well-established hunting ground: "The Blue Gardenia radiates a male fantasy environment, a trap for women designed as an over-ripe garden of the fulfilled wishes of the hedonist" (Gunning 400). Norah enters this space through an imposing door in the background of a long angle shot that emphasizes the restaurant's convoluted layout; as the camera shifts to follow her progress towards Prebble's table, tangled palm-fronds obscure her from view and her sense of direction is continually confounded. Prebble seems patently unconcerned that Norah has arrived in Crystal's place (one woman will do as well as any other); he immediately invites her take a seat in a wicker chair that dwarfs and encloses her. At the end of the scene, as Norah greedily consumes the last of a cocktail, the enormous wicker chair she is

sitting in appears to be “swallowing” her just as greedily. From this image, Lang dissolves to a shot of Prebble driving Norah home in his convertible. Prebble invites Norah back to his apartment, and without Alice’s telling hesitation, she accepts, having drunk herself past all cares. When it starts to rain, the convertible hood seals them in in another subtle gesture of entrapment. Our view of the rain streaking against the car’s windshield then dissolves from there to a view of the skylight window in Prebble’s studio, also filled with rain and darkness. The more distance—physical or otherwise—that Norah attempts to place between herself and her grief, the more blind she becomes to the trap that is already closing invisibly around her.

While the brightness of the interior we find ourselves being drawn into offers a momentarily comforting escape from the foul weather raging beyond the window, the warm light of studio balances the darkness beyond without ever completely overcoming the storm’s oppressive desire to break through and shatter our fragile (because illusory) sense of security. We find ourselves backed into a surprisingly small, cramped space, neatly appointed with the tools of the artist’s trade. Lang steadfastly refuses to relinquish the camera’s angle on the window, so that we find ourselves sandwiched between the night’s overwhelming presence and an equally disturbing absence of knowledge about the space that lies *behind* us. Hoping to take advantage of Norah’s drunken state, Prebble then leads her (and the viewer) past a partition into an expansive living area, where a large mirror hanging over a fireplace briefly captures their reflection. The artist’s studio, jammed into a tiny corner of space at the far edge of what turns out to be a much larger living area, is clearly a subordinate zone in what is ultimately a luxurious bachelor pad.

Despite the artist's implements, paintings, canvases, shelves of books and stacks of records, Prebble's studio is too carefully arranged; like props in a photograph from a fashionable interior design magazine, its contents constitute little more than a hollow gesture toward human life and personality in a room that is otherwise "just for show." It is entirely probable that the concrete fireplace, which forms the focal point of a grouping of chairs and sofas, has never contained more than a flicker of the warm and inviting fire it was meant to contain. The placement of each element in the room's stylishly modern decorating scheme conforms to an almost anal-compulsive aesthetic of geometric balance and right angles, as if the removal or adjustment of a single component would throw the space into irredeemable chaos. We find ourselves, in effect, in a space as elegant and impersonal as an expensive hotel room, where relationships are brief, casual, and disposable.

As Norah passes out for a moment on one of the sofas, Prebble dims the lighting in order to create an atmosphere more amenable to seduction, repeating Norah's earlier efforts to stage a romantic setting for her "dinner for two". In effect, he unconsciously drowns the studio in sinister shadows and returns us to the earlier scene of Norah's rejection and betrayal. The shadows erase our sense of the space beyond the dim pool of light in which Norah stirs in her half-sleep, as if to suggest that Norah has travelled a great distance only to end up back in the very place she started from. Moreover, the elements of decor in Prebble's apartment visually rhyme with details from the Blue Gardenia restaurant they have just arrived from. The mirror over the fireplace recalls the mirror in the restaurant, positioned above and behind Nat "King" Cole as he serenades the

restaurant patrons earlier with a song of heartbreak and love gone wrong (a song which Prebble now places on his record-player in honour of their “first date”). On either side of the fireplace, exotic palms casts tangled shadows on the wall as Prebble surreptitiously spikes the coffee Norah has requested with liquor at a private bar off to the side of the living room. The apartment is, in other words, nothing more than an extension of the “jungle” of “male traps and wiles” she has already passed through (Kaplan 83). The most bewildering labyrinth, after all, is one in which all spaces mirror one another perfectly. It is impossible to know if progress has been made when the destination is identical to the point of departure.

Indeed, many of Lang’s most expressive settings are box-like spaces such as Prebble’s apartment: in films such as *Woman in the Window* (1944), *Scarlet Street* (1945) and *The Big Heat* (1953), murders and acts of violence are almost always staged in modern, geometrically overdetermined interiors filled with symmetrical arrangements of objects and decor. The mirror, that gateway to the “ontological confusion between image and reality” (Gunning 307), consistently dominates such spaces; by expanding horizontal space, they offer an incomplete view onto parallel worlds that watch us watching them with a gaze as cold and impassive as the gaze of his camera. They expand the horizontal dimension of his interior labyrinths into multiple spectral realms and confront us with the knowledge that guilt and entrapment are the metaphysical condition of moving through his cinematic worlds. They remind us that the consequences of desire—always a fatal blindness—must be answered with a surfeit of vision that neither clarifies nor reveals, but only bewilders and entraps those who give in to even its most quietly whispered

invitations.

Given the lack of sustained attention these interiors and motifs have received in studies of Lang's films, I would like to briefly consider examples of murder rooms in two of his other films as a way of supporting my claim that such spaces bear a consistent expressive power in the director's visual landscape. The apartment Chris Cross rents for Kitty March in *Scarlet Street* is perhaps the most elaborate example of a Langian "hall of mirrors". Partitioned into separate "rooms" by walls of glass, it suggests openness and maximum visibility even as it confines movement to prescribed pathways. Access to the apartment's various spaces requires first passing through a bewildering, circuitous route up and down steps and along transparent corridors. Metaphorically, it describes the labyrinth into which Chris's desire for Kitty has led him. A meek-mannered cashier who paints in his spare time, Chris sees in Kitty the embodiment of erotic and romantic desires long-buried under years of repression. Kitty, having mistaken Chris for a famous painter, uses Chris's desire to manipulate him into supporting her and invites him to use the apartment as a studio space where he can paint in peace, free from the oppressive recriminations of his wife of convenience, Adele. *Scarlet Street* is a study in the fatal blindness of desire and the lengths it will take us to before the truth is finally laid bare. Kitty's apartment literally leaves everything open to view, but Chris still cannot see (refuses to see) the trap it represents. Only at the end of the film, when he walks in on Kitty embracing her pimp/lover Johnny, viewing them through one of the glass panels, does he at last perceive the magnitude of his deception. When Johnny leaves, Chris confronts Kitty as she lies on a bed placed against a mirrored wall. Her excoriating



laughter and mocking revelation drive Chris to grab hold of an ice-pick and stab her to death. The mirror duplicates both her laughter and his violent reply, answering Chris's blindness with a surfeit of vision and exposing his desire as nothing more than an image, as unreal as a mirror's reflection, a two-dimensional fantasy he has mistaken for reality. Like the glass walls, the mirror captures him behind glass and freezes him in the empty, specular space of erotic entrapment from which there can never be any release. The act of stabbing Kitty with the ice-pick suggests an attempt to break through the walls of his glass prison, but only condemns him to a life surrounded by mocking echos (aural reflections) of Kitty and Johnny murmuring their love for one another.

However, it is in the immaculate, gleaming-white apartment of Alice Reid in *Woman in the Window* (the film Lang made previously to *Scarlet Street*) where one finds the most obvious precursor to Prebble's studio in *The Blue Gardenia*. The layout of Alice's apartment is identical to that of Prebble's, except for the arrangement of furniture next to the omnipresent Langian fireplace with its surrounding mirror. Richard Wanley, a middle-aged professor of criminology who has just bid farewell to his wife and children for the summer, has been invited into this space by Alice after she observes him admiring her portrait in a display window. While Wanley's intentions are ostensibly innocent (he is just there to look at other works by the same artist) his visit signals the kind of minor transgression that so often embroil Lang's characters in fatal circumstances. When a lover of Alice's suddenly intrudes and jealously attacks Wanley, Alice hands the professor a pair of scissors, which Wanley uses to stab his assailant in the back.

The entire struggle takes place on the floor across a plush carpet and surrounded

by soft furnishings; the cold mirror surrounding the fireplace captures the fight in its reflection. Later, the mirror reflects the movements of Wanley and Alice as they scour the apartment and set about concealing signs of the crime. The mirror in this scene points up the relativity of visual perspective (how can we ever be sure which side of the mirror is real?) as well as the relativity of moral perspective. He knows that he has acted in self-defense, but he also knows that—appearances being what they are—the law will not be likely to see things in quite the same light. Lang delights in the conflict that occurs when quandaries of ambiguous guilt and moral grey areas encroach upon worlds of sharply defined values and rigorously narrow ways of seeing. Any effort to clean up signs that a crime has taken place only leave behind an indelible, incriminating “cleanliness”, which often takes the visible form of a too tidy and obsessively ordered space. It is the absolute absence of disorder in Alice’s apartment that signals to Heidt, a man who later attempts to blackmail her and Wanley, that she has something to hide.

Perhaps nowhere else in *The Blue Gardenia* is Lang’s camera more attuned to his characteristic way of envisioning space than in Prebble’s apartment. As Gunning argues, Lang insists wherever possible on “a primacy of space into which the characters enter” and which then “portray systems as pre-existing and structuring subjectivity (347). Throughout her travels through the women’s apartment, the restaurant and the studio, Norah is frequently framed in medium shots that emphasize, almost as clearly as an overhead view, the controlling influence of the spaces she enters. There is almost nowhere else for her to go other than where the space itself wills her: shadows force her out of the apartment; the layout of the restaurant determines her winding, uncertain course

and implies the impossibility of ever finding her way back out; Prebble's studio closes her in, without any indication that it contains a door or any other means of egress.

In contrast, Gunning goes on to note that "Hitchcock will build most scenes out of a character's (or sometimes, characters') point of view, sculpting the space with the viewpoint of the character" (347). Alice's first view of the staircase is a perfect example of the manner in which a character's subjectivity "creates" the space around them. The craning shot of her climb with Crewe up the staircase, however, is considerably more ambiguous. One might reasonably argue that the camera's peripheral position seems to imply a certain degree of Langian objectivity and emphasizes the space's control over the movements (physical and metaphysical) of the characters. Yet the movement of Hitchcock's camera, with its attentive need to keep up with Alice and Crewe's vertical journey when it could so effortlessly outpace them, evokes a subjectivity largely alien from Lang's. Where might one locate the source of this subjectivity if not in Hitchcock himself, who could be said to enact an almost playful moment of authorial intrusion, delighting in the staircase's seductive aesthetics? An alternate answer might suture the point of view to either of the characters on screen, but particularly to Alice, who perhaps imagines herself crossing the physical distance of her transgression with a measure of detached disbelief. The ambiguous nature of cinematic point-of-view (and Hitchcock's in particular) allows for any of these possibilities.

Gunning's statement proves most correct in the scene that begins in Crewe's studio. If Prebble's apartment is as finite and hermetically sealed as a steel tomb, Crewe's studio is porous, shifting, open to eddies and currents of energy from other

spaces. As Robin Wood notes, Hitchcock films the scene in such a manner that its exact layout manages always to elude the viewer's need to assemble it into a coherent space (267). Hitchcock's camera never allows the viewer to establish a concrete mental map of its contents and boundaries; it is almost as if the studio doesn't exist until Alice enters to discover it, piece by piece. Shortly after their arrival, for instance, Crewe walks across the room and quickly closes what turn out later to be the curtains surrounding his bed. His precise position in relation to Alice, who is still standing next to the studio's front door, is impossible to determine because of the camera's proximity to him: we are given no context in which to situate Crewe or the bed within the studio's layout. As Alice progresses further into the space, first to a painting of a jester, then to a blank easel, and finally to the folding screen where she will change into another dress, Hitchcock refuses to widen our view on the surrounding space. The only anchor we are given is the fireplace, with its decorative, serrated hood, which first frames Crewe and then, once his intentions become clear, appears to devour Alice.

Until that moment, however, the space utterly beguiles Alice, who has found herself in exactly the kind of enchanted domain in which one might imagine an artist to live and work. Crewe's studio is a gathering-place of bohemian objects and decor, crammed into every shelf and covering every surface, and presumably collected on adventures exotic and local. Alice's first rapturous question to Crewe is whether or not he decorated the place himself. He answers dismissively in the negative and, without any elaboration, crosses the room to mix drinks. What, then, do we make of this kingdom of eclectic furnishings and knick-knacks, each of which imply a marvellous tale of origin

and acquisition? If Crewe didn't populate this space with its intriguing belongings, then who did? Alice appears unperturbed by Crewe's answer, but the viewer is left, in the absence of any forthcoming explanation, to wonder how else such a place might have come to be. In light of Crewe's claim to have had no responsibility for the studio's decor, one is invited to imagine (if only in passing) that the space was created by some other person, someone we haven't yet met and whose undisclosed presence in Crewe's life only adds to our disquieting sense that there is more to the artist than Alice—or we—have been made aware of.

Crewe's disavowal of responsibility for the studio's contents implies an acknowledgement that it belongs to—or was created by—"someone else." We might read his statement, then, as a form of deferral to the room's true designer and creator, Hitchcock himself. Alice has entered a space metaphorically charged with the director's authoritative presence, occupied by an artist-surrogate (Crewe) who forces her to defend herself in a manner that will enable the Hitchcockian drama of guilt and entrapment to continue. Crewe's studio is a space in which things "happen to turn up" only when dramatically expedient. For instance, the bed into which Alice is forced appears quite suddenly only at the moment in which Crewe is forcing her into it. If the space is, as I have suggested, a region where the boundaries between diegetic space and the metaphysical space of Hitchcock's authority are especially permeable, than the room's boundaries extend beyond the frame into unimagined "wings" where the director himself might be found, waiting for the opportunity to incite the next dramatic incident. There is, for instance, something almost too propitious in the knife's suddenly disclosed presence

at the side of the bed. Like the scissors that turn out to be “just within reach” in *Dial “M” for Murder* (1954), another of Hitchcock’s guilty woman films, one imagines that the knife has been placed there by a furtive, invisible hand at the very moment its presence becomes most necessary for the woman to save herself—and for the narrative to continue along a trajectory in keeping with the director’s thematic obsessions.

Throughout the sequence, Alice finds herself drawn deeper and deeper towards the back of the studio, stopping twice to enact a minor drama of metamorphosis. At the blank canvas, she tries her hand at painting, but only manages a crude smiling face to which Crewe must add (guiding her hand) a naked body, which she either signs or titles with her own name. Behind the folding screen—another canvas of sorts—she exchanges her respectable clothes for a revealing dress in order to model for Crewe. In both of these instances, she succumbs to the “lure of participating in the artistic process” (Modleski 23-24) and finds herself, instead, transformed into the erotic image of Crewe’s desire. The folding screen obscures her from Crewe’s gaze, but hardly affords her any privacy, as it presents her “pornographically for the sole delectation of the film spectator” (Modleski 21). The artist is once again aligned with the film’s director. The space tricks Alice into gradually stripping away the outer layers of respectability and transforms her instead into an object of erotic consumption. The studio itself then consumes her, after a fashion, by framing her within the gaping jaws of the fireplace and its shadow the moment Crewe begins to force off her slip and push her back towards the bed, which (in another image of consumption) swallows them both from view. The curtains, whose movements suggest the struggle that takes place beyond view, thus become the scene’s most startling image

of artistic creation: they are at once theatrical curtains concealing a private drama and a shifting, rippling canvas that paints an impressionistic picture of sexual violence. They are also, of course, a metaphor for Hitchcock's cinema, which so often implicates the viewer by extending an invitation to project his or her own images onto a screen that merely suggests what violent acts are taking place beyond view.

In light of my reading of *Blackmail* and *The Blue Gardenia* as one-way journeys into wonderlands and looking-glass worlds, Alice's emergence from behind the curtain obviously recalls the moment in which Carroll's Alice locates a tiny door to Wonderland behind a curtained wall. In order to pass through this door, however, Alice must first undergo a metamorphosis by shrinking herself to a size that the door will accommodate. In *Blackmail*, Alice's transformation into the object of Crewe's desire accomplishes a similar metamorphosis. Although she quickly resumes her respectable attire, Alice's sense of lost innocence ensures that she has become invisibly altered in a way that no clothing can perfectly disguise. Her subsequent journey down the rabbit-hole of the staircase makes clear that she has not so much entered another world as she has returned to one that will no longer recognize her, or her place within it. As I stated at the beginning of the chapter, Alice's most significant moment of passage between worlds takes place when she emerges from the studio and approaches the top of the stairs. The camera gazes directly down the stairwell from overhead: the stairs coil around the edge of the frame, a squared-off spiral terminating on the checker-patterned floor of the lobby far below. Alice pauses a moment, then takes the first steps onto the staircase. The image then cuts to an angle from the lobby floor as Alice, still dazed, descends the last two

steps. Nearly the entire descent has been omitted, its absence all the more startling because of the protracted and visually arresting quality of the corresponding ascent.

The meaning of this absence becomes clear if we allow ourselves to return to the overhead shot and consider the implications of the unexpected alternative view of the staircase. Not knowing when the top of the stairs will finally appear, we experience the climb of Crewe and Alice back and forth up each identical flight of steps as constantly deferred arrival. What the overhead view emphasizes is the vertiginous empty space at the centre of the staircase itself, a plummeting drop that traverses the vertical distance between Alice's traumatic experience in Crewe's studio and the familiar safety of her "pre-lapsarian" earth-bound life on the surface far below. Viewed from overhead—that is, from its uppermost reaches to the floor below—we apprehend the staircase's entire length at once. Yet each turn of the spiral obscures the turn below, so that once again the staircase refuses to yield itself entirely to our gaze. Even if we were permitted to watch Alice undertake the journey back down the stairs, she would quickly vanish from view, consumed by the first turn of the spiral. The overhead shot suggests, then, that the only sure way to reach the ground floor is not through the staircase at all, but rather through the tunnel of empty space it encircles—a passage, in other words, that can only be achieved by a fatal fall. Like *Vertigo's* Scottie Ferguson, Alice remains psychologically suspended in a place from which meaningful return is impossible.

It is useful, at this point, to compare the fall implied by the staircase to the lethal fall that occurs near the film's ending. Returning home with her guilty secret, Alice finds herself the target of a blackmailer who has retrieved a piece of incriminating evidence



from the scene of the crime—a black glove. Frank steps in and attempts to coerce the blackmailer, Tracey, into returning the glove. After Tracey loses the advantage, Frank and the police pursue him to the British Museum, where he climbs the glass dome of the Reading Room in an effort to escape. The glass gives way beneath him, however, and he plummets through to his death. Tracey's fall allows us to perceive the differences between patriarchy's attitudes towards criminal guilt, a "known quantity" around which a whole system and set of traditions have been constructed to manage and absorb, and women's sexual guilt, for which it has barely sufficient language to describe, let alone adequately attend to. Thus Tracey falls through a dome into a time-honoured repository of knowledge and learning, and the floor of the Reading Room, which we have already visited from below, knows precisely how to receive him. By contrast, when Alice reaches the ground floor in Crewe's building, she does so only literally; as the overhead view of the staircase makes clear, it might be more convincingly argued that she remains trapped, like Carroll's Alice, in a slow fall through the stairwell's vertical space, the termination of her descent as endlessly deferred as the ascent could only pretend to be. Climbing the stairs, she does, after all, finally reach Crewe's apartment at the top—but her experience there, far from allowing her to transcend a dull and morally circumscribed life "on the surface", has marked her in a way that renders null and void her ticket for a safe return to a ground level that can no longer recognize her.

Alice's journey home from Crewe's studio takes her on a circuitous nighttime route through the streets of London. Everything she passes—ghostly pedestrians, glowing advertising signs—becomes transfigured by her eyes into symbols of murder and

lost innocence. If she loses her way in a labyrinth of sorts, however, Hitchcock only once widens our perspective on her journey into an objective “Langian” point of view: as dawn rises over the city, we are given an aerial shot of London in which Alice (indeed, all human figures) are lost from view. Before then, his camera maintains an intimate proximity with Alice, and frequently cuts to point-of-view shots that reveal her guilt-ridden subjectivity: neon martini-shakers become stabbing knives; the hands of sleeping derelicts recall the hand of Crewe, slipping from behind the bed-curtain to signal his death. Inside the entryway of her parents’ shop, the camera watches her furtive ascent up a final flight of stairs to her bedroom from an angle that draws our attention to the ground-floor hallways and doors from which anyone might, at any moment, enter and demand an explanation for her questionable early-morning return. There is a sense, once again, that Alice is somehow watching herself climb that final stretch of stairs, re-enacting her ascent to Crewe’s apartment. The positioning of her bedroom at the top of the stairs conflates it somehow with Crewe’s studio: if she is retreating to a space of privacy, she does so, this time, with her knowledge of what lies ahead fully intact.

How might we describe Alice’s knowledge, at this point, of where her experience has brought her? Inside the bedroom, she confronts her reflection in a mirror. Although she is still fully dressed, the woman staring back at her from the other side of the mirror is visibly naked. She sees herself, in other words, partly as the ambiguous image co-authored by herself and Crewe in the studio. Started by Alice and finished by Crewe, the painting reflects both her sense of herself as a bodiless head (implying, obviously, her imaginative, inquisitive nature and her discomfort with her body’s sexuality) and,

simultaneously, as an object of sexual desire, to which she ambivalently aspires. Her reflection in the mirror, then, projects back to Alice a vision of herself as the image-made-real and confronts her with the visible consequences of her metamorphosis in the studio. The mirror, which might have provided her with a safe, specular space for recognition and emotional unburdening, reflects back a look of distance and arid detachment. Caught in an act of involuntary x-ray perception while still reeling from an overwhelming and unassimilable experience of violation and violence, Alice gives the doll-like appearance of “looking” without seeing: some essential contact has been broken off between herself and her reflection. “Knowledge” is present, but in a form too overwhelming for her to absorb or comprehend in any meaningful sense.

Now let us imagine our way through this mirror, out of *Blackmail*, and into a similar moment that takes place in *The Blue Gardenia*. Norah, having gone through more or less the same experience in Prebble’s apartment as Alice, awakens the morning after her ordeal and confronts her own reflection in the bathroom mirror. The sound of water on the shower-curtain echoes that of the rain falling against the window in Prebble’s apartment where the attack took place, and the mirror she gazes into recalls, obviously, the mirror over Prebble’s fireplace. But Norah cannot grasp the significance of either of these troubling rhymes. She has told her roommates that she can only remember part of the previous evening; amnesia, the by-product of too much drink and/or the psychological trauma of her experience, has created a veil she cannot pierce. Staring intently at her reflection, she appears momentarily unable to recognize the woman looking back at her. No amount of probing, however, can penetrate the mystery of what that other woman,

looking back at her, might know about the reason for her own sudden disquiet. The mirror Norah finds herself gazing into therefore reflects not an overwhelming surfeit of knowledge but a troubling absence of knowledge of any kind. The saving powers of memory remain firmly and irretrievably trapped on the other side of the mirror's surface, in a space to which she no longer has access.

Before taking a closer look at the specific events that Norah has forgotten, I would like to briefly consider the film's portrayal of her own vexed relationship to images. That her reflection should present her with such difficulties at this moment is hardly any surprise; throughout the film, Lang has already demonstrated the degree to which Norah's identity is largely predicated on images of male desire not dissimilar to Crewe's "collaboration" with Alice. For example, in an early scene that takes place at the switchboard office where Norah works with her roommates, Prebble has just finished a portrait of Crystal as part of an expose of working women. Douglas Pye notes that Prebble's sketch "abstracts Crystal's head from context, leaving the background blank and reducing Crystal to a stereotyped image of working girl beauty which suppresses any social reality" (77). (Norah, peering at the sketch, enthusiastically endorses its "likeness" to the woman it represents). Like Crewe in *Blackmail*, Prebble is not interested in women as individuals (with ideas—or "heads"—of their own). As an artist, he reconstructs women into images for male consumption. Moreover, if Norah, Sally and Crystal are mirror-images of one another (they have the same blonde hair, makeup and clothing), it is because they actively capitulate to the same "abstract, static, stereotyped" images and "fashion ideals" (Pye 78).

The example of Prebble's art that most closely links him to Crewe, however, is in the sketch he makes during a phone-call with an unknown woman on the phone who demands to meet with him. Lang cuts from a shot of Prebble's sketch, which depicts a smiling woman in a black dress, to a shot of Norah at home, wearing an identical black dress. (Furthering the mirror-imagery of the film, Sally remarks that because of Norah's size, they can all wear the dress.) The cut between image and image-made-real points to "the relationship between images and action" and makes Norah "almost a puppet" of the images of male desire that Prebble creates and represents (Pye 79). Both Prebble and Crewe are authors of images that women aspire to. But while Alice is at least ambivalent towards the image Crewe has created of her, Norah has no qualms about matching her look to suit the image of women that Prebble's sketch represents.

Moreover, Norah's susceptibility to images extends to her commitment to an image of romantic faith. In the dinner scene that precedes Prebble's phone-call, her devotion to her boyfriend's picture, which is framed by candles and attended to with gazes of tremulous adoration, suggests a kind of morbid idolatry: "Dominated by the twin ideals of one true love and absolute fidelity, she is committed to a form of stasis in her life which is pointed up by her fiance's photograph on the dinner table—the worship of an *image*" (Pye 79). Once this image is shattered by the revelation of her boyfriend's "betrayal", however, Norah is confronted with yet another pictorial representation of her romantic ideal. Shortly after their arrival in Prebble's studio, he shows off his latest work in progress—a portrait of a happy couple posing before a mirror. This painting perfectly evokes the anodyne quality of Norah's idealism; it is perhaps a measure of the success of

her efforts to drink her pain away that she refuses to respond to the picture in any way. Prebble, on the other hand, continues to draw attention to it by claiming that he doesn't care if it gets finished, even though it must be completed tonight if he is to be paid the commission. In his world, art clearly takes a backseat to a night of casual seduction.

It is possible, then, to read Prebble's attempt to seduce Norah in terms at least provisionally similar to Crewe's seduction of Alice. Prebble artfully stage-manages the scene: he adjusts the lighting and invites her to lay down on the sofa across from the fireplace and mirror, as if refashioning his unfinished (because personally unengaging) portrait into a composition more in line with his true concerns. In a sense, Norah has therefore already passed through into Looking-glass Land. Although she is unaware of it, she has crossed over the threshold of the mirror in Prebble's painting, with its static, improbable happy couple, into a world whose values are the obverse of those she has intentionally left behind. The sticky residue of her pain still clings to her, however, as Prebble leans over the back of the sofa and begins to kiss her. Mistaking him for her boyfriend, she asks him why he had to "write that letter," then shrugs off the question and returns Prebble's kiss, momentarily unaware that she has confused him for the lost object of her love. Too late, she opens her eyes and realizes her mistake and tries to escape, but Prebble traps her against the fireplace and the mirror. (Interestingly, Lang cuts throughout their struggle to low-angled shots of their feet and legs against the gaping hole of the fireplace, unconsciously echoing Hitchcock's imagery of consumption in *Blackmail's* parallel scene). Grasping the iron poker, Norah lashes out, striking Prebble and shattering the mirror.

As in *Blackmail*, the woman's effort to defend herself results, with the same gesture, in cutting off her escape route back to the realm of innocence and security. But the shattering of the mirror also signals the most significant way in which Lang's narrative differs from Hitchcock's. As I noted earlier, Norah (unlike Alice) has no memory of Prebble's attack or his death. Only later, when she learns that the police are hunting for the artist's murder, does she begin to assemble the slivers and fragments of her memory into a whole that reflects her own guilt. The police, however, have pieced together the evidence in a manner that leads them to conclude that Prebble's murderess is the kind of "cheap, promiscuous" woman he was known to spend time with. Norah takes her guilt for granted and exerts much of her energy trying to convince others (and herself) that Prebble's murderess wasn't "that kind of woman." Norah, who wanted nothing more the night of Prebble's death than to forget that she was the naive girl who believed in one true love, now discovers that she has instead forgotten much more. She can no longer recall, with memory's saving firmness, that she didn't behave like the "Blue Gardenia girl" the press have made the murderess out to be. Moreover, her collusion in fashioning herself as an object of male desire (like so many other women) makes it impossible for her, or anyone else, to distinguish herself from the woman wanted by the police. Towards the end of the film, Norah accepts the offer of journalist Casey Mayo, whose front-page appeal to the "Blue Gardenia girl" promises to represent her "real" story fairly in the press. Uncertain whether she can trust Mayo, Norah pretends to be a "friend" of the killer; as she negotiates the terms by which the murderess will finally come forward, Casey becomes visibly attracted to her shy, quiet personality. When she finally reveals

that *she* is the woman whose story he wants to tell, however, Casey can barely conceal his revulsion. Even Norah's physical presence cannot stand up to the image of the killer he himself is largely responsible for creating.

In a world of mirror images, Norah finds herself distressingly unable to assert herself as something more than just another reflection. Her release from the phantasmic nightmare of the looking-glass only occurs when another woman comes forward and confesses to the crime. The real murderess, Rose, turns out to be the woman Prebble was speaking to on the phone in the switchboard office while composing his sketch of the figure in a black dress. Although the film only implies it, the script makes it clear that Rose is pregnant with Prebble's child and desperate to appeal to him for support. Hoping to confront Prebble, she arrives at the apartment shortly after Norah has shattered the mirror and fallen to the floor, unconscious. Unaware of Norah's presence, Rose has an argument with Prebble, who has not been killed but only slightly injured by Norah's blow. She discerns the signs of another woman's recent presence in Prebble's studio, however, and flies into a jealous rage, killing him with the poker.

Significantly, Lang's staging of Rose's confession, with Norah present, emphasizes the striking similarity between the two women's appearance. She is yet another reflection of the same fashion ideals and stereotypes to which all women in the film appear to aspire. At the same time, she also does not fit the image offered up by the media of the woman who killed Prebble: as Janet Bergstrom notes, "Rose represents a cautionary example of what Norah could become after just one false move"; she is "the image of defeat, not a femme fatale" (113). Furthermore, the hall-of-mirrors logic that



controls the film repositions Norah, at this point, as the “other woman,” and Rose as the jilted lover. Norah’s “release” from the looking-glass requires her to shift perspective in order to recognize the fatal ease with which one can come to occupy a position of “guilt”, which is itself merely a matter of point of view.

What the revelation at the end of the film points to is what I would argue to be mirror’s ultimate purpose in *The Blue Gardenia*. Unlike the curtain in *Blackmail*, which conceals Crewe’s death but doesn’t leave any room for doubt that Alice is killed him, the mirror in *The Blue Gardenia* operates in a manner similar to the darkness of the seance scene in *Ministry of Fear*: it creates a kind of ellipsis in our perception of the events unfolding onscreen. However, as several critics of the film have pointed out, the visual lacuna caused by the shattering of the mirror doesn’t call attention to itself, but rather prompts us to conclude that we have just seen Norah kill Prebble. (One of Lang’s more significant alterations to the screenplay was to remove shots that revealed the presence of a third person in Prebble’s apartment, which would have pointed the viewer rather too directly to the fact that Norah might not have been responsible for his death.) While even the most attentive viewer is unlikely to second-guess their assumption that Norah has dealt a deadly blow, our view of the crime scene the morning of the investigation gives us ample opportunity to notice what is tellingly “out of place” in a space defined the precise arrangement of its contents. We enter the scene of the investigation through the jagged hole in the mirror’s reflective surface, an image that we are cued to equate to the gaping hole in Norah’s own memory. As Pye argues, however, the shattered mirror also “points to the flaws in our own way of seeing” (80). What we fail to notice, in particular, is the

detail of Prebble's body being carted away from the studio, and not from the living-room, where he would have fallen had Norah killed him. As well, the record that has been left playing from the night before, presumably from the moment of Prebble's death, is not Nat "King" Cole's "Blue Gardenia", but Wagner's *Liebestod*, which (as we later learn) he puts on as musical accompaniment to his break-up with Rose.

The viewer's perceptual entrapment in Lang's looking-glass world is first signalled not at this moment, but (more fittingly perhaps) in the Blue Gardenia restaurant. The mirror angled over Nat "King" Cole, which prefigures the mirror we will encounter in Prebble's apartment, reflects the movement of his hands across the piano keyboard as he plays. Gunning points out that Lang claimed to have inserted close-up shots of his own hands in a film to stand in for the hands of a character, imitating Hitchcock's ritual cameo appearances but in a far more anonymous manner (2). While Lang's claim shouldn't necessarily be taken at face value—the hands in the mirror in *The Blue Gardenia* belong undeniably to the singer, not the director—the image of the hand nevertheless implies the director's manipulative presence within the world of his film. The composition of the shot places the hands above the singer (and by extension, above the entire crowd, Norah and Prebble included), suggesting the presence of a master puppeteer who presides over the narrative space from the other side of a two-dimensional screen, operating from "outside" the world of the film. Norah, listening to the performance taking place under the mirror, falls under the spell of the song's romantic sentiment without recognizing that she, too, is being played like a puppet. Most importantly, however, the mirror points up the viewer's own susceptibility to puppet-like

manipulation. The mirror's reflective surface, so similar to a film screen, excludes as much as it reveals. As Carroll's Alice remarks, peering through the mirror before entering Looking-glass House, "I can see all of it when I get upon a chair—all but the bit just behind the fire-place. Oh! I do wish I could see *that* bit!" (Carroll 173). The mirror exhorts us to resist our too-easy proclivity to look—and hear—without proper care and attention, and implicates our own faulty perceptions in Norah's guilt as much as those of the film's characters.

The film's project of social critique, particularly with regards to the perceptions and values of its characters, is (at first glance) emphatically unambiguous: although Norah emerges from the courthouse completely absolved of her guilt, she remains bound to the ethos of Looking-glass Land, unable and unwilling, even now, to separate herself from the two-dimensional surface of an image. She enacts for the press photographers "the relief that she is required not simply to feel but to show" (Pye 82). What has continued to trouble critics is the opacity of the film's critical strategies. Pye suggests that "The cultural attitudes we unwittingly inherit and the predominant laziness of our responses to popular movies in particular, mean that we are unlikely to recognize the systematic way in which Lang points to the problems in the character's perceptions, let alone our own." Lang's tactic is "a kind of stoical endeavour, made knowing that it would not be recognized" (82). Picking up where he left off, Janet Bergstrom argues that although the director was a "promulgator of radical social criticism" throughout his career, the impenetrability of his design in *The Blue Gardenia* might just as easily indicate cynicism and disdain for his audience (114-115).

Nor, however, can one be equally certain of Hitchcock's intentions at the end of *Blackmail*. Unlike the mirror in Lang's film, the curtains in *Blackmail* appear to conceal something from view and *seem* to shroud the culmination of Alice's ordeal in a kind of ambiguity, but ultimately leave no room for doubt as to what is going on. Tania Modleski points out the misguided efforts of critics who have nevertheless attempted to debate the degree of Alice's guilt by assuming that what is at stake in the matter is the girl's willingness to come home with Crewe: "Interestingly, since the episode is not presented directly to the spectator's view, it is a question here of accepting the veracity of the woman's words, her expression of protest and fear. As frequently occurs in real life, critics in the main refuse to accept the woman's negative, claiming that Alice unconsciously wishes to be ravished" (23). Those critics who hold Alice as (at least partially) responsible for her attack, or guilty of an excessive act of self-defence, are themselves guilty of contorting the issue in order to fit their reading of the film through Wonderland's tiny door. What needs to be settled in *Blackmail*, therefore, is the question, "to what extent does the film share this point of view and make us condemn the woman for her sexual availability?" (Modleski 23).

As I indicated at the beginning of my discussion, the answer is that the film remains steadfastly ambivalent towards Alice's guilt. The final shot of the film, which shows the painting of the jester being carted off into the evidence rooms of Scotland Yard, can be read as the final punch-line of a joke told at Alice's expense. Having escaped the clutches of one blackmailer, she finds herself in the hands of another—Frank—who prevents her from confessing her secret to the police and ensures

that his power over her will be, from this moment on, absolute. The punishment for Alice's sexual transgression is to be bound tighter than before in a confining, loveless relationship. On the other hand, the jester points his finger at the audience as well, "who are as much entangled in the ideological contradictions as the characters" (Wood 269). Alice, not Frank, has been our primary locus of emotional engagement and character identification throughout the film. Frank, in contrast, remains largely unsympathetic; his efforts to hide the evidence of Alice's guilt and his refusal to allow her to "speak for herself" and explain her ordeal undermine the social values he represents. Whether or not the film's ambivalence indicates a conscious critique on Hitchcock's part, or merely reflects the director's own ambivalence towards the subject of his film, has remained a conundrum as persistently elusive as a Cheshire cat's grin.

## Chapter 3

### Watch Your Step: Hitchcock, Lang, and the Fatal Staircase

A labyrinth is a structure compounded to confuse men; its architecture, rich in symmetries, is subordinated to that end. In the palace I imperfectly explored, the architecture lacked any such finality. It abounded in dead-end corridors, high unattainable windows, portentous doors which led to a cell or pit, incredible inverted stairways whose steps and balustrades hung downwards. Other stairways, clinging airily to the side of a monumental wall, would die without leading anywhere, after making two or three turns in the lofty darkness of the cupolas.

— Jorge Luis Borges, "The Immortal"

Writing about the metaphysics of staircases in film, Jeremy Pallasmaa makes the suggestion that "Stairs have the same significance to the vertical organization of a house as the spine to the structure of the body. Besides the door, the stair is the element of architecture which is encountered most concretely and directly with the body" (32). Elaborating on this analogy, he argues that "stairs are responsible for the vertical circulation of the house in the same way that the heart keeps pumping blood up and down the body. The regular rhythm of the stairs echoes the beating of the heart and the rhythm of breathing" (33). Taking a cue from Freud's analysis of stairs in dreams, Pallasmaa also notes that ascending a staircase re-enacts the physical rhythms of copulation (33). Not limiting himself to corporeal analogies, however, he goes on to propose that "Rising stairs end in Heaven, whereas descending stairs eventually lead down to the Underworld," and that, even more suggestively, staircases evoke the imagery of the labyrinth (32), a correlation hauntingly crystalized by the narrator of Borges' "The Immortal" in the

passage cited above.

It is hardly surprising, then, that staircases play such a prominent role in the spatial metaphysics of Alfred Hitchcock and Fritz Lang. Both directors are frequently noted for their obsessive concern with the metaphorical implications of human movement and the hazardous consequences of vision, which might here be characterized as a failure to take in an adequate view of the surrounding terrain. In Hitchcock's case, the staircase is eminently suited to generating spatial tropes similar to those just described by Pallasmaa. Throughout his films, the moral vulnerability of house and home (and, by metaphorical extension, to the self they could be said to represent) remains one of his most enduring themes. As the heart or spine of the house, staircases are clearly of central importance to his moral vision: they are the vulnerable, hazardous point of transition between the upper level (the private domain of secrecy and prohibition), and the lower level (the domain of safety, familiarity, social congress and traditional values) (Zirnite, 4), a dichotomy that Hitchcock's villains subvert and exploit.

For Hitchcock's characters, who are so often burdened with secret guilt and destructive knowledge, the open structure of a staircase presents formidable dangers. Descending a flight of stairs opens one up to social scrutiny or a threatening gaze; conversely, climbing a staircase allows one to escape or retreat into a private space where even the viewer's gaze cannot follow. However, one can just as easily use the staircase to one's advantage: a position at the top of a staircase makes it possible to survey the lower level unseen, or allow one to descend into another character's gaze as an act of defiance or repudiation. Hitchcock often uses the staircase as a battleground where control of the

house and its occupants can be seized, lost or reclaimed depending on one's ability to hold a position or transform the staircase's capacity for perilous exposure into a tactical advantage.

More importantly, Hitchcock's staircases express in architectural form the journeys of his characters into labyrinths of psychological entrapment. The narrator of "The Immortal" describes staircases as structures perversely detached from the purpose assigned to them by their human creators. Betokening passage through or transcendence from the labyrinth, Borges' stairs only draw us further into the heart of the maze, or mock us by connecting to nothing but empty space. As I noted in the previous chapter, Hitchcock's stairs emphasize the hazardous psychological distance one must cross first in order to consummate one's desire (whether for romantic or erotic fulfilment, knowledge, or confrontation). Murder, guilt, and psychological bewilderment are always the fate of ascending "the pathway to the disordered psyche of humanity" (Zirnite 3); like those described in "The Immortal," Hitchcock's staircases paralyse the unwary traveller with dizzying views, and trap us on vertiginous heights "without leading anywhere".

By contrast, Lang's use of staircases in his metaphysics of space differs considerably from Hitchcock's. Taking my lead from the narrator of "The Immortal," I would argue that Lang's staircases belong more to the labyrinth he describes at the beginning of the above passage. "Rich in symmetries," Lang's deterministic labyrinths (and the staircases one finds within them) are more suited to "confuse men" and expose invisible systems of control rather than to reflect interior states of psychological or moral bewilderment. For instance, Frieda Grafe states that Lang often uses vertical spatial



relationships in architecture to express power relations between social groups.

Transitional spaces between separate levels (such as staircases and elevators) are therefore often particularly dynamic points of contact and conflict (quoted in Gunning 371). In his early German allegories, staircases appear as monumental staging-grounds for hierarchical and geometric arrangements of human figures. Movement up or down the staircase can signify shifting power relations or measure the progress of a struggle between opposing groups. In *Metropolis* (1927), for example, workers gather at the foot of the steps to confront the solitary figure of the master architect at the top. The empty steps that separate them shimmer with tension and restrained violence before filling suddenly with a tidal wave of revolt as the workers rush up the staircase to overturn the balance of power. Later in the film, the operators of the city's machines march in a triangular configuration up another flight of stairs to begin the process of reconciliation. To cite another example, the underworld denizens in *M* (1931) flood into a tunnel staircase leading from their tavern to the streets above, only to find themselves pressed back down by a wall of policemen. In either film, the staircase becomes an architectural barometer of the dynamics of social conflict.

As Lang's interest in the alienating effects of modernity and urban space becomes more pronounced in his film-making, the staircase allows him to express the feckless nature of human movement and to expose, in abstract form, the structures and systems that intervene in any effort to connect or escape (Gunning 166). In *M*, once again, a man must descend endless flights of an office building's central staircase in order to communicate to his cohorts that the murderer they are hoping to capture is hidden in a

storage room. At the end of *Ministry of Fear*, Stephen Neale and Carla Hilfe attempt to escape their Nazi pursuers by running up another large central staircase. The farther they run, however, the less progress they appear to make; emerging onto a rooftop, they find themselves cornered by their enemies, as if the staircase itself has conspired to trap them in the murderous grip of the conspiracy they are trying to outrun.

Having sketched out what I take to be the central issues involved in both director's use of the staircase in their films, I would like to explore in the following discussion the staircase's particular function in both director's metaphysics of murder. In order to establish the clearest and most fruitful set of associations possible, I have chosen to consider those Hitchcock films that, in my view, come closest to the thematic, narrative and aesthetic concerns of Lang's two examples. The first part of my discussion will therefore briefly compare staircase scenes from Lang's *M* and Hitchcock's *The Lodger* (1927); in the second part I will conduct a more extended analysis of staircase scenes from Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) and *Psycho* (1960) to Lang's *House by the River* (1950). It is important to note that although Hitchcock links the staircase to murder (or murderous impulses) in an astonishing number of films, Lang does so only in the two films I have just cited. I would argue that Lang's use of the staircase in *M*, which is only indirectly linked with the murder of a child, remains more obviously consistent with his depiction of vertical, transitional space as a metaphor for urban alienation and the impossibility of connection (which he tellingly implicates in the murder itself). The staircase in *House by the River*, on the other hand, marks a more significant deviation from Lang's customary manner of envisioning the fatal pitfalls of desire. As I remarked

in the previous chapter, Lang typically portrays the movements of his ill-fated characters across a labyrinthine horizontal trajectory, into modern, elegant chambers of confinement eminently suited to his deterministic vision. Unlike Hitchcock, Lang is rarely interested in portraying the movement towards fulfilling one's desire as a protracted journey across a hazardous psychological terrain; he focuses instead on the traps our desires set for us before we are even aware of having committed a transgression, and on our feckless struggles to free ourselves from the trap once it has been sprung. In many ways, the staircase in *House by the River* might at first appear to mimic Hitchcock's use of the staircase in films such as *Shadow of a Doubt* and *Psycho*, especially in its visual design and its capacity to convey characters into the gaze of a threatening presence. As I shall reveal, however, Lang appropriates the staircase entirely to his own ends.

Ultimately, I wish through these examples to propose my own alternative staircase metaphor to those suggested by Pallasmaa. Viewed from overhead, the winding staircases of Hitchcock and Lang describe the shape of an eye that gazes back not only at the characters on screen but at the viewer as well. Their gaze can express emptiness, fear, madness, or a desire to consume. Even when we view them from below or across, staircases somehow refuse to relinquish their watchful hold. If they are sometimes dangerously active intersections of sight-lines and spatial/metaphysical revelations, they are also an image of the screen's disturbingly permeable boundaries. On *this* side of the screen, the purpose of the staircase is to bridge the open space between the surface of the earth and those other levels (imagined in our minds and then brought tangibly within reach by the concrete process of human construction) that might otherwise remain as

unattainable as clouds. Perhaps it is this quality of enchantment, to which we have grown so accustomed that it no longer *seems* an enchantment, that accounts for the attraction of a staircase projected onto a movie screen. Staircases entice our own eyes ever deeper into the frame, towards realms of light and darkness as yet only partially revealed by what is immediately present to our field of vision. They threaten to lead us farther into a film image than we might otherwise be willing to go, and often leave us stranded and helpless on the other side.

In *M*, Lang portrays the widespread effects of a child murderer on the city of Berlin. His underlying intention is to implicate the alienating space of the city itself as a contributing cause of the murders by suggesting that the killings are (at least in part) a consequence of the large-scale inability of the city's inhabitants to make meaningful human connections in an alienating urban topography. As Elsie Beckmann, the first victim in the film, leaves school for lunch, Lang's overhead view of the scene emphasizes the isolated groups of parents waiting on the sidewalk for their children, "alienated and separate from each other. What they share most deeply as city dwellers is their loneliness and their fear" (Gunning 168). Before long, Elsie is led astray by a strange man whose face we aren't permitted to see, while all around her the city responds to the news that another child has been slain.

The staircase leading up to Elsie's apartment, "one of the many in-between, liminal spaces of communication through which people move" throughout the film (Gunning 166), schematizes the social and psychological distance that separate the city's

inhabitants from one another. Our first view of the staircase fixes our gaze on an empty corner of a landing. Lang extends our view of the empty corner over several moments as the sound of climbing footsteps draws closer. While we wait, the emptiness of the landing itself takes on a palpable aura, as if we were being made to stare into the corner like a child who has misbehaved. Lang invokes through absence the child that is expected to arrive home at any moment. But the figure who finally rises into view is not Elsie but the laundry woman we have just watched scolding a group of children playing a “murder game” in the courtyard. (She mutters to herself about the effort involved in climbing, as if verbally underlining the film’s emphasis on the difficulties inherent in any movement toward connection.) As the camera pans to follow her to an apartment doorway, she passes a heavy basket of laundry to Frau Beckmann, Elsie’s waiting mother.

Several moments later, Frau Beckmann hears footsteps scampering up the staircase outside her apartment; peering out the door, she looks up the stairs as a pair of children, not nearly as encumbered by gravity as the laundry woman, dash up the steps and disappear around the next turn. The angle of the shot recalls Alice’s view of Crewe’s staircase in *Blackmail*; however, Lang allows us to see the risers climbing up towards the next landing, thus stressing the hazardous nature of the film’s architectural terrain. As the children tell Frau Beckmann that Elsie didn’t come home with them, the angle of the staircase they are climbing—and up which Frau Beckmann now gazes with barely suppressed anxiety—seems too perilously steep for them, no matter how unconscious of its dangers they appear to be.

When another visitor informs Frau Beckmann that he, too, hasn’t seen Elsie, she

once again goes out onto the landing. This time she peers down the stairwell, which we view from overhead, looking straight down the squared-off spiral towards the bottom floor far below. Frau Beckmann calls out Elsie's name, but no response returns from across the distant space below. More frantic now, Frau Beckmann goes to a window and repeats Elsie's name, each of her cries growing more and more ragged with panic. Over the sound of her voice, Lang cuts to a second overhead view of the staircase identical to the first; then to the courtyard (now empty); and finally to Elsie's empty plate at the supper table. The exterior shots that follow—a child's ball rolling out a tangle of bushes, and Elsie's balloon, momentarily tangled on power lines—confirm for us what the child's absence from the cold, impassive stairwell is making clear to Frau Beckmann. As Gunning notes, the overhead shot of the empty staircase visualizes "the space which measures separation and death" (173). This staircase is not a space that suspends or consumes, but one that seems to extend indefinitely, and exerts an infinitely increasing distance between the spaces it appears to bridge. As a kind of eye, it stares back with an impassive, unflinching gaze that sees only a world of emptiness. If we allow ourselves to be drawn into this gaze, we find ourselves confronted with nothing less than the unfathomable distance between ourselves and those who our own eyes will never behold again. While the staircase's gaze might seem to provide emotional access to a moment of unbearable devastation, it registers more palpably as a ruthless echo-chamber that allows Frau Beckmann's cries to pass through unheard and unfelt. Lang draws a parallel, in other words, between the inability of the city's population to connect with each other (and thus protect themselves) and the staircase's inhuman emptiness. If the staircase

“connects” us to anything, it is the knowledge that absence, separation and alienation are the metaphysical conditions of living in an urban environment such as the city Lang’s film portrays.

I stated in the introduction to this chapter that *M* is in many respects similar to *The Lodger*, which also deals with a city reacting to a serial murderer. But Hitchcock tightens the scope of his narrative by bringing the apparent murderer stalking London’s streets into the family home. If Lang links the staircase to the external social conditions that make it possible for murders to take place in a crowded urban environment, Hitchcock links it instead to issues of character subjectivity and viewer knowledge. Shortly after the murder that opens the film, for example, a mysterious figure arrives at a boarding house run by the Bunting family, seeking lodgings. We view his entrance into the Bunting household from behind: a passageway on the left of the screen leads to a parlour and kitchen; on the right, a staircase leads to an upper level. Hitchcock has composed the image so that the staircase frames the lodger, as if suggesting that the two will become linked in a manner that has not yet been revealed to us. Led upstairs by Mrs. Bunting, the lodger’s ascent is shown first from the bottom of the staircase, looking up, and then from the top, looking down. Dennis Zirnite points out that “this cut [that separates these angles] privileges us to the title character’s ‘forbidden’ territory”; in other words, the shot of the staircase from below carries the mysterious lodger out of view, denying the viewer’s desire to “penetrate his mysterious presence” (5), which his costume and secretive manner have encouraged us to link with the murderous Avenger.

The corresponding shot from above only appears to satisfy this desire: even

though the staircase brings the lodger closer into view, he still refuses to relinquish his secret to our gaze. Ironically, his trajectory towards us up the staircase doesn't allow us to penetrate the enigma of his presence, but it does allow the lodger to penetrate into the private regions of the house itself, which he does by passing the viewer's position at the top of the stairs. In effect, he "slips past" the viewer as well: the resolution of the film will reveal that he is not the Avenger at all, but the brother of one of the killer's victims who seeks to avenge his sister's death by murdering her murderer. (He has taken up lodgings in the Bunting home because it is in the vicinity of the place where he thinks the Avenger will strike next). Thus, even though he never achieves his revenge (the police capture the Avenger before such a scene can take place), he nevertheless remains the Avenger's murderous double. If Hitchcock's staging of the scene confronts us with the limitations of our own knowledge about the lodger, it simultaneously describes his arrival in a moral space whose ambiguities the film will never fully resolve.

Once he has moved into the house, the lodger effectively "takes control" of the upstairs level: his presence there will dominate the Bunting family as they regard him with increasing degrees of suspicion and fear. All except their daughter, Daisy Bunting, whose attraction to the mysterious lodger continually draws her upstairs; as Zirnite notes, "the only instance in which she is shown descending follows her second encounter with the lodger near the film's beginning; and then her descent to the main level is slow, somewhat reluctant" (5). It is as if the enigma he poses has seduced her, rendering any descent into the lower space of conventionally circumscribed experience a force of gravity she gives in to only with resistance. A few scenes later, Hitchcock again uses the



staircase to further elaborate the spatial dimension of Daisy's attraction to the lodger and to the resisting forces that make such an ascent difficult. Downstairs, a visiting policeman named Joe boasts that he has been assigned the case of the Avenger. He declares, "When I've put a rope around the Avenger's neck, I'll place a ring around Daisy's finger." Slipping free of Joe's grip in disgust, Daisy moves for the staircase, but Joe shackles her to the bannister with his handcuffs. A low-angle shot up the staircase reveals the lodger looking down from the top. Unseen by Joe and Daisy, he does not intervene in their quarrel. If, as Rothman argues, the lodger's position at the top of the staircase intensifies our sense of his power (25-26), the power he commands is derived from his gaze. The lodger looks, but does not move or act. Throughout the film, the lodger's gaze suggests a deep inner absorption whose meaning the viewer cannot fathom, but which seems to fixate most strongly on those images that recall the Avenger's victims: pictures of blonde young women, and Daisy herself. In this scene, she may be the object of his desire, but whether his desire is to love her or murder her remains unknown. His impassive and impenetrable gaze highlights what little we know (and how much we suspect) about the man that Daisy desires, and heightens our sense of the peril that her ascent up the staircase might involve her in.

Later in the film, the staircase's links to surveillance and the subjective gaze become even more pronounced. Mrs. Bunting, prompted in part by Joe (who openly questions Daisy's safety with the lodger), has come to suspect that the lodger and the Avenger may be one and the same. A few scenes later, she lies awake in bed as the lodger creeps downstairs and out of the house. To portray the lodger's descent,

Hitchcock employs an overhead view of the staircase, which spirals downwards in a series of overlapping ovals. The cutting of this scene alternates between Mrs. Bunting face staring in the dark and the lodger's descent down the staircase, and "conjoins objective reality and [Mrs. Bunting's] nightmarish fantasy: our views are real and at the same time projections of her imagination" (Rothman, 26). While we may take the lodger's descent to be literal, the angle of Hitchcock's composition transforms it into an abstract image that equally reflects Mrs. Bunting's subjective point of view—in particular, her sense that his departure is motivated by the desire to murder. Fittingly, the spirals of the staircase create a pattern resembling a staring eye, a visual motif that Hitchcock will repeat in two later films (*Blackmail* and *Vertigo*). In this case, the staircase's eye is also Mrs. Bunting's "inner eye," though it also stares back at her (and us), exerting a gaze of its own. It also creates a tension between the lodger's ascent and the narrow space of the stairwell (slitted like a cat's iris) that connects our own gaze directly to the bottom floor below. This abyss is not bottomless, however; it confronts our gaze with a boundary: a patterned carpet that suggests that our vision (and all that we might infer from what it shows us) is as limited as the vision of Mrs. Bunting. Soon the lodger's descent is lost from view as he disappears under one of the flights of stairs. Our gaze, like Mrs. Bunting's, can follow him no further: we have once again reached a limit to our knowledge of the lodger's intentions.

The overhead shots I have been discussing, which both link real or implied acts of murder to the gaze of a mother overwhelmed with worry, once again highlight the essential contrasts between Lang's and Hitchcock's manner of linking space and

subjectivity. Immediately following her anguished cries, Frau Beckmann disappears from *M's* narrative, absorbed into the collective point of view that comes to dominate the film's mode of storytelling. The repetition of the overhead shot of the staircase, now unfettered from her point of view, frees up the image so that Lang's omniscient camera can appropriate it for its own allegorical ends. The shots that surround it—images of absence and emptiness—grant it an overtly symbolic weight and fix it more firmly in a landscape that pre-exists and determines the subjectivity of the characters who encounter it. The parallel shot in *The Lodger*, by contrast, remains inseparable from Mrs. Bunting's point of view even when she herself descends into it. The morning after the lodger descends the staircase, Mrs. Bunting herself descends in a shot that mirrors, although from a closer vantage point, the shot from the night before. As Rothman argues, "the mother's corporeality is underscored [by this shot]. She drags her aging body down these stairs, wearied by the burden of her 'knowledge'" (28). But whatever "knowledge" Mrs. Bunting has acquired remains firmly couched by her own suspicions and limitations. More importantly, the overhead angle of the lodger's nighttime descent places us in the same point of view. Although Hitchcock presents us with an image that points to the highly subjective limitations of vision and knowledge, we have not been given, as yet, sufficient information to know for sure whether Mrs. Bunting's suspicions—or our own—are unjustified.

Generally speaking, staircases are architectural structures inherently suited to the dramatics of visibility and exposure; as Pallasmaa remarks, "Ascending a stair implies

exiting from the social stage and withdrawal into privacy,” while “Descending a stairway expresses self-presentation, joining a group and entry into the public sphere” (33). In his films, Hitchcock capitalizes on the staircase’s hazardous structural openness in order to exploit the vulnerability of his secret-burdened characters. In *Shadow of a Doubt*, Hitchcock uses the staircase to mark the progress of what amounts to a battle between the gazes of those seeking control of the Newton house. Uncle Charles has moved in with the family as part of an extended visit motivated, in part, by his desire to escape the clutches of law enforcement agents who believe he has murdered a number of affluent women. He quickly and effortlessly takes control of the family, who are only too eager to pass on the reins to their charming relative. Gradually, however, his niece Charlie uncovers the secret of his guilt. To avoid permanently destroying her family’s fragile happiness, Charlie decides to keep her uncle’s guilt a secret but attempts to convince him to leave. Charles is unwilling to give up his hold on the family, however, and soon Charlie herself becomes the object of a gaze that is both murderous and subtly, ambiguously erotic.

When reporters arrive at the Newton house soon after Charles’s arrival to take photographs of the house as part of a story on “average American families,” Charles conspicuously retreats from their gaze by slipping up the staircase. From the top, he looks down on the lower level. The angle of the shot mirrors that from *The Lodger* described above; however, Charles’s gaze cannot literally view the scene between the reporters and the Newtons taking place in the living room and kitchen below.

Nevertheless, from his perch at the top of the staircase, his surveillance penetrates

through walls and doorways; his gaze provides him, in Rothman's words, with a kind of "magical access" (203) to all that goes on inside the house—an access that almost appears to extend to control over the actions below, as if he were authorizing them to take place.

Yet, how easy it is for the staircase to reverse the dynamics of control. Later in the film, when Charles and Charlie learns that another man has been charged with the murders and accidentally killed, Charles triumphantly rushes into the house and bounds up the stairs. The camera swoops up behind his ascent from a low angle as he suddenly slows, stops at the top of the staircase, and looks back down. Charlie, who knows her uncle is guilty regardless of this "news," stares up at him from the front door far below, framed by sunlight, almost a silhouette, her shadow pointing an accusing finger at him. Her gaze penetrates directly up the staircase into his shadowy upstairs realm, threatening to expose him and reclaiming the "magical" powers of his own gaze. Under the power of Charlie's gaze, the staircase marks Charles's movement as a progression from triumph to halting exposure; turning away from his niece with agonizing slowness and climbing the last steps to the top, Charles relinquishes his hold on the staircase. The final portion of his ascent is a retreat; but at this point Charles unwillingly acknowledges that his triumph can only be secured by destroying her.

Following this scene, Charles makes several unsuccessful attempts on Charlie's life (including sabotaging the rickety outdoor staircase that links the upper level to the kitchen). When Charles refuses Charlie's request to leave Santa Rose once and for all, she waits until the house is empty and then searches his room. Downstairs, Charles and the Newtons return home with a number of guests. Charlie, not wanting her uncle to

know what she's been up to, watches from the upstairs landing. Significantly, Hitchcock frames Charlie's act of surveillance not from the bottom of the stairs looking up, but from Charlie's level at the top of the landing. She has assumed her uncle's position at the top of the stairs as if to declare to the viewer her intention to restore the balance of power he has disrupted. In the following moment, she will use the staircase itself to announce her intentions to her uncle. In Rothman's words, "The audience has arrived, and Charlie is preparing to step out on stage" (231). As Charles toasts the guests assembled in the living room below, Charlie begins to descend the staircase. Charles watches her downward, diagonal trajectory, his face brightening as he begins what looks like a toast to an "intended bride" (Rothman, 232). At that moment his face freezes. The camera approximates his subjective point of view by gliding towards the staircase, zeroing in on Charlie's hand as it slides down the bannister, fixing its gaze on the ring on her finger. The ring is the spoils of a previous murder, a gift to his niece which she has thrown back at him upon discovering his guilty secret. Charlie's descent into her uncle's gaze, luring him with the ring she has reclaimed from his room (and which constitutes the evidence that could condemn him) is an act of outright repudiation: she willfully pre-empts the staircase's previous associations with surveillance and secrecy and appropriates it to her own end, transforming it into a conduit that carries her directly to her uncle's gaze. She has finally mastered the language of the staircase and uses it to speak a word that only Uncle Charlie can hear and understand.

In Lang's *House by the River*, the staircase's capacity to convey a character into another's gaze receives a dramatically more erotic emphasis than it does in any of

Hitchcock's films. Lang's singular staircase murder indelibly fuses death and sexual desire in a manner that, one suspects, simply would not have appealed to Hitchcock's sensibility. In Hitchcock's films, desire (always a subterranean impulse) is an ordeal that first involves a harrowing period of dread and anticipation, followed by a prolonged vertical movement away from safe and familiar ground. As I stated previously, Lang views desire, conversely, as a superficial impulse that leads far too easily (and therefore almost instantly) to a condition of entrapment, with murder and guilt as the consequences. The price of touching the object of one's desire is to find oneself instead gripping a corpse.

The ornate Victorian staircase featured in *House by the River* is arguably the centrepiece of the film's elaborate and dreamily overwrought visual design. It is the scene of a murder, a return from the dead, and a ghostly act of revenge that enacts a decidedly architectural form of "poetic justice." If staircases in cinema are often architectural metaphors for the "heart of the house", this heart is capricious and corrupt. I argued in the last chapter that Lang's murder scenes typically take place in modern, elegant rooms of entrapment, where he is able to fuse his vision of fate and guilt with the imagery of the labyrinth, the mirror, and the tomb. The staircase in *House by the River* is therefore all the more remarkable because it appears to signal a startling deviation from Lang's standard means of envisioning the fatal trap of desire. Initially then, the staircase in *House by the River* might seem to provide yet another piece of evidence in support of the oft-repeated claim that Lang simply stole thematic and visual motifs from Hitchcock (as Hitchcock had stolen from him at the outset of *his* career) in order to reclaim at least

some part of his title as the rightful “Master of Suspense.” The staircase’s presence could also be dismissed on the grounds that the film’s Gothic plot and setting demanded it. While both of these possibilities are undoubtedly valid, their explanatory power fails to attend to the far more compelling issue of how Lang’s *use* of the staircase’s structure differs, sometimes obviously, sometimes subtly, from Hitchcock’s. As Gunning argues, “Lang ‘steals’ from Hitchcock in order to transform him” (347), and in this case I would argue that if Lang consciously appropriates a distinctively “Hitchcockian” motif into his own film-making, he adapts the metaphysical implications of the staircase to his own uncompromising vision of fate and desire.

*House by the River* tells the story of an unsuccessful author, Stephen Byrne, who accidentally murders a housemaid, Emily, while making a drunken, violent pass at her. In the film’s opening scene, Stephen has given Emily permission to take a bath in the private upstairs bathroom that belongs to him and his wife, Marjorie. Outside the house, Stephen is drawn to Emily’s presence in the bathroom by a light that appears in the upstairs bathroom window. Sitting on the gazebo facing the river, he gazes into space, his eyes fixed on an inner vision or fantasy clearly meant, by parallel editing, to elaborate erotically on the shots we are given of Emily draining the bathtub and primping herself in a mirror. The implications of the vertical arrangement of Lang’s cinematic architecture becomes, in this instance, particularly relevant: as Gunning points out, the “displacement of the bourgeois order of the household” signified by Emily’s bath in the house’s upper level “will have fatal consequences” (371). Fittingly, these consequences are played out at the point of transition between “upstairs and downstairs”—the house’s main staircase.



The film makes clear that what impels Stephen to a state of uncontrollable excitation is Emily's momentary transgression (which he himself has authorized) against established class boundaries. Stephen himself later remarks that he is hardly a stranger to the arousing effects of "cheap perfume"—that is, he derives his sexual potency from the power his status gives him over the women he beds with, all of whom are presumably well beneath his own station. By dabbing herself with her mistresses's perfume and descending the staircase from the forbidden upper level, Emily seals her fate as the object of his desire: she presents him with an opportunity to engage in an act of mutual transgression.

Drawn inside the house, Stephen pauses in the darkened hall at the foot of the staircase to light a candle, tidy himself up in the mirror, and pour himself a drink. Hearing a noise on the floor above, Stephen blows out the candle, retreats into the shadows, and looks up. Emily first appears in the form of a silhouette against the wall at the top of the staircase, her shadow framed by a square of light from the open bathroom door. She is an erotic apparition that Stephen views from the anonymous darkness below. As she slowly descends the staircase, the only parts of her body open to view are her bare legs and feet. The vertical lines of the bannister further fragment and abstract Emily's body into an impersonal object of Stephen's lust. At this point, these partial views of Emily—as a two-dimensional shadow/projection, and as an image of erotic desire—clearly configure her as an object of the male gaze. Gunning notes that "the male gaze is never taken for granted in [Lang's] films, as it would seem to be in most Hollywood films. Instead, it is scrutinized, criticized, mocked, and—undeniably—

participated in" (288). Significantly, these views of Emily invoke the mechanism of cinema itself: light, shadow, projection and movement are fragmented as if into a series of frames that, run together at just the right speed, trick the eye into thinking that what it sees is seamless. Lang deconstructs the male gaze by revealing the constituent components of its functioning. Moreover, the low angle of the camera, following each step from the other side of the bannister, fuses Stephen's point of view with that of the audience. If Emily descends from an upper level space as the object of Stephen's fantasy, she is also positioned as the object of the viewer's desire. The earlier cross-cutting between Stephen staring off into space and Emily in the bathroom compel the viewer to imagine the content of Stephen's fantasy, for which Emily's actual activities (emptying the tub, preparing her face in the mirror) are simply a less erotically charged but nevertheless suggestive foundation. Lang makes us complicit in Stephen's objectification of Emily, but he does so in order to make the fracture that takes place moments later all the more meaningful.

As she approaches the middle of the staircase, the sound of Stephen replacing the lid on a glass decanter startles Emily. At this point, the angle suddenly shifts to a frontal view of her from slightly below. Now we see Emily as a whole person, unobstructed by the bannister. Compared with the preceding angles, which have a tight, claustrophobic quality, this wider view of Emily surrounds her with depth. Unable to see Stephen in the darkness, she takes a terrified step back up the stairs and shrinks against the wall. No longer merely an object, she steps out of the two-dimensional frame of Stephen's desire, her terror opening up room for the viewer's emotional involvement in her situation. She

suddenly resembles a character in a film who becomes suddenly conscious of the viewer's presence on the other side of the screen. Given the nature of the fantasy she has been forced to enact on that side of the screen, it is perhaps understandable that her first reaction, once she has somehow regained a sense of herself, is one of terror.

But Emily finds herself unable to comprehend, until it is too late, the nature of the gaze the staircase has drawn her into. If, as I have argued, Lang's staircase acts as a transitional space between the realm of (cinematic) fantasy and the viewing "audience" (Stephen), her awareness of the "viewer" isn't sufficient to allow her to penetrate that darkness on the other side of the screen; she cannot identify the viewer, and therefore cannot immediately fathom his aims. The unseen viewer, however, seems to know all about her: his eyes glinting in the shadows, Stephen softly murmurs her name, then steps into the light so that Emily can finally see him. In relief she steps forward toward the bannister. The angle on Emily now shifts back to a lateral view from Stephen's position, but widens to include her entire body. The bannister descends diagonally from upper left to lower right, with Emily at the centre of the frame, flattened once again into a two-dimensional image. The staircase once again traps Emily behind the bannister even as it offers her an escape route back upstairs. Emily, however, remains ignorant of her danger and descends towards Stephen, who suddenly meets her on the lower steps. There he blocks her passage first with his body, then with his arm when he reaches out and grasps the newel-post. Curiously, Emily hesitates from taking what might seem, at this point, an inviting route of escape back up the stairs. Literally of course, her visit to the upstairs bathroom is a temporarily sanctioned transgression into the private space of her employer;

retreating to the upper level would violate the social boundaries that separate her from Stephen. But perhaps she also senses that by retreating back up the stairs, she would only trap herself more decisively in the space of Stephen's fantasy. Upstairs, of course, lies Stephen's bedroom, to where he would pursue her in order to make good on the threat his eyes prove increasingly incapable of keeping veiled.

Stephen's hand on the phallus-shaped newel-post suggests that the entire staircase has become an erotically charged structure which he can use to imprison Emily. But as Stephen's intent becomes more clear to her, she breaks past him. Undeterred, Stephen grabs her and pulls her back up onto the lower steps, pressing her against the newel-post and kissing her face. Emily's efforts to escape only cause Stephen to tighten his hold. He has no wish to relinquish his fantasy now that he has it in his grip. Emily's screams deflect Stephen's attention to a nearby window, through which he glimpses his busy-body neighbour tidying up the yard. Lang momentarily re-frames the angle on the neighbour from a position outside the house, where it becomes clear that Emily's cries cannot penetrate the stifling interior. His attention fixed on the window, Stephen smothers Emily's face and forces her into the space beyond the bottom of the frame. The neighbour, stepping towards the house as if to investigate the disturbance, instead picks up a forgotten coil of twine and withdraws into her own house. When Stephen relaxes his grip on Emily, she slips from his grasp and collapses at the foot of the staircase, dead.

In terms of the rhetoric of Lang's images in this scene, Stephen pays for the transgression of attempting to wrest his fantasy from its apparitional domain by destroying it utterly. The moment he moves beyond "just looking" and touches the object

of his gaze, it resists him and tries to free itself. Emily completes her trajectory down the staircase by becoming the very opposite of a fantasy object: as a corpse, her powers to repulse become the negative expression of her powers, as an image, to attract. Unable to shake life back into Emily's corpse, and disturbed by his brother's sudden appearance at the front door, Stephen attempts to crawl out of view. But a strap from Emily's dress snags his arm; Stephen wrests himself free with a spasm of disgust and horror.

After Stephen manipulates his brother into helping him dispose of Emily's corpse, he returns to the mansion and witnesses a second figure descending the staircase in a series of shots that exactly mirror Emily's earlier descent. Stephen reacts to this spectral image with horror: he assumes that Emily has returned from the grave to punish him for his crime. The same staircase that conveyed the erotic fantasy of Emily into his murderous grasp now conveys an apparition that descends to repudiate his gaze. However, after fearfully murmuring Emily's name, Stephen is relieved to discover that the person descending is not a ghost, but his wife Marjorie. In an attempt to explain his case of nerves, he composes (with almost perfect poise) a story to explain Emily's absence. This act of "improvisation" signals a turning point in the film. As Gunning argues, "His murder was the accidental result of his drunkenness and lust, but now he wants to claim it, or at least absorb it into his creative work, taking nourishment from the abject—that is his fantasy" (380). Emily's murder provides Stephen with the kind of lurid "life experience" that makes for commercially successful fiction. Soon after her death, he begins to incorporate his new-found capacity for murder into his writing, thereby claiming a kind of authorial control over that which he has wrought, and which

threatens, at every move, to overwhelm and undo him (Gunning 380). When Emily's body is at last discovered in the river and an inquest begins an investigation, it becomes clear to Stephen that his authorial control over events will have to extend beyond "the realm of words", however. Before long he begins to make plans to murder his brother John, who presents both an easy scapegoat for the original crime and an opportunity for Stephen to exercise his new-found powers of enunciation over events in the surrounding narratives (Gunning 381).

Once he has successfully dispatched John into the river (arranging it to look like a guilt-motivated suicide), Stephen returns to the mansion and discovers Marjorie in the upstairs bedroom reading his latest work in progress, which she correctly perceives as a confession (however remorseless) of his deeds. His only recourse, to which he turns with relish, is to strangle her as he did Emily, this time re-enacting the original crime while in complete control of his power to kill. But like any of Lang's villains who aspire to narrative control, Stephen discovers too late that his stranglehold on the unfolding events is only temporary and must be punished in turn by the film's true author. The sound of heavy footsteps climbing the staircase and moving towards the bedroom causes Stephen to relinquish his grip on Marjorie with a spasm of terror. John, who has somehow survived his brother's attempt to murder him and returned like another dripping corpse from the river, enters the bedroom, presenting himself to Stephen's view as an embodied renunciation of the very powers he thought he had mastered.

Despite his hubristic efforts to reclaim authority over the horrifying powers of the "object", however, Stephen only frees himself from its grip by making his own fatal

descent down the staircase. Fleeing John and Marjorie, Stephen rushes to the top of the staircase and pauses, rivetted by a billowing curtain. On its rippling surface appears a ghostly apparition of Emily. She, too, has returned from the dead. (Indeed, she has haunted him throughout the film: her body, stuffed into a sack and dropped into the river, resurfaces periodically to taunt him, always disappearing from view or slipping beyond reach the instant he thinks he has closed the distance between them. When he finally comes close to her later in the film, he prods the sack with an oar and a long tangle of blonde hair spills into the river's current, spreading towards him in another gesture of desire.) The billowing curtain in the film's final scene, filled with Emily's spectral presence, finally completes this gesture by entangling Stephen, whose efforts to free himself only wind the fabric around his neck. Repelled by the embrace of this apparition, Stephen struggles to free himself from its grip but only succeeds in tightening its stranglehold. Begging "Emily" to release him, Stephen finds his wish granted; but the force of his struggle propels him, at the instant of release, down the stairs and over the bannister, where he falls to his death.

Stephen's fall from the staircase naturally calls to mind the famous moment in Hitchcock's *Psycho* where Arbogast, a detective investigating the disappearance of Marion Crane, encounters a murderous presence at the top of the staircase in the Bates mansion. I would like for a moment to freeze-frame the image of Stephen at the beginning of his fall in order to compare Lang's staging of the fatal plummet to Hitchcock's. Unlike Lang, Hitchcock goes to great lengths to implicate the viewer in Arbogast's death by first protracting his ascent, which allows him to tighten the tension

between dread and anticipation to maximum pitch. Hitchcock, always deeply concerned to activate the mechanisms of viewer suspense, understands that by some strange alchemy, dread and anticipation refuse in their combination to cancel each other out; the tug-of-war instead heightens the effect of each warring impulse so that, within the "safe" confines of our movie-viewing experience, we derive a thrilling if perverse pleasure from the battle itself. Edgar Allen Poe describes this perverse desire in appropriately spatial terms by equating it with the situation of someone gazing into an abyss: "Our first impulse is to shrink from the danger. Unaccountably we remain." Gradually, the very idea of falling into such a space, rather than deterring us, causes us "now the most vividly to desire" this "rushing annihilation" (Poe 282). Our traumatic memory of Marion Crane's murder in the famous shower sequence earlier in the film, coupled with the links the film has already established between the staircase and Mrs. Bates (we have seen her silhouette in an upstairs window), induce unbearable levels of suspense as we follow Arbogast up the stairs.

At the beginning of Arbogast's ascent, the camera occupies a position on the staircase looking slightly down on him from a fixed distance. As the bannister and wall enclose him, the angle of the camera invokes the threat of a presence on the level above. The lugubrious pacing of Arbogast's climb, however, aligns us with the murderer we sense is waiting for him: we want the murder to happen so that the suspense will end. As Rothman puts it, "we know he is about to be attacked and fear for him; but we also share the exhilaration, the bloodthirsty excitement, of the murderer poised to strike" (316). The next shot reveals a doorway opening wide enough to permit a blade of light to slice across



the carpet, confirming our fears and increasing our anticipation: as Rothman notes, the shot is for us, and not for Arbogast, who has no access to what it conveys (316).

The camera then occupies an overhead position looking directly down on the landing: as Arbogast reaches the top of the staircase on the left, the door on the right opens suddenly wide, and the murderer swiftly crosses the intervening space to stab him with a knife. We return to our frontal view of Arbogast as he flails his arms, unbalanced, his face streaked with blood. Our perverse desire for the murder is at once satisfied and punished. Reaching out for the bannister, Arbogast gazes into the camera, looking into the eyes of his murderer—a position we now recognize as our own. If, at this point, we have any qualms about our complicity in his demise, it is too late, for we cannot reach out to save him: “If there be no friendly arm to check us, or if we fail in a sudden effort to prostrate ourselves backward from the abyss,” writes Poe, “we plunge, and are destroyed” (Poe 282). Mirroring the shot of his ascent, the camera swoops down at an even distance from Arbogast as he staggers backward down the stairs. As the floor rushes up to meet him, we find ourselves punished again by the camera’s insistence that we endure the fall as well.

In his version of the fatal fall down the staircase, Lang adamantly refuses to indulge in camera angles that might induce in the viewer a more visceral sense of the staircase’s precarious height. Instead, he depicts Stephen’s fall from the perspective of an establishing shot that stresses maximum openness and stability. If Hitchcock links the staircase to the subjectivity of the murderous presence at its summit, Lang emphasizes the lateral trajectory of Stephen’s trajectory over the bannister to the floor below in a manner

that reduces the image to a schematic. What is important to Lang, it seems, is not the spectator's ambiguous and suspenseful engagement in the fall itself, but rather our ability to perceive as clearly as possible the *diagrammatic* significance of Stephen's trajectory. His movement is not merely vertical but lateral: it takes him down the staircase, and then over the bannister, and then down again to the floor below. Gunning observes that Stephen's fall lands him in precisely the location where Emily, strangled to death, sunk to the floor (384). In fact, Stephen's body lands not at the foot of the stairs, but on the place further behind where he watched Emily descend in the darkness. He completes the trajectory of the imaginary viewer I described earlier, who, having penetrated the fantasy in order to pluck it into the "real" space on the other side of the screen, finds *himself* fatally expelled by the image his touch has murdered. The frontal, wide angle of the shot that Lang uses to convey Stephen's fall takes in not only the entire staircase but the hallway below, now brightly lit: in the theatre of Stephen's murderously erotic gaze, the lights have come up, and the show is now over. Unlike the staircase in *Psycho*, the staircase in *House by the River* only pretends to be the murderer's accomplice in crime: as is so often the case in Lang's films, a space proves fatal to the perpetrator as well as to the victim, and is ultimately shown to function in the service of a hitherto invisible machinery of determinism to which all are blind, and from which no one has the powers to escape.

The failure to see properly is, as I have already mentioned, central to Lang's work. His characters continually move through spaces without ever apprehending what proves, in the end, to be right in front of their eyes: the warning signs of a metaphysical entrapment from which it is always already too late to escape. This differs substantially

from what I take to be the central problems of vision in Hitchcock's films, in which what needs to be seen is somehow always *beyond* view, hidden over the edge of an event horizon. In *House by the River*, Stephen constantly retraces his steps and beholds variations of the same vision—that his desires are a conduit to death, and that the staircase is the mechanism that will complete the process by consuming and then expelling *him* as another corpse to be dumped into the river of the abject. How does his cyclical journey differ from that of the characters in *Psycho*, who also “retrace each other's steps and imitate each other's actions, without ever having the sense of what their eyes need to connect with” (Toles 154)? Lila Crane, searching the Bates mansion for her missing sister Marion, fastens her gaze only on signs of absence: empty rooms, an empty staircase, the imprint of a body on a mattress. She does not know that by climbing the staircase, she follows the same trajectory as murdered Arbogast; or that by descending it, and retreating from the advancing gaze of Norman Bates to another, hidden staircase, she follows the pathway traced out earlier by Norman as he carried his frail, invalid mother into the fruit cellar. At the end of her descent she will encounter, like Stephen, a corpse. But the mummified gaze of Mrs. Bates will confront her with something far more harrowing than a vision of death, because even *it* fails to answer in adequately clarifying terms the riddle of dread and madness at the heart of the film, like a staircase leading nowhere.

Perhaps no other film better demonstrates Hitchcock's use of the staircase to visually connect the themes of death and desire than *Vertigo* (1958), in which Hitchcock equates Scottie Ferguson's fear of heights with his romantic and erotic fixation on an

ideal woman who turns out never to have existed. Scottie is unaware that the woman he has fallen in love with is only a convincing performance devised to dupe him into acting as the unwitting alibi for a murder. Twice in the film, he must confront his fear by climbing a seemingly endless staircase to the summit of a bell-tower: the first time, he fails to reach the top and watches Madeleine Elster plummet her death in an apparent suicide; the second time, he forces Judy, the actress who played Madeleine, up the same staircase after uncovering the deception. He reaches the top, only to watch as Judy, terrified by the sudden appearance of a nun, repeats the death of Madeleine by also falling over the edge. The staircase in *Vertigo* continually presents Scottie with the challenge of climbing up and out of the abyss his desire has allowed him to fall into. The shifting depth of field that Hitchcock uses to express Scottie's vertigo each time he looks into the stairwell—an image that invokes the overhead spiral staircase shots in *Blackmail* and *The Lodger*—confronts him with the gaze of a staircase that appears bottomless, and desires to consume him in emptiness. At the conclusion of the film, escape from the abyss turns out to be as illusory or paradoxical as the fulfilment of his desire: if Madeleine's death is the only thing that allows Scottie, finally, to possess her, the cure for his vertigo involves a recognition that he must always remain in free-fall.

I would like to conclude, fittingly enough, with the last of Hitchcock's fatal staircases.

*Frenzy* (1972) reiterates and refines the pattern used in *Psycho*: he follows up a shocking spectacle of murder with a later scene in which a character ascends a staircase to a place where the viewer knows, with appalling certainty, that another equally violent murder

will take place. Serial killer Bob Rusk has already raped and murdered a woman earlier in the film in a scene that leaves nothing from view. The viewer is held in horrifying proximity to acts of physical and sexual violence that seem to escalate past the boundary of what we are willing to watch, even on film, before we have a chance to turn away. Later, Rusk invites to his apartment a woman named Babs, and leads both her and the viewer up an elegant staircase. As Rusk closes the door behind Babs, however, the staircase, as if exerting a will of its own, draws us away from his apartment, carrying us down the steps and ejecting us out into the noisy street. The length of our enforced retreat down the empty staircase—a kind of slow-motion backwards fall—draws our attention to the incarnadine hue of the staircase's carpeting, and our sinuous, winding trajectory describes the necktie we know Rusk will use to strangle his latest victim. Somehow it is both disquieting and *right* that in the final Hitchcock murder, the staircase should stand in so indelibly for the atrocity itself. We know, of course, that there is nothing we can do to help Babs, but our irrational desire to intervene, somehow, in the film's unfolding narrative is emphatically denied. If the staircase physically removes us from the scene of the crime, however, it fails to remove us to a sufficiently "safe" spectator distance from which we might be able to disengage from our own mental images—fleeting perhaps, but disturbingly vivid—of what we know is taking place in a space now beyond our view.

## Conclusion

Why does the crime of murder have such a potent clutch on the imagination of all human beings? I admit feebly that I don't quite know, this after years of studying murder from the viewpoint of the dramatist. The fascination of murder and violence for the human imagination is probably inherent. [...] Gradually, and at times reluctantly, I have come to the conclusion that every human mind harbors a latent compulsion to murder.<sup>3</sup>

— Fritz Lang

The real danger in my opinion is not violence. It is that the viewer of television murder can enjoy all the sensations without the mess. There are no stains to remove, no body to dispose of, no cement to dry. Such a situation is not good for national character. It encourages sloth and dries up the creative juices. The result? Murder could someday be reduced to a mere spectator sport.<sup>4</sup>

— Alfred Hitchcock

Over the course of the past three chapters I have attempted to account for the thematic, narrative and aesthetic differences between murder scenes in the films of Alfred Hitchcock and Fritz Lang. My guiding conviction has been that a great deal can be learned about their individual visions of guilt, fate, death and desire by comparing the thematic function of murder within the larger context of their film narratives, and by examining aesthetic choices and patterns that resonate throughout their film-making.

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<sup>3</sup> Fritz Lang, "Director Tells of Bloodletting and Violence", *Los Angeles Herald Express* 8 December 1947, quoted in *Fritz Lang: His Life and Work. Photographs and Documents*, ed. Rolf Aurich, Wolfgang Jacobson and Cornelius Schnauber, in collaboration with Nicole Brunnhuber and Gabriele Jatho, Filmmuseum Berlin–Deutsche Kinemathek and Jovis Verlag GmbH, Berlin, 2001, pp. 391-392.

<sup>4</sup> Alfred Hitchcock, "After-Dinner Speech at the Screen Producer's Guild," quoted in *Hitchcock on Hitchcock: Selected Writings and Interviews*, edited by Sidney Gottlieb, University of California Press, Los Angeles, 1995, p. 58.

One of the most consistent themes to appear in the films I have discussed is the ambiguity of guilt. For both Hitchcock and Lang, guilt of some kind or another stains the hands of almost all of their characters; it might best be described as a universal condition that can descend upon the innocent without the slightest warning. In *The 39 Steps* and *Ministry of Fear*, Richard Hannay and Stephen Neale find themselves suddenly incriminated in murders we are ostensibly encouraged to believe they didn't commit. By obscuring the murders themselves from view, however, Hitchcock and Lang make it impossible for us to rely on our own perceptions and knowledge in order to be certain of either man's lack of culpability, and thereby require us to take their innocence as an act of viewer faith. In *Blackmail* and *The Blue Gardenia*, Alice White and Norah Larkin also discover how easy it is to find oneself entrapped by guilt (even when their actions are justified), and how difficult it is to clear one's name of murder when the world around them refuses to recognize the mitigating circumstances that have led them to kill in the first place. Both directors link these issues to problems of point of view that ultimately incriminate the viewer as well. "Guilt" and "innocence" are moral categories that prove, in both director's films, to be problematically linked to the lack of any final, clarifying perspective, a perceptual blindness for which the only cure (if there is one) can only be more diligent viewing, or else a recognition that the means of achieving any such a perspective must always remain beyond reach.

Throughout the films of both directors, murder scenes are staged according to consistent metaphysics of murder. Lang traces the entrapment of his characters across horizontal trajectories through a series of enclosed interiors that describe a kind of

labyrinth; for him, murder and guilt are the end result of desires that blind his characters to the traps they are walking into before they have a chance to recognize their transgressions. His spatial metaphysics emphasize the deterministic systems (technology, social values, and the media) that intervene in the lives of his characters and that keep them shackled to imprisoning values and perceptions, even when they think they have achieved freedom. Hitchcock, on the other hand, envisions murder and guilt as the unavoidable destination of movement through vertical space. The staircases in his films confront his characters with the perilous heights they must cross before achieving their desires, and then often refuse to provide a way back down to a place of safety and innocence. Unlike Lang, Hitchcock uses his spatial metaphysics to stress character subjectivity and the psychological nature of entrapment. When staircases do appear in Lang's murder scenes, they reflect his vision of the alienating, deterministic nature of space, which separates his characters from their desires or consumes them in the machinery of fate.

Given the amount of attention I have devoted to the aesthetics and thematics of murder scenes throughout these pages, it would now seem reasonable that I conclude with a brief statement about the sociological significance of Hitchcock's and Lang's devotion to murder as a central moment in their cinematic art. As the quotations at the beginning of this conclusion make clear, Hitchcock and Lang both recognized that their artistic fascination with the problem of murder at least partially reflected the fixations of their viewers. I would venture to claim that even as the processes of modernity work to pave over and distance us from the violent and the irrational, both directors recognize the



capacity of these suppressed impulses to express themselves in increasingly spectacular fashion. It is almost as if the utopian projects of modernism, technology and urbanization have cut us off from an intimate relationship with our own violent natures, a fracture that results not in the abolition of our murderous instincts but in an increasing fascination with them. Our fascination with murder, both real and fictional, reflects to a degree our desire to grapple with the "return of the repressed," as Freud would have had it. If Lang's task is to expose this dynamic to view in terms of an objective sociological critique of sorts, Hitchcock's is to provide us with a vicarious (and perhaps cathartic) release in the form of entertainment or artistic encounter.

This leads me to what I take to be the most compelling distinction between both director's murder scenes. For the viewer watching their films, the most palpable difference lies in the quality of our emotional engagement with the action taking place on screen. Hitchcock's murder scenes tighten our visceral, suspenseful involvement in the spectacle of murder to maximum pitch. We are always (or almost always) given enough information to know that a murder is about to take place, but Hitchcock draws out the moments leading up the final, violent release as far as he can, and then shocks us with the intimacy of his camera's view of the murder itself. We are locked into a lover's proximity to the violence of killing, which in turn generates a kind of pleasurable fusion of pleasure and dread. Lang's murders, on the other hand, have an arid, detached quality; they unfold before our eyes with the precision of an efficient, well-oiled machine. Because we are rarely given advance warning that a murder is about to take place, Lang's murder scenes are far less emotionally and viscerally involving. Shock replaces suspense

as Lang's primary aesthetic effect, but even the sensation of the shock is muted by Lang's camera, which views the act of murder from a cold, fixed distance. What matters more, to Lang, is the camera's objective view of murder as just another piece in the machinery of his deterministic vision of modernity. Lang's cinema has little patience for (or interest in) Hitchcock's romanticism, and seeks to keep its hands clean of the murky, unreliable and distracting mess of human emotion, which he perceives as a threat to his camera's task of exposing the invisible structures that impose themselves upon the lives of his characters.

What has surprised me more than anything else, in the end, is the number of viewership issues that murder scenes inevitably raise, and which I feel would require a fuller accounting if one is to gain the clearest possible sense of murder's significance in both men's art. For example, narrative point of view often plays a vital role in determining how a given scene is to be read. If this seems obvious, it hardly answers the more complex question of how, exactly, we should describe the various points of view that become available to us while watching a scene unfold. As George M. Wilson points out repeatedly, film theory has only just begun to recognize the inadequacies of the vocabulary currently available for discussing point of view in cinema. While I have tried to distinguish Hitchcock from Lang by contrasting the former's emphasis on subjectivity with the latter's emphasis on a more objective, omniscient point of view, such statements can often grossly oversimplify the intricate shifts and overlapping subject positions their cameras invite us to occupy. Given the limitations of space at my disposal, I have attempted whenever possible to suggest some of the subtler nuances that might

complicate a too-easy bifurcation of Hitchcock's and Lang's narrational approaches, but the issue of point of view, in particular, remains open to further elaboration.

The aspect of either director's film-making that struck me as most compelling was that of directorial enunciation—the ways in which Hitchcock and Lang draw the viewer's attention to signs of their authorship in the film itself. I have argued in several cases that both directors bestow their powers of enunciation on characters within the diegesis of a film, usually villains, and that this generates a wide range of suggestive implications on how we are to view the condition of guilt in their cinematic worlds. However, one gets the strange sense (although perhaps it comes, in my case, from watching too many murder scenes too many times) that Hitchcock and Lang are the true perpetrators of their on-screen murders. I have found myself wondering on more than one occasion if this necessarily implies that the *viewer* is somehow the film's true victim. Recall that in every murder scene the viewer is involved as fully as possible in the events unfolding on the screen. We are lured into attractive interior spaces and then left with no route of escape. Worse, we are frequently left with no *desire* to escape (there are only a few instances of murder scenes in which I find myself wanting to get out—*Psycho* and *Frenzy* being the two examples that come most readily to mind). For Hitchcock, it seems that we are most often punished for wanting to see something we know we shouldn't see, or shouldn't want to see. And yet film after film we come back, wanting to be murdered in the dark all over again. For Lang, we are punished consistently for not seeing clearly enough. Each repeated viewing of his films teaches us (if we are willing to learn) to pay more attention to what is right before our very eyes.

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