Framing the Fall:

Hitchcock's Camera and the Journey *Downhill*

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for

The Films of Alfred Hitchcock

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Alfred Hitchcock changed the title.

Ivor Novello and Constance Collier's moderate stage success of 1926 was titled *Down Hill* (written under the pseudonym David L'Estrange). When Hitchcock adapted the play for the screen the following year, he changed the title to *Downhill*. (McGilligan, 2003) There is no dramaturgical rationale for the change, and the director never addressed the decision publicly, but its symbolism should not be ignored, as it immediately imprinted the adaptation with Hitchcock's artistic signature. *Downhill* may not be one of the more well-regarded entries in the Hitchcock canon but, as biographer Patrick McGilligan notes, the film is "enhanced by his imaginative staging, expressive lighting and composition, and usual camera work." (McGilligan, 2003) The film is, by any title, a work of prescient narrative authority; the director employs the techniques of "pure cinema" to illustrate the downfall of Roddy Berwick (Novello) with a visual economy and compositional poignancy.

This essay will explore Hitchcock's use of camera to (a) efficiently establish the film's inciting love triangle with close-up shots, (b) create suspense with subtle movement, (c) frame Roddy's descent through visual metaphor, (d) subvert spectator expectations, and (e) use subjective focus to provide experiential, as opposed to reflective, experiences for the viewer.

Sex & Secrets

Downhill, in short, is the story of a single man's downfall through deception. Roddy begins the film as the rugby captain of an upper-class boarding school and in the closing scenes finds himself suffering fits of hallucinatory delirium in the hull of a sailing vessel, bound back for London. (A pointed title describes that "what was left of him was thrown to the rats of a Marseilles dock-side.")

This lamentable descent is initiated by his involvement in a love triangle with a friend and schoolmate Tim (Robin Irvine) and a waitress, Mabel (Annette Benson). In a lengthy dining hall sequence, Hitchcock establishes both the love triangle itself, and its secretive (dangerous) nature, punctuating their narrative import with two close-ups, a complete story told in each frame.

After writing a note explaining that she'll be alone later that evening, Mabel sneaks the note to Tim.

As her fingers brush up against his palm, the note takes on a purely sexual connotation, establishing a private rendezvous for two young lovers. The secretive nature of the note's delivery establishes a sense of danger in the interaction. This meeting must be coordinated outside the view of those gathered in the school's dining hall, as Mabel is an employee of the institution and a liaison with a student would certainly have been deemed improper. (Their class discrepancy might also have been a reason for discretion.)

Shortly thereafter, Mabel approaches Roddy. The camera slides to their feet.

This moment, seconds later, establishes Mabel's engagement with both men. But the interaction with Roddy is more playful than sexual. Mabel and Tim's establishing shot was skin-on-skin,

prelude to an imminent tryst. Mabel and Tim's establishing shot is shoe-on-shoe, a game of "footsies" more akin to the antics of children on the schoolyard. The complicated sexual dynamics of the love triangle are communicated in just two shots, but the compositional distinctions define Roddy's tenuous involvement and portend difficulties for him ahead.

Approaching Danger/Danger Approaches

Roddy and Tim are called to the headmaster's office. When they arrive, they find him sternly staring in their direction and know they have been summoned for disciplinary reasons. Hitchcock uses a long shot, allowing the Gothic architecture of the headmaster's office to aid in the intimidation.

The boys approach. The camera takes on their subjective focus, slowly moving towards peril, creating tension. What trouble awaits them? By framing the following sequence entirely from the perspective of the boys, Hitchcock makes the spectator an active participant in the suspense. On stage, the audience is rarely granted the luxury of perspective without direct address. Hitchcock discusses how this approach is an inherent advantage cinema has over theatre:

> "In order to appreciate what the characters on the stage are going through, we have to project ourselves into their consciousness; we have to receive our thrills vicariously, which is not the most effective method." (Hitchcock, 1995)

The headmaster reveals that Mabel is pregnant and he knows one of them to be responsible. When Mabel is asked to identify which of the boys deserves punishment, this camera method is reversed. Maurice Yacowar writes of what follows, "…distinguished by its use of space. Mabel has a long, slow walk toward the camera to level her paternity charge against Roddy." (Yacowar, 2010) The camera remains still as the boys remain still, with the danger now approaching *them*. Just as camera movement created suspense in the earlier sequence, now the lack of movement performs a similar function. Again, there is an important juxtaposition of visuals; the inversion this time created through technique as opposed to composition. Movement towards the unknown is frightening, as is stillness in the face of an approaching, known terror.

Hitchcock also reflexively draws attention to the camera during this sequence. As Mabel approaches, the frame is presented as if she is being viewed through a camera lens. (The first image directly below.) But as she reaches the boys, the viewer realizes Hitchcock placed the camera behind them, framing Mabel with their shoulders, and creating a visual illusion. (The second image directly below.) Mabel is positioned directly between them, with almost geometric precision, but she does not look at either boy. She looks at the camera, us, and we experience the same fear they do.

Framing the Fall

Sidney Gottlieb notes that Hitchcock (potentially) derived from F.W. Murnau "his expressive use of what we might call the architecture of space." (Gottlieb, 2000) In *Downhill*, Roddy begins as a figure of power and authority, triumphant on the rugby pitch and celebrated by his schoolmates. As the film progresses, Roddy is banished from the societal institutions that define him: the boarding school and his wealthy home. At each instance, Hitchcock frames him as a small figure in a larger world, now drawing upon visual metaphorical to develop character and further the narrative. After Roddy is accused by Mabel, and dismissed from the school, the viewer is presented with the following image.

Later, Roddy is forced to leave his home, after being called a liar by his father. He descends an Underground escalator.

Hitchcock regretted this visual choice, telling Francois Truffaut the sequence was a "…naïve touch I wouldn't do today…To show the beginning of the downhill journey, I put him on an

escalator going down." (Truffaut, Hitchcock, 1967) This is overly self-critical from Hitchcock. First, as has just been discussed, this is not "the beginning of the downhill journey." It is, in fact, the second stage of a multi-stage journey downhill for Roddy. Second, the image of the small figure of Roddy framed by the large architecture of the Underground works precisely because of the complementary shot at the boarding school. As Roddy descends further on the societal spectrum, he becomes a smaller and smaller figure.

There are, however, several overly simplistic visualizations in the film, including a close-up shot of Roddy's finger pushing the down button in a lift after being thrown out of his own home later in the film. And while these compositions surely warrant some regret, and display some characteristics of a novice filmmaker, they are more than compensated for by a flourish of visual ingenuity displayed throughout.

Can One Get Lower?

An essay on *Downhill* must mention what is perhaps Hitchcock's most dazzling use of camera in the film. McGilligan describes it:

> "One particularly inventive sequence began with a close-up of a man [Roddy] in evening dress – a swell, one judges, until the camera sweeps back to reveal the man is a waiter. When a nearby couple begins to dance energetically, the waiter seems to join in, before the camera sweeps father back and around to reveal the action is all part of a revue stages for a nightclub audience." (McGilligan, 2003)

The illusion is remarkable, but here Hitchcock also displays how camera technique can be an effective tool for subverting spectator expectations and delivering a punchline. The viewer is meant to believe Roddy has fallen to the depth of waiter, but it is far worse than that: he's a background player on the stage! Roddy's downfall is now presented as spectacle, not only for the viewer but also for diegetic audience within the film. The indignity of his fall is now light entertainment for theatregoers.

The Taxi Dancer's Lament

Late in the film, Roddy finds work as a taxi dancer (gigolo) in a Parisian dance hall. Hitchcock explains to Truffaut:

> "…there I experimented a bit. I showed a woman seducing a younger man. She is a lady of a certain age, but quite elegant, and he finds her very attractive until daybreak. Then he opens the window and the sun comes in, lighting up the woman's face. In that moment she looks dreadful. And through the open window we show people passing by carrying a coffin." (Truffaut, Hitchcock, 1967)

What's humorous about this reflection is the sequence, as described, is not actually in the film. (James Vest addressed this in a section of his 2005 essay on *Downhill* brilliantly sub-titled "The Memorable Missing Coffin.") In the actual sequence, waiters in the dance hall pull open the window and as the light enters the space, the camera takes on Roddy's perspective. This, to borrow from Shelley Stamp's work on Lois Weber, "psychological interiority and subjective experience" over "detached, sociological observation" (Stamp, 2015) creates an experiential catharsis for the viewer as they, with Roddy, come to terms with the world in which he has tragically found himself.

The sequence represents what Gottlieb describes as Hitchcock's "vision of sadness, suffering, and disorder beyond human responsibility or repair" (Gottlieb, 2000) while also linking Roddy to the mid-Victorian tradition of the fallen woman, described by Richard Allen as a character

having "lost her capacity to discriminate between right and wrong, who had abandoned her freedom or autonomy, and was therefore someone whose behavior was wholly governed by the forces of nature." (Allen, 2001) Roddy began the film as the subject of an adoring gaze, fans gathered around the rugby pitch to shower him with praise. During his downfall he was forced absorb the gaze – both in a performative and sexual sense – to survive. Now, he is returning his gaze upon them, with Hitchcock literally using the camera to do so. The viewer does not merely *observe* the moment of catharsis but *experiences* it through the use of subjective focus. We do not reflect upon his downfall. (Look at him!) We are given the opportunity to experience that fall as he does. (Look at us!)

The Legacy of *Downhill*

While mostly ignored by modern critics (and Hitchcock scholars), *Downhill* presents a filmmaker with an established cinematic vocabulary for the development of narrative and character. And this early vocabulary would resurface throughout his career. Truffaut remarks on the several close-ups used to open *Rear Window*, "In that single opening camera movement we have learned where we are, who the principal character is, all about his work, and even how it caused his accident." (Truffaut, Hitchcock, 1967) Robin Wood often discusses Hitchcock's use of subjective focus to create experiential moments in his films. Of *Vertigo*, he writes, "The sensation of vertigo is conveyed to the spectator by the most direct means, subjective shots using a simultaneous zoom-in and track back." (Wood, 2003) And with *Psycho*, Wood takes the concept a step further: "As he cleans up after his mother's hideous crime, the camera becomes subjective; they are our hands mopping away the blood." (Wood, 2003) *Downhill* presents a filmmaker experimenting with techniques that would come to define much of his cinematic style and the film deserves consideration as a major work of Hitchcock's silent period.

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