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A Shot-by-Shot Analysis of the Balcony Scene from *A Streetcar Named Desire*

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What follows is a shot-by-shot analysis of the most iconic sequence from one of the most admired films of the classical Hollywood cinema era, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), written by Tennessee Williams and directed by Elia Kazan. The sequence in which Stanley wails his wife’s name at the foot of the stairs quickly became famous for its feral yet steamy illumination of the fraught power dynamic between Stanley and Stella.

In the stage play on which Kazan bases his film, Williams introduces Stanley this way: “Animal joy in his being is implicit in all his movements and attitudes. Since earliest manhood the center of his life has been pleasure with women, the giving and taking of it, not with weak indulgence, dependency, but with the power and pride of a richly feathered male bird among hens.” At this point in the film, however, Stanley’s innate “animal joy” has transformed into animalistic howls of pain. And if his “power and pride” is initially akin to a “richly feathered male bird among hens,” here his feathers are in disarray, his power diminished, and his pride turned to penitence.

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Editing: Straight cut to Stanley as he stands in the middle of the courtyard and calls out for Stella.

Cinematography: A medium, high angle shot, in shallow focus with Stanley center frame. The camera is not moving.

Mise-en-scene: Stanley stands in the middle of the courtyard, in front of what looks to be a fountain without water. There are leaves, dirt, and various plants behind him. Stanley is soaking wet, with a severely torn short. He looks extremely distraught.

Sound: We hear slow, jazzy, extradiegetic music playing and, early in the shot, a loud bang. Then Stanley “howls” (to use Eunice’s word) for Stella at a volume much louder and more desperate than anything else we hear in this shot.

Shot Analysis: This shot emphasizes Stanley’s desperation. He is soaking wet, which suggests that what he is doing right now—howling for Stella to win her back—is the most important thing to him (more important than, say, drying off and changing his clothes). Stanley looks tough, rugged, and manly with his ripped shirt and soaking wet body, yet this is contrasted with the power Stella wields over him as this hypermasculine, bestial man cries at the foot of the stairs, begging his wife to come back. In the background, we see fallen leaves, dirt, and an unkempt courtyard, further emphasizing Stanley’s wild, ragged appearance and demeanor. Stanley is in the foreground, center frame, and in focus to draw the eye towards him. The way he cries is reminiscent of the howling of a wolf. He also looks extremely pained, however, and this desperation (along with the high angle of the shot) makes him look small.



Editing: Straight cut to the inside of Eunice’s apartment.

Cinematography: The camera starts on Stella in a medium shot, shallow focus, at eye level when she’s sitting in the chair, and then it follows her as she stands up and walks to the door. When she stands up, the camera switches to a low angle. As she gets closer to the door and Blanche is also now in the frame, the focus shifts to Blanche in the middle ground and away from Stella in the foreground. The camera tilts up (when Stella stands), moves backwards (when she walks towards the door), and pans slightly (once she leaves the house).

Mise-en-scene: Stella has short, curly hair. She’s wearing a plain dress with some simple lace meshwork at the top and a ribbon around her waist. Her facial expression and the way she slowly stands and walks to the door give the appearance of not just strength and power, but also control. She is well lit until she gets close to the door, when she walks into shadows. Blanche is dressed very differently—a frilly, long, extravagant dress with longer, more traditional hair. Blanche’s demeanor here contrasts with Stella’s. Blanche is concerned and confused, her expressions exaggerated, in contrast to Stella’s calm, slow, and controlled look and movement.

Sound: We hear Stanley yell “Hey, Stella!” again and, after that, the extradiegetic music introduces more high-pitched sounds. The music sounds smooth, slow, and contemplative. We also hear Blanche make a noise as she tries to get Stella to come back, and then Eunice tells Blanche, “I wouldn’t mix in this.”

Shot Analysis: This the first shot of many in this sequence that emphasize the power Stella has over Stanley. It also emphasizes just how different the two sisters are. The changing camera angles in the shot tell us a lot: when Stella stands up from the chair, we now see her in a low angle, representing her as increasingly powerful. The way she walks towards the door is also somewhat animalistic—like a predator hunting its prey. Stella looks to be in a different world than Blanche and Eunice, entranced by and fully in command of the cries she hears from Stanley outside the apartment. The difference between Blanche and Stella is also clear not only through their outfits but also through Blanche’s fearful gestures of concern for her sister (when she reaches for

Stella to come back) and through Stella's indifference to Blanche's concern. This is between Stella and Stanley. Even Eunice knows that, as evidenced by her warning to Blanche at the end of this shot ("I wouldn't mix in this"). Anything Blanche may say or do is futile, demonstrated by the way Stella carries herself in this shot as if Blanche and Eunice aren't even in the room.



Editing: Straight cut to Stella as she looks down onto Stanley. This shot is much shorter than the previous one, lasting only about four seconds.

Cinematography: We see Stella in a medium, low angle shot in shallow focus where the foreground (the staircase railing) is out of focus and Stella remains in focus in the middle ground. The camera doesn't move.

Mise-en-scene: Stella stands with her arm outstretched as it lays on the staircase railing. She then drops it. Her facial expression and posture convey a stern, domineering, and unyielding attitude, yet she also looks as if she's savoring the moment. The window shutter behind her looks dirty and decrepit.

Sound: The extradiegetic music continues to play. Here, however, it begins to sound more alluring and even seductive, the delicate flutes of the previous shot giving way to a slow jazz melody played by what sounds like an alto or soprano saxophone.

Shot Analysis: Stella is shown in an even more low angle than the previous shot, further emphasizing the power she has right now. She is at the top of the stairs and literally looking down on Stanley. Her outstretched yet relaxed arm conveys confidence, letting us know that she knows just how powerful she is at the moment. Her facial expression looks sultry and alluring. She desires Stanley as much as he desires her. Though this shot is only four seconds, it feels longer because her only movement is letting her arm fall. This makes the shot feel longer than it is because Stella pauses here at the top of the stairs, reveling in Stanley's desperation for her before she yields to his desires later in the sequence. The sexy jazz music adds to Stella's seductive posture and facial expression. Meanwhile, the dirty and worn-down window behind her reminds us that the New Orleans environment in which Stella and Stanley live is unrefined, rugged, coarse, and even crude, especially when compared to the idealized, upper-class Southern plantation ("Belle Reve") on which Blanche and Stella were raised.



Editing: Eyeline match from the previous shot where Stella is looking down at Stanley at the foot of the stairs.

Cinematography: Stanley is shown in an extreme high angle long shot with most of the frame taken up by the massive staircase in front of him (which is in focus except for the bit in the foreground). Stanley is also in focus, but the background is slightly out of focus. Stanley is positioned near the middle of the frame, and he looks small. The camera does not move.

Mise-en-scene: Stanley lowers his hands from around his head and drops them onto the staircase railing. A subtle twinge in Stanley's face suggests a smile. His shirt is so torn up that it's literally falling off his arm. We see a lot of shadows, most noticeably the shadow of a metal gate in the background. The fountain behind him is empty, surrounded by debris.

Sound: The same extradiegetic music continues, evoking the same sense of allure and seduction.

Shot Analysis: The framing and angle of this shot emphasizes Stella's power in the shots before and after this one. Stanley is dwarfed by the staircase—a staircase that Stella uses to convey how confident and powerful she is compared to him, and a staircase that Stella is walking on right now when Stanley isn't. His size in this shot emphasizes the position Stella commands. The extreme high angle makes him look small and weak compared to his wife far above him. If he is indeed smiling when he sees her, that would suggest just how desperate he is to even get to see her. This desperation further shrinks him (metaphorically) in relation to her. At the start of the shot, his hands are up by his face—the position we last saw him in when he was howling for her. He drops them when he sees Stella, suggesting that her presence is so commanding that he'll immediately stop his tantrum at the sight of her. He still looks feral. And once again his surroundings—the unkempt ground, the dirt and sticks on the ground, the empty water fountain—accentuates his messy, unrefined, disheveled appearance. The score suggests that this mix of untamed savagery and childish vulnerability in Stanley is attractive to Stella, luring her back to him.



Editing: This is a shot-reverse shot as we are alternating between Stanley and Stella as she walks down the stairs. It's also a very quick shot and ends when she takes her first step down. It lasts only three or four seconds.

Cinematography: This is the same framing and angle as shot #3—low angle, medium shot in deep focus (except for a railing in the foreground). The camera does not move.

Mise-en-scene: Stella stares down at Stanley for a few seconds and then takes her first step down. She does it in a way that gives the movement weight, as if it's a highly consequential action for her to take. As with shot #3, she looks very strong and commanding here, and her facial expression conveys both dominance and lust.

Sound: The sexy, extradiegetic jazz music continues to play in the background.

Shot Analysis: Though the shot itself is quick, Stella spends all of these four seconds hesitating before taking the first step. There are many elements of the sequence thus far, however, that suggest her hesitation does not signal indecision. She does not appear to be weighing whether or not to go back to Stanley. Instead, the sequence implies that she made up her mind to return to him when she walked out the door in shot #2. Her hesitation here suggests, rather, that she's reveling in the power she has over him right now and wants to make him suffer as long as she can before she finally gives in. This once again emphasizes her dominance. She is basking in it, elongating every moment of Stanley's desperate subservience. This does not appear to be an abuse of power, though, because both she and

Stanley seem to enjoy this dynamic. Her facial expression, her posture, the slowness of her movements, and the extradiegetic jazz all help to convey the sexual tension between the two of them.



Editing: This is a match on action as Stella takes her first step down at the end of the last shot and now, at the beginning of this one, we see her finishing the step from a different angle. At eleven seconds, this shot is much longer than those before it.

Cinematography: A long shot, shallow focus, with Stanley out of focus in the foreground and an extreme high angle on Stella as she starts out in the background and walks down the stairs. The camera pans to the right as Stella gets closer to the bottom of the staircase, entering the middle ground and cutting Stanley out of the frame.

Mise-en-scene: We see the staircase railing and columns that hold up the building, both of which have fancy, swirling patterns. A light bulb is shown in the upper left corner of the frame, illuminating Stella and producing the shadows that we see, including the one of her on the wall that she touches as she walks slowly down the staircase. In the beginning of the shot, we see Stanley only from behind and, because the shirt he's wearing is so torn, a portion of his back that is illuminated. From this angle it looks as if he's not wearing a shirt at all. Stella walks down the stairs at an uneven pace, though for the most part slowly and extremely seductively.

Sound: There is no dialogue (as in the last few shots) but the sexy extradiegetic jazz continues to play.

Shot Analysis: This shot is longer than those before, which draws more attention to how slowly Stella walks down the stairs (the only action here) and emphasizes her purposeful delay. She walks down the stairs in a slow, alluring way, indicating her attempt to savor Stanley's desire for her in this moment, the pleasure she takes in dominating him, her desire to intensify his desire, or a combination of these. All of this is conveyed in her posture, the way she moves (and grabs the wall next to her), and the angle of the camera. Though she is shown further away and therefore smaller than Stanley, she is clearly the one in control here. The camera follows her as she walks, cutting Stanley out of the frame towards the end of the shot. She also remains in focus throughout the entire shot, whereas Stanley, though larger in size, never is. These elements help to further emphasize her power and importance relative to Stanley in this moment.



Editing: A shot/reverse shot, as we saw Stella walking down the stairs in the previous shot and now we see Stanley at the bottom of the stairs as he reacts to her descent.

Cinematography: Stanley is close to the center of the frame, shown in a steep high angle, deep focus, long shot. The camera pans to the right as he moves away from the side of the staircase to a position more directly in front of it.

Mise-en-scene: Reacting to Stella's decision to come down the stairs, Stanley moves closer to the front of the staircase. He looks slightly relieved but also still desperate for her to come closer. He touches and then tugs at his shirt which, at this point, is pretty much falling off him. There are many shadows around him, however Stanley himself is well lit. The fountain with the sticks and plants around it starts in the upper left corner of the frame but moves increasingly out of frame as the camera pans to the right.

Sound: Again, no dialogue, just the sexy, extradiegetic jazz score.

Shot Analysis: The slow movements of this shot (along with most of the other shots in this sequence) work to build sexual tension between the two characters. In this shot, we see Stanley relieved that Stella has decided to come down the stairs, however his relief is only evident by the fact that he gets closer to the front of the stairs. He doesn't look victorious; he still is very much under her control. The only thing he can do is wait for her, or perhaps cut down that wait time by a half a second or so by walking a few steps closer to the stairs, which is to say that he is relatively powerless right now. That powerlessness is emphasized by the camera angle, which shows him small, though not as small as in shot #4. This suggests that the closer Stella gets to Stanley and the further she walks away from her position literally above him at the top of the stairs (and metaphorically her position of authority over him), the more power Stanley will have. This also explains why she might want to take her time walking down the stairs and why the filmmaker draws our attention to that. Additionally, Stanley's shirt is hanging off him in this shot and, at the end, he even tugs at it to pull it off some more. The seemingly disintegrating shirt emphasizes the growing sexual tension between them: he is literally (albeit subtly) pulling off his clothes at this point.



Editing: Shot/reverse shot of Stella walking down the stairs again. This shot is long, lasting about fifteen seconds.

Cinematography: This low angle, medium shot captures more of Stella's epic walk down the stairs and brings her closer to the camera. The camera moves alongside Stella as she moves, adjusting to keep her in the center of the frame. The shot starts out in deep focus, then moves to shallow focus as Stella nears the camera and enters the foreground to become the only thing in focus.

Mise-en-scene: There are a lot of shadows, particularly at the beginning of the shot where she is hidden almost entirely in a shadow and towards the end where her face and left side is partially hidden in shadow. She is walking slowly and seductively down the stairs, but the further she walks down, the more her facial expression softens and the sadder she looks.

Sound: The same extradiegetic jazz continues. There is still no dialogue or ambient sound.

Shot Analysis: The low angle shot still depicts Stella in a position of power, however it's not as extreme of a low angle as previous shots have been because she is walking further down the stairs and closer to Stanley at the bottom. This suggests that the further down Stella walks, the closer to

Stanley she gets, the less power she has. Her expression has also changed slightly. In previous shots, she looks stern and in control, but here her expression appears to have softened somewhat. This suggests not only that the further away (and higher) she is relative to Stanley the more confident and in control she is, but also that the closer she gets to him, the more difficult it is for her to maintain this persona. The slow, seductive walk down the stairs represents Stella's savoring of her every moment of power; this shot, however, is the last we see of it. Her look may have softened because now that she's physically closer to him, she's less capable of remaining detached and unaffected by the pain and desperation he's experiencing (which wasn't the case in previous shots when she seemed to intentionally elongate his suffering via the slow walk).



Editing: Straight cut to a reverse shot of Stanley as he falls to his knees in front of the staircase.

Cinematography: The shot starts out at about eye-level and then becomes a high angle shot when Stanley falls to his knees. He's shown in a medium shot, shallow focus, in the center of the frame. The camera tilts down when Stanley drops to his knees.

Mise-en-scene: Stanley's face looks pained and distraught. He appears to be crying. His shirt is still soaking wet and still falling off his right shoulder. When he falls to his knees, he hangs his head like a very sad and repentant little boy. His face and body are well lit, but we can see shadows coming in from the gate behind him and in front of him when he kneels.

Sound: We hear the same extradiegetic jazz as well as the sound of Stanley falling to the ground. There is still no dialogue.

Shot Analysis: When Stanley falls, he is not only apologizing but also begging for her forgiveness. The kneeling posture resembles the way in which people show submission when they beg or pray for absolution. The power dynamic between these two characters is emphasized by his kneeling in front of her, putting her in a position of power over him. The high angle shot is another way to show how powerless he is right now. The way his head hangs also conveys the shame he's experiencing and how desperately he wants her to forgive him. His crying and pained facial expression depict him as vulnerable, childish, and emotional, which contrasts with how firm and controlled Stella has looked for most of the shots so far. His ripped shirt is still soaking wet and sticking to his body, which sexualizes the dynamic between them, helping to convey to the audience that Stella's arousal and his animalistic appearance and demeanor are associated. The jazz music that has been playing this whole time is another way to convey Stella's mindset—its smooth and alluring sound helps us to understand how enticing they are to one another, even (and perhaps especially) in the context of this performance of dominance and submission.



Editing: Straight cut to Stella as she and Stanley finally come together. This is the longest shot so far at about twenty seconds.

Cinematography: This starts as a medium shot, deep focus, about eye level on Stella, following her as she makes the last few steps down towards Stanley. We then see him in the frame and the camera follows and gets closer to them as he stands up and the two of them hug and kiss. The end of the shot is in shallow focus and the two characters take up most of the frame.

Mise-en-scene: Stella starts above Stanley at the beginning of the shot but after they embrace, he stands up and picks her up in his arms, making them about the same height. We see Stanley's bare back because his shirt is barely on and he is facing away from the camera for most of this shot. Once they stand up, their faces are difficult to see due to shadows and frantic, passionate kissing. There are a lot of shadows in this shot, though both characters remain well lit.

Sound: The same extradiegetic jazz music plays, but we also hear Stanley say, "please don't ever leave me baby." We hear Stella either exhale or gasp before that line, then we hear her cry after he says it.

Shot Analysis: The nine shots before this one served, in part, to build tension so their reunion in shot #10 would be all the more dramatic. So far, Stella has been physically and figuratively above Stanley and the last moment that maintains this power dynamic is when Stella hugs Stanley while he is still on his knees. She even folds over him, enveloping him in her embrace. However, shortly after this he stands up, she collapses into his arms, and the two characters are now shown at the same angle and roughly the same height. This suggests that when Stella forgives Stanley and decides to give him another chance, she loses the ability to wield power over him. Much of this power dynamic is conveyed through the cinematography. In dialogue, Stanley seems both sad and relieved when he says, "please don't ever leave me baby," for their embrace makes it clear that she does forgive him and will take him back. Their frantic kissing also makes that clear and the sound of her sobs suggest that, though she looked detached from his pain in the previous shots, she was still affected by his suffering. Her emotions are apparent now that she's close enough to him that she can't resist falling lovingly into his arms and taking him back. The shot is long enough to allow Stella to start out in a position of power and finish having fallen from it over the course of these final twenty seconds. 🍷

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Kazan, Elia, director. *A Streetcar Named Desire*. 1951; Warner Brothers, 2010. DVD.