

Watching *Rear Window*: Notes

Rear Windows has been variously categorized as a comedy-thriller, a romance, and a detective story.

Hitchcock: “*Rear Window* is entirely a mental process, done by use of the visual.”

Themes:

- Voyeurism,
- Watching a movie as voyeurism: (1) the audience members are voyeurs who see through Jeff’s eyes and (2) his binoculars and still camera representing the movie camera,
- Voyeurism related to McCarthyism (late 1940s through the 1950s),
- The male gaze and female exhibitionism and objectification,
- Male-female roles and relationships (war of the sexes),
- Romance, love, and marriage,
- Sex and violence.
- Community or concern for and connection with others.

Technical difficulties Hitchcock overcomes:

The fact that all the action takes place on one set presents enormous challenges, not the least being how to engross the audience and how to avoid the movie looking like the adaptation of a stage play or like a series of store windows.

Compounding the difficulty is shooting almost all the scenes from the point of view of a man confined to a wheel chair. (Scenes not filmed from Jeff’s point of view include Thorwald’s leaving the apartment with a woman, some pans of the courtyard while Jeff sleeps, and his fall into the courtyard.)

The majority of the shots are of the apartments Jeff looks at, so that the film depends largely on the visual images. Even important actions take place 60 or 80 feet away from Jeff’s viewpoint. In addition, the set has 70 openings, e.g., windows and doors. Each apartment seen from Jeff’s window has to be lit as if it is a separate set, and the entire set has to be lit for both night and day settings.

The greatest technical difficulty is filming action across the courtyard so that the shot matches exactly what Jeff sees through a telephoto lens. These shots from Jeff’s point of view require both good definition and adequate depth of field.

Opening scene:

The opening shot, which pans the courtyard and settles in Jeff’s apartment, is one of the most famous of movie sequences.

The movie opens—and ends—with the raising of three bamboo blinds. The movement suggests the raising and lowering of a theater curtain.

The window of Jeff’s apartment frames the opposite buildings of Jeff’s limited world.

The opening scene, which runs 3 minutes and 35 seconds, introduces through entirely visual means the protagonist, his background, and his neighbors. The cast on Jeff’s leg reveals his name; the photographs identify him as a photojournalist; the smashed camera and photograph of an out-of-control race car explain his injury; a negative of a photograph and a magazine cover with a positive image of the negative indicate a connection with high fashion. (It is unclear whether Lisa is the model in the negative and the photograph.)

Hitchcock’s eye for detail is obvious in the shot of an outdoor thermometer reading just over 92 degrees. The heat affects the action; it’s why the married couple is sleeping on the fire escape, why windows are wide open, and why Jeff can’t sleep and sits in front of the window all night in his wheelchair.

Introducing Lisa:

Lisa first appears as a slightly mysterious—and menacing?—shadow cast over the sleeping Jeff. His warm

smile changes the audience's perception, and a slow motion kiss establishes their romantic relationship.

When Lisa pronounces her last name, Fremont, and turns on the third and brightest light, her head is aligned with a framed picture on the wall. In other words, just as the picture is enclosed by a picture frame, she is enclosed in a doorway frame. She is confined in the relationship by Jeff, who resists marriage. Lisa's poise as she moves and her poses suggest not only that she is comfortable being looked at but also that she invites being looked at.

Jeff's Voyeurism:

Voyeurism turns those watched into objects, gives the voyeur a sense of power, and involves the voyeur in no responsibility.

Hitchcock presents voyeurism ambiguously.

Is Jeff turned on by his voyeurism? Missing the excitement and adventure of work, does Jeff want there to be a murder? Or is Jeff's watching others merely an extension of his job as a photographer and a natural response in his situation? Or all these possibilities?

Initially both Stella and Lisa reject Jeff's calling Thorwald a murderer. Stella warns him against watching others. Lisa initially warns, "If you could only see yourself... sitting around looking out the window to kill time is one thing, but doing it the way you are with binoculars and wild opinions about every little thing you see is diseased." Lisa also notes, with concern, that they are not happy that no murder occurred. The detective, Tom Doyle, condemns voyeurism and its invasion of privacy. After watching Miss Lonelyhearts fend off her pick-up, Jeff wonders whether watching his neighbors is ethical, even if there is a murder.

Does watching others without being seen give Jeff a sense and/or a position of power? If so, is it threatened or lost when Thorwald sees him?

Without his voyeurism, would a murderer have gone free?

To what extent are we, the audience, also implicated in Jeff's voyeurism because we can't help watching his neighbors with him?

The voyeurism of others:

In the beginning, a helicopter hovers over a rooftop so its crew can ogle two women sunbathing (an obtrusive voyeurism).

During a phone conversation in the beginning, Jeff's boss Gunnison jokes that he got his position as editor by "thrift, industry, and hard work, and catching the publisher with his secretary." The last item suggests the rewards and power of voyeurism.

Stella and Lisa come to agree with him, and Lisa adds her women's perspective to provide more "evidence" of murder. Though Doyle scoffs at her "evidence," she turns out to be right.

The gaze:

The gaze involves both the theme of voyeurism and the theme of male-female relationship.

If the gaze exercises power, it also carries risk; it exposes the gazer to being seen by the other. Nietzsche warned, "If you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you."

The gaze is primarily a male activity. Hitchcock is using gender stereotypes pervasive in the 1950s: the active, independent male (the gaze); the passive, dependent female (the object of the gaze). However, Hitchcock subtly undermines these stereotypes. For example, Jeff is nearly helpless and dependent in his wheelchair. Lisa may be watched or looked at an object of the male gaze, but she is able to use being looked to achieve a position of power and to express strength.

Sexual politics:

An older term for "sexual politics" is "war of the sexes" and is based largely on the active-independent male, passive-dependent-female stereotype.

The theme of marriage dominates from the beginning. Jeff, in a phone conversation with his editor; protests that if he were married he could not go anywhere and that wives nag (at the end, is the newlywed wife beginning to nag when she exclaims she wouldn't have married if she knew he lost his job?)

Lisa repeatedly tries to draw him into marriage: she suggests a conventional lifestyle and career as a fashion photographer to him. He rejects it for a life of freedom, action, and adventure. Though Jeff rejects marriage, he wants to continue the status quo.

Objecting to his interpretation of Miss Torso, Lisa asserts that she is “doing a woman’s hardest job, juggling wolves.” Later he sees Miss Torso resisting the advances of an insistent escort. His calling her “Miss Torso” reduces her to being only a body and is ironic in view of Mrs. Thorwald’s dismemberment.

Lisa becomes a partner in his gazing/voyeurism and an active investigator. Is she joining Jeff a stratagem for marriage, like her failed seduction attempt with the dinner from 21 and the sexy negligé?

Lisa’s holding up Mrs. Thorwald’s wedding ring is ironic in view of her marriage designs on Jeff.

Ironically, Jeff is the dependent and passive one, “framed” by or confined to his wheelchair and window. Lisa is not reduced to passivity or dependence by the male gaze; she actively pursues her goals.

The woman sculptor gazes at others as part of her profession; interested in others, she gives advice on the flower bed to Thorwald, who tells her to “shut up.”

Jeff watches his neighbors’ marriages and singleness. Mrs. Thorwald is dependent, her husband is submissive or “emasculated.” Miss Lonelyhearts is the despair of being single.

The dead dog and community:

The bereaved mistress of the murdered dog denounces her neighbors or apartment “society” for not being a community. (Incidentally, Hitchcock was very fond of dogs.) The set isolates individuals by having each character or couple appear in separate windows. The cutting from one window to another reinforces the sense of isolation.

Is the ideal of neighborly love opposed to voyeurism? Stella warns, “We’re a race of Peeping Toms. People ought to get out of their homes and look at themselves.”

Thorwald is the only tenant who shows no concern for the death of the dog; thus, the dog’s death becomes further “proof” of Thorwald’s guilt.

Thorwald’s attacks on Lisa and on Jeff:

How does Thorwald’s attacking Lisa affect Jeff?

What is the effect of Thorwald’s asking Jeff two times, “What do you want of me?” Is he asking more than just, how much money do you want? Does his question humanize him to some extent? Does he become an ambiguous figure, not just a monster?

Is Jeff rendered powerless or passive in this scene?

Since the gaze is an important element in this movie, is there any significance to Jeff’s using flash bulbs to try to blind/incapacitate Thorwald and failing?

Costumes:

Lisa’s wardrobe is expensive, high fashion (couture), and different in every visit. How does Jeff react to her dress and impeccable appearance? What is the significance of her casual clothing in the final scene?

How are the other women dressed, with what effect?

Dialogue:

The exchanges of Lisa and Jeff are sophisticated, lively, funny, and witty. Stella is a master of the wisecrack.

Music:

Most of the music comes from the apartments themselves.

In the opening, the composer listens to a rumba on and is annoyed at the radio announcer, “Men, are you over 40? When you wake up in the morning, do you feel tired and run-down?” An alarm clock moves our attention to the couple on the fire escape

“That’s Amore!” plays as the newlyweds enter their apartment for the first time (their wedding night?).

The first night “Lover” is heard; its first line, “Lover, when you’re near me” applies to the couple sleeping on the fire escape, to Lisa walking out after a quarrel, and to the Thorwalds in their apartment.

Bing Crosby's "To See You Is to Love You" plays during Jeff and Lisa's disagreement about him becoming a fashion photographer and during Miss Lonelyhearts' preparations for an imaginary date.

When Miss Lonelyhearts brings home the aggressive pick-up, "Mona Lisa" is being sung by the drunken guests at the composer's party ("is it only 'cause you're lonely, Mona Lisa?").

Another song emanating from the composer's party is "Waiting for My True Love to Appear," which applies to Jeff waiting for Lisa and Miss Lonelyhearts waiting for a non-existent male.

A recurring motif is Leonard Bernstein's "Fancy Free."

At the end of the movie, the composer completes the song, called "Lisa," that he has been working on throughout the movie and that Lisa has admired several times. She hums it when Doyle realizes she intends to spend the night and when she first agrees with Jeff about Thorwald. It plays when she breaks into Thorwald's apartment. It prevents Miss Lonelyhearts from committing suicide and endangers Lisa who is caught by Thorwald. At the end, it is played with a full orchestra on a record.

Other sounds:

A faint train whistle sounds in the distance as Mrs. Thorwald catches him in a compromising phone call and when he leaves with a woman. These train sounds subliminally support Doyle's explanation that Mrs. Thorwald took a train trip.

The conversations coming from the apartments and courtyard are often muffled, yet comprehensible.

Thorwald's approaching footsteps reverberate—long, slow, and exaggerated, an unseen threat.

Noises from the street and the neighborhood form a background and suggest an outside world breaking into Jeff's insulated room/world.

Ending:

The gaze plays an important role in the ending. Jeff's using flash bulbs to try to blind/incapacitate Thorwald fails. When Thorwald enters Jeff's apartment, his eyes are lighted but his face and body are dark.

Her telling Jeff to "shut up" echoes his telling her to "shut up" in their first argument in the beginning. Also, her scream for help is repeated by his scream for help when each is in turn threatened by Thorwald.

What is the significance of Jeff's sleeping with his back to the window? And his now having casts on both legs?

Once Jeff is sleeping, Lisa replaces the adventurous *Beyond the High Himalayas* with the high fashion magazine *Bazaar*.

What do the final scenes of the neighbors contribute to the meaning of the movie?

Additions to "It Had to Be Murder" and other changes:

A sophisticated, beautiful woman and a complex, romantic relationship are added.

More detail is provided about the characters. Jeff's job, a glamorous one, is specified. The detective, now named Doyle, is an army buddy.

More neighbors are added.

Sam is replaced by Stella, a no-nonsense, blunt-speaking insurance company nurse.

The focus is no longer just the mental process by which the narrator convinces the reader that there has been a murder.

The murder, with its dismemberment, is more grisly.