

Rear Window

By John Belton

"Rear Window" tells the story of a globe-trotting photo-journalist who breaks his leg on a dangerous assignment and is confined to a wheelchair in his Greenwich Village apartment with nothing to do all day but look out the window at his neighbors. The film alternates back and forth between two story strands--a murder mystery and a love story, intertwining the two plot lines through the theme of voyeurism. The hero's voyeurism is integral to the murder mystery which he pieces together by looking out his window, but it is also connected to his relationship with the heroine. Refusing to commit himself to a love relationship, Jeff (James Stewart) prefers to look out his window at his neighbors across the way rather than to look at Lisa (Grace Kelly), the beautiful woman who is in the same room with him and who repeatedly throws herself at him. He opts for the freedom (and irresponsibility) of a one-way relationship based on voyeurism (seeing without being seen) instead of a two-way relationship rooted in mutual regard, recognition, and concern.

The pleasure he derives from watching his neighbors without their knowledge or permission is essentially sadistic. As Laura Mulvey argues, voyeurism is a pleasure based on a gaze that controls or dominates what it sees. A somewhat different form of visual pleasure characterizes his relationship with the heroine. Lisa provides a willing exhibitionism in answer to his voyeurism. She wants to display herself to him. Thus, shortly after she first appears, she turns on the lights in his apartment one by one to introduce herself ("Lisa . . . Carol . . . Fremont) and to model her new \$1,100 dress. But Jeff refuses her attempts to engage him in a mutual exchange of looking and being looked at.

The film repeatedly opposes its two main "attractions" Lisa and the murder mystery--and Jeff routinely turns his gaze from Lisa and focuses instead on events across the way. Lisa nonetheless continues to compete with the murder mystery for Jeff's attention. When Detective Doyle announces to Jeff and Lisa that Jeff's suspicions of a murder in the Thorwald apartment are unfounded and that there is "no case to be thorough with," Lisa lowers the bamboo blinds, closing off Jeff's view of the neighborhood, and announces "show's over for tonight." She then directs Jeff's attention to her Mark Cross overnight case, which contains the silk nightgown she is about to put on and describes it as "a



Nurse Thelma Ritter watches the apartment that wheelchair-bound photojournalist James Stewart has been eyeing from his window. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

preview of coming attractions."

It is only when Lisa enters this world across the way that she succeeds in capturing Jeff's attention. Wearing high heels and a white silk organdy print dress with a full skirt, she climbs a fire escape and crawls into Thorwald's window to look for clues. When Thorwald suddenly returns, Jeff watches helplessly as Thorwald assaults Lisa. Jeff no longer takes Lisa for granted but, as it were, sees her as if for the first time. Significantly, the evidence she has retrieved is Mrs. Thorwald's wedding ring which Lisa wears on her finger. The conflict between murder and marriage is resolved in the ring on Lisa's finger.

The murder mystery initially provides the hero with an obsessive interest that he uses to avoid participation in the love story. Yet it also functions as a way of working out the tensions in that relationship. What Jeff represses in his relationship with Lisa is worked out in the actions seen across the way. Thorwald's murder of a nagging, invalid wife serves as a release, of sorts, for the hero from the threat posed by the heroine who has the immobilized hero at her mercy. The hero unconsciously identifies with the villain's desire to free himself from the responsibilities of his relationship with a woman who seeks to control him.

A common reading of the film views Jeff as a spectator figure and what he sees out his window as a

screen upon which his own desires are projected. In this scenario, Thorwald functions as Jeff's Id and the murder as the projection of Jeff's unconscious desires to rid himself of Lisa. The other neighbors represent various kinds of marriage (the Thorwalds, the Newlyweds, the couple with the dog) and lonely alternatives to it (Miss Lonelyhearts, Miss Torso, the Sculptress, the Composer). The staging of Jeff's desires for freedom enables Jeff to locate them outside of himself in the figure of Lars Thorwald, to confront them, and to defeat them. Jeff's battle with Thorwald, fought initially with exploding flash bulbs (at a "distance") and then in hand-to-hand combat, mirrors the narrative trajectory of the film as a whole in which Jeff undergoes an Aristotelean catharsis that purges his fears about marriage. Jeff does not quite win this battle—the police intervene and apprehend Thorwald, while Jeff merely succeeds in breaking another leg—but he has symbolically exorcised the demon within himself.

While the film inter-relates the murder story and the love story through the theme of voyeurism, it also mounts an examination of the ethics of voyeurism, repeatedly calling into question the hero's voyeuristic behavior. Early in the film, as Jeff looks out his window at the neighbors, his nurse, Stella (Thelma Ritter), arrives and from off-screen announces: "the New York state sentence for a peeping Tom in six months in the workhouse! . . . And there aren't any windows in the workhouse. . . . Years ago, they used to put your eyes out with a hot poker. Are any of those bikini bombshells you watch worth a hot poker?" Stella's blunt remarks catch Jeff and us in the guilty pleasure of voyeurism, identifying it as a crime punishable by law. Stella then makes a philosophical reflection that lays a foundation for our viewing of the film: "We've grown to be a race of peeping Toms. What people should do is stand outside their own houses and look in once in a while." Stella suggests that Jeff (and the audience) examine the morality of their own behavior—a suggestion which the film itself undertakes as it explores the ethics of Jeff's and our own voyeurism. Later, in the middle of the film, Lisa also reprimands Jeff for his voyeurism,

describing it as "diseased." Finally, after Doyle reports that Mrs. Thorwald is alive and well in Merritsville, CT., even Jeff begins to question his actions. He wonders aloud to Lisa, "Do you suppose it's ethical to watch a man with binoculars, and a long-focus lens . . . do you suppose it's ethical even if you prove he didn't commit a crime?" To which, Lisa responds, "I'm not much on rear window ethics."

But the murder of a neighborhood dog who sniffed around Thorwald's garden reignites Jeff's suspicions of Thorwald and prompts him to renew his voyeuristic surveillance of him. Jeff's moral dilemma lasts just so long as he doubts the conclusions that he has drawn about Thorwald's guilt. The fact that Thorwald is guilty vindicates Jeff's voyeurism, which can now be justified as a vigilance performed for the greater public good. But Hitchcock does not let Jeff off lightly for his "crime." Jeff is punished for his voyeurism—he is thrown out of his own rear window by Thorwald, breaking another leg in the process. In as much as we, the spectators in the movie theater, identify with Jeff, who occupies the position of a spectator within the film, we participate in his voyeurism and partake of the pleasures it provides. But in the world of the film, his voyeurism is not without risk: Thorwald can and does look back at Jeff. And Thorwald can and does violate the illusory security of the space from which Jeff looks. We, however, remain safe and secure in our seats in the movie theater, leaving Jeff to pay for our "sins" as voyeurs. In other words, the film explores our own status as spectators whose pleasures at the cinema derive from the satisfaction of our voyeuristic desires.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

John Belton was a founding member of the National Film Preservation Board from 1989-1996 and is the editor of Alfred Hitchcock's Rear Window (Cambridge University Press, 2000).