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JOHN BELTON

Introduction

SPECTACLE AND NARRATIVE

Like many of the best works of classical Hollywood cinema, *Rear Window* is a deceptively obvious film. Its chief virtues are clearly visible for all to see. An exemplary instance of commercial motion picture entertainment, it represents the best that Hollywood had to offer its audiences in the tumultuous 1950s.[1] (Indeed, its classic status continued to be reaffirmed in the 1990s; in 1997, the Librarian of Congress placed it on the National Film Registry, and in 1998, it was listed among the American Film Institute's best 100 American films of all time.) Filmed in glorious Technicolor and projected on a big screen in a widescreen format,[2] it is, on a purely technological level, a compelling example of 1950s motion picture spectacle. Though its subject matter lacks the epic proportions of that era's big-budget biblical spectacles, costume pictures, or westerns, its basic situation is pure spectacle. Indeed, its story is "about" spectacle; it explores the fascination with looking and the attraction of that which is being looked at. The story goes as follows: Confined to a wheelchair with a broken leg, photojournalist L. B. Jefferies (James Stewart) has little to do but to look out his rear window at his Greenwich Village neighbors. He suspects that one of them, a jewelry salesman named Thorwald, has murdered his invalid wife. With the help of his girlfriend, Lisa Fremont (Grace Kelly), and his nurse, Stella (Thelma Ritter), he continues to observe Thorwald until evidence is discovered that confirms that Thorwald did, indeed, kill his wife.

In a number of ways, the film looks back to what scholars of

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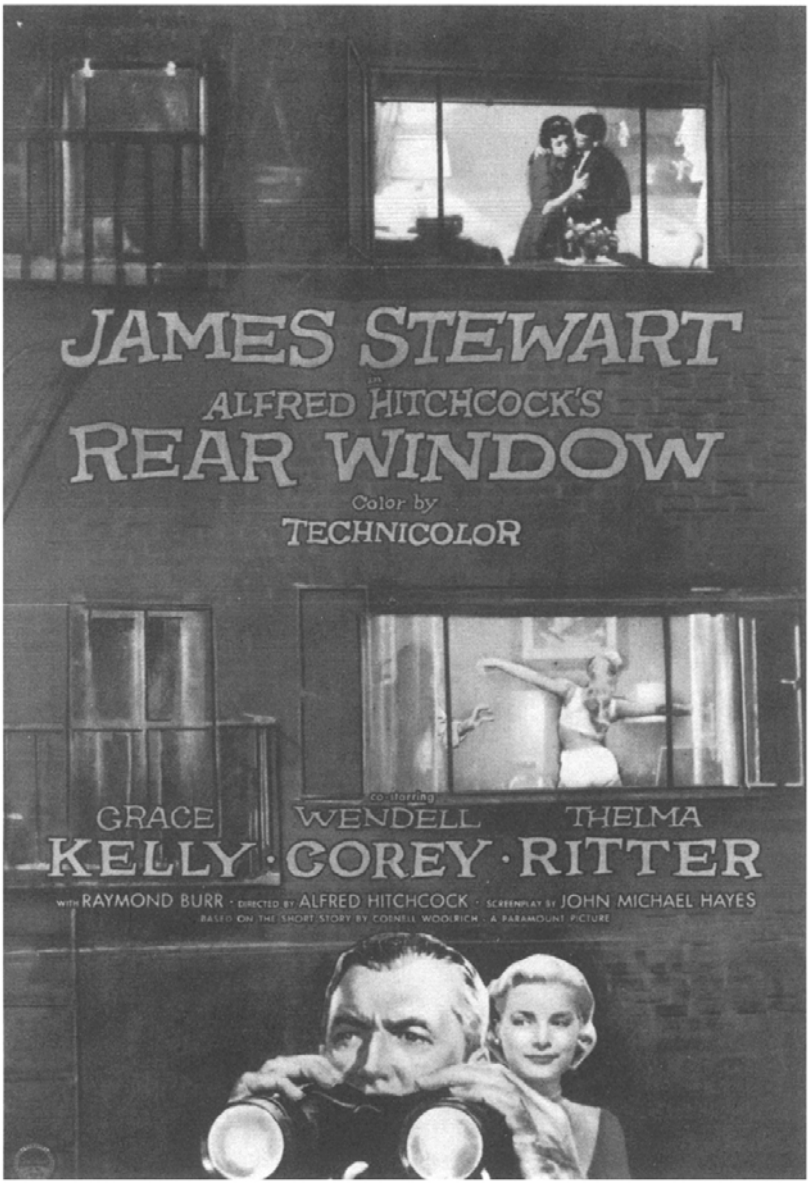

The Cinema of Attractions: An original poster for *Rear Window* exploits its status as spectacle. Note the ad's rearrangement of apartments and rewriting of basic story material (the sinister hand) to emphasize love, sex, and potential violence. Photo courtesy of Paramount.

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early cinema have termed "the cinema of attractions."[3] According to Tom Gunning, early (i.e., pre-1906) films were more concerned with exhibition, presentation, and display than with narration. They consisted of a series of loosely connected acts or attractions, resembling, in part, the structure of a vaudeville show. Though *Rear Window* has a strong narrative line and is centrally concerned with the act of narration, its story is grounded not only in voyeurism but also in exhibitionist display, "revealing [as its advertising copy proclaims] the privacy of a dozen lives."[4] It consists of a "montage of attractions," of various windows that display a variety of different "acts." The film is about what the hero sees out his rear window. What he sees is apparently random – different neighbors are engaged in various, unrelated activities. These activities constitute the film's spectacle. The sense that the hero makes out of these activities comprises the film's narrative, a narrative that he imposes, as it were, on seemingly random events.

Rear Window is spectacle in more traditional ways as well. It is concerned with the display of its lavish set and costumes. The film's set (discussed in this volume by Scott Curtis) remains one of its chief attractions; it is a "star" in its own right, dominating posters and other advertising material for the film on its initial release. "Fifty men worked for two months to build the set, which includes seven apartment buildings, most of them six stories high, and three smaller buildings on the other side of the street."[5] Occupying an entire sound stage, the set measured 98 feet in width, 185 feet in length, and 40 feet in height; it cost more than $9,000 to design and more than $72,000 to construct. These were unprecedented costs for a single studio set in 1954.

Designed by Edith Head, the costumes worn by the film's heroine (also discussed elsewhere by Sarah Street) represent the latest in Paris fashion. The display of these costumes provides the viewer with a kind of fashion show, a form of spectacle that was a staple of Hollywood productions of the past (from *Fifty Years of Paris Fashions, 1859–1909,* 1910, to *Cover Girl,* 1944, *Singin' in the Rain,* 1952, and *Funny Face,* 1957) and that continues into the nineties (*Ready to Wear,* 1994). Popular awareness of costume design in

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motion pictures was longstanding, but critical interest in the "art" of costume design blossomed only a few years before *Rear Window;* the first Academy Award for Costume Design was presented as recently as 1948. Fashion featured in the headlines in 1947, when Christian Dior unveiled his "New Look" in Paris. Interest in fashion dramatically escalated in the 1950s when Oleg Cassini, Dior, and Givenchy became household names. At the same time, fashion magazines, such as *Harper's Bazaar* (the journal read by the heroine in the film's last scene), functioned as mass-produced fashion shows in pictures and print and brought the spectacle of fashion to millions of postwar, middle-class, female consumers.

On a purely visual level, then, *Rear Window*'s set and costume design provide viewers with something spectacular to look at. The film's story and theme build on this highly visible base, exploiting and exploring the nature of spectacle. The film does this by examining more abstract aspects of the relationship between spectator and spectacle, between the film's voyeur-hero and what he sees. It addresses the concepts of voyeurism and exhibitionism and explores the nature of their interconnectedness.

The film is deceptively obvious in that it is, above all, so eminently entertaining. It combines an engagingly suspenseful murder mystery with a seductively sexy love story featuring two of the decade's most attractive stars, the well-known James Stewart and the relative newcomer, Grace Kelly. The narrative plays with their screen personae: Stewart, Hollywood's most eligible bachelor until his recent marriage in 1949 at age 41, plays Jeff, a freedom-loving photographer who fears marriage because, as he tells his editor Gunnison, when he's married, he'll "never be able to go anywhere." Stewart's most famous postwar role – as George Bailey in Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) – explores this theme: George desperately wants to leave Bedford Falls, to become an engineer, and to build bridges in far-away countries, but is trapped in his hometown, initially by the needs of the family business and then by marriage and children.

Kelly had a somewhat notorious (off-screen) reputation for seducing her leading men.[6] For Hitchcock, Kelly was like "a snow covered volcano" – hot on the inside and icy cool on the outside.[7]

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In *Rear Window,* he contrasts her overt sexual desire with her cool, quasi-aristocratic reserve. In the film, Kelly plays Lisa, a high-fashion career girl who will do almost anything, including moving "into an apartment across the way and do[ing] the dance of the seven veils every hour," to get the hero's attention.

The narrative is based, in large part, on a short story, "It Had to Be Murder," written by mystery/thriller novelist Cornell Woolrich in 1942. The original story, however, differs considerably from the script of the film. One chief difference is that Hitchcock and Hayes give the protagonist a profession – that of photojournalist – and a girlfriend. (Woolrich's hero's sole companion is a male, African-American "day houseman" named Sam, who takes care of him.) The reworking of the Woolrich story by Hitchcock and screenwriter John Michael Hayes also draws on aspects of biography, persona, and personal history. As Steve Cohen has pointed out, *Rear Window* is, in part, a reworking of the story of Ingrid Bergman and Robert Capa.[8]

Bergman met the famous war photographer, Robert Capa, in Paris in 1945 and immediately fell in love with him. When Bergman returned to Hollywood to star in Hitchcock's *Notorious* (1946), Capa accompanied her, taking photographs of her on the set for *Life* magazine. Hitchcock, according to biographer Donald Spoto, had become romantically obsessed with Bergman during the making of *Spellbound* (1945).[9] Hitchcock noted Bergman's passion for Capa as well as Capa's noncommittal responses to her. Bergman clearly wanted to marry the photographer, but he refused to, fearful of the commitment of marriage.[10] The Capa–Bergman affair dissolved within a year, largely over Capa's refusal to marry her. Cohen speculates that Hitchcock was amazed "that the photographer would walk away from a woman about whom he himself [Hitchcock] could only fantasize" and that the director deliberately set out to re-create this relationship several years later in *Rear Window.*

Cohen notes that the Jefferies character is subtly connected to Capa in the following ways: Both are photojournalists, both work for *Life* magazine,[11] both frequently eat at "21," and both live in Greenwich Village (within a block of one another).[12] Cohen con-

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cludes his comparison of Capa and Hitchcock's hero with the most bizarre and uncanny link between the two. "On May 25, 1954, two months before the release of *Rear Window,* Capa was taking photographs outside of Hanoi [in Vietnam] when he stepped on an anti-personnel mine. The explosion tore a gaping hole in his chest and blew off his left leg – the leg that Jefferies has in a cast. . . . By the time [Capa] was taken to a French field hospital, he was dead."[13] Production of the film had been completed by January (or at the latest, February) 1954, so Hitchcock could not possibly have known about Capa's left leg, but this final connection between life and art must certainly have astounded both Hitchcock and Bergman (if she ever realized that *Rear Window* was, in part, about her and Capa).

Aspects of star persona regularly play a role in the stories and themes of many motion pictures, but the role played by the biography of the director remains more problematic. Hitchcock never spoke of *Rear Window* in these terms (i.e., as "about" Bergman and Capa); nor was screenwriter John Michael Hayes aware of any connection between the scenario he wrote and the Bergman–Capa story; indeed, Hayes insists that the character of Lisa is based on his own wife, not Bergman.[14] But Hitchcock, who playfully acknowledges himself in the cameo appearances he makes in most of his films, was never one to refrain from including inside jokes or biographical allusions in his films. Indeed, *Rear Window* itself contains one such joke, played at the expense of Hitchcock's former producer, David O. Selznick, with whom the director repeatedly struggled for artistic control of his films. In directing Raymond Burr, who plays the villain Lars Thorwald, Hitchcock coached the actor to use various gestures and mannerisms that the director had seen his former employer use, especially the way Selznick cradled a telephone in the crook of his neck. Hitchcock also went out of his way to make Burr look like Selznick, giving him curly gray hair and making him wear the same style of glasses worn by the famous producer.

It would be foolish to place too much emphasis on the Bergman–Capa or the Selznick allusions; the film is not "about"

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them. The thematic concerns of the film cannot be reduced to biography. Nor should the critic engage in cheap psychoanalysis, proclaiming "eureka" when an aesthetic work can supposedly be traced back to some prior trauma or obsession of its creator. Ultimately, *Rear Window* is not about Bergman and Capa or about Hitchcock's obsession with Bergman. Nor, once its factual basis has been established, should such biographical detail be dismissed entirely. The film clearly is about the kind of relationship Bergman and Capa had – the aggressive pursuit by an attractive, glamorous, sexy, "perfect" woman of a man who fears commitment to her. But this theme remains one of many in a complex tapestry of related themes and ideas.

It's important to remember that the film is as much a product of classical Hollywood cinema as it is of Hitchcock or other creative personnel. The narrative deftly alternates back and forth between murder mystery and love story, intertwining the two through the theme of voyeurism. In this respect, the film is a perfect example of classical Hollywood cinema in that the narrative consists of "two plot lines: one involving heterosexual romance . . . , the other line involving another sphere – work, war, a mission or quest. . . . The story ends with . . . a resolution of the problem and a clear achievement or nonachievement of the [two] goals."[15] The hero's voyeurism links the two plot lines; it is clearly related 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 prefers looking out his window at his neighbors across the way to looking at Lisa, the beautiful blonde who is in the same room with him and who repeatedly throws herself at him. He opts for a one-way relationship based on voyeurism instead of a two-way relationship rooted in mutual regard, recognition, and concern; he would rather look than love.

The pleasure he derives from watching his neighbors without their knowledge or permission is essentially sadistic. (See Elise Lemire's discussion of feminist readings of the film in this volume.) It is a pleasure based on domination. A similar form of

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sadism emerges as a fundamental aspect of 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 lights one by one to introduce herself ("Lisa . . . Carol . . . Fremont") and to display 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's self-display is an attempt to control his gaze. Jeff, however, resists her strategy and tries, instead, to force Lisa to abandon her own attempts to control his gaze and to submit herself to *his* gaze, to join him in his voyeuristic activities. In other words, Jeff wants to enlist her in his own sadistic regime; he wants to dominate her. Though he himself, an invalid confined to a wheelchair, is weak, he attempts to achieve power over her by subjecting her not only to his "vision" – that is, his understanding of what is happening across the courtyard – but also to a form of emotional abuse. Jeff rejects Lisa's efforts to please him (the dinner from "21") and is deliberately rude to her after dinner, insisting that she "shut up" and let him talk. He toys with her, refusing to marry her, yet he remains unwilling to break off their affair.

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.[16] Thorwald's apparent 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. Yet he would clearly never do what Thorwald apparently does: he consciously represses this desire and actively pursues the villain for his own would-be crime. The fact that the hero has so much trou-

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ble proving that the villain has killed his wife underscores the tenuous nature of his own identification with the forces of law and order. He remains torn between two desires – that of the villain and that of the villain's nemesis, the law. Jeff works out his feelings for Lisa by openly rejecting his identification with Thorwald, by relentlessly refusing to give up his belief in Thorwald's guilt. When he and Thorwald physically battle in the penultimate scene, he finally acts out – on a physical level – his opposition to the villain. Yet he also pays – with a second broken leg – for his (repressed) desire to do what Thorwald has done. Once Jeff's anxieties have been acted out, he can then resolve his relationship with Lisa. Though the film doesn't conclude with a marriage, it does present a final image of them as a more-or-less-stable couple.

If this is a very Freudian film, in which the villain functions as the Id to the hero's Super-ego, acting out his desires, it is also a very Catholic film. In projecting his desires, the hero becomes responsible for their acting-out by another. In the contemplation of evil, he becomes guilty of evil, even though he himself does not commit it. For Catholics like Hitchcock, the sin of omission – an immoral thought or desire that is repressed – is equal in the eyes of the Church to the sin of commission – an acting out of that illicit thought or desire. In this way, the double narrative remains tightly intertwined. *Rear Window,* as the title suggests, is a view onto unconscious desire: It looks into the back of the mind and at what it conceals. The eye is traditionally, for poets at least, a window into the soul; it is the "front" window, as it were. The unconscious mind, which opens onto a different terrain of desires, functions as a "rear" window: It sees what the eye does not. *Rear Window* explores the relationship between these two "windows," between what the eye sees and what the mind desires. What Jeff sees – the evidence of a murder – is what his mind unconsciously desires. The action of the film becomes a drama of catharsis – the purgation of his fears and desires by means of an acting out of them. His cure is achieved, quite appropriately, when Thorwald pushes him out of his rear window and, dragged down by the weight of his own body (and that of the heavy cast on his leg), he falls to the courtyard below.

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Inasmuch as *Rear Window* is an "obvious" film, it wears all of these classical features, commercial "attractions," and manifest themes quite stylishly on its sleeve. But there is a great deal more to *Rear Window* than these obvious themes and commercial trappings. Admittedly, the film has its eye on the box office. It grossed $5.3 million in 1954, $4.5 million on its reissue in 1962, and another $12 million on its re-release in 1983, making it director Alfred Hitchcock's most commercially successful film. But if the film has one eye on the box office, or "front" window, it also has its other eye on another, less obvious, decidedly "rear" window. It has noncommercial interests, looking at issues that, most properly, belong to the domains of film theory, criticism, history, and aesthetics. Its story and the way that story is told raise questions about the nature of the cinema itself. In this respect, *Rear Window* is Hitchcock's "testament" film – that is, it is a film that is "about" the cinema, a film that serves as a director's ultimate statement about his or her craft.

In other words, what is least obvious about the film is its own artistry. Like most Hollywood films, *Rear Window* strives for transparency. Its story and its characters are delivered to the audience simply and directly, as if they were just "there." All signs that might reveal the artifice of the film's production or construction have been carefully effaced. Yet *Rear Window* (like Hitchcock films in general) is not entirely transparent. It is carefully constructed. As narrator, Hitchcock maintains a visible presence that goes far beyond his cameo appearance. *Rear Window* is, after all, a Hitchcock film, marked by his dark sensibility, by his wry wit, and by his intrusive presence as a storyteller.

Hitchcock's visibility as a narrator has become part of his "contractual" relationship with his audiences. Viewers expect a Hitchcock film to be "Hitchcockian" – that is, to have a certain kind of narrative sensibility – much as they expect Hitchcock's own cameo appearances within the films themselves. (In *Rear Window,* Hitch appears in the Song Writer's apartment [reel 2A, shot 44] winding a clock, just before Jeff and Lisa sit down to a lobster dinner from "21.")[17] By means of this sort of visibility, Hitchcock vio-

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