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Alfred Hitchcock's Rear Window: The Pleasures and Dangers of Looking

Cover Page Footnote

Sidney Gottlieb is Professor of Media Studies at Sacred Heart University. This is a slightly revised version of a talk delivered on March 1, 2006, at Sacred Heart University as the inaugural Honors Program Lecture.

SIDNEY GOTTLIEB

*Alfred Hitchcock's Rear Window:
The Pleasures and Dangers of Looking*

When Walter Brooks invited me to be the first speaker in the newly-established Honors Program Lecture Series, I was extremely flattered and excited about this opportunity to speak about one of my favorite subjects. Today I'm going to try to give a talk rather than lecture to you. I brought lots of notes and things I could read to you, and I will read some of these, but mostly I want to talk about Hitchcock, and share some of my enthusiasm for Hitchcock with you. I'm glad to see so many people here, and I hope that the combination of a fascinating topic and such an eager crowd will inspire me. Hitchcock has been one of my passions for a very long time, and *Rear Window* in particular has always attracted me.

North by Northwest is Hitchcock's most adventure-filled and dazzling film. *Strangers on a Train* is perhaps his eeriest. *Shadow of a Doubt* is as dark as dark could be. *Psycho* is grim and shocking and terrifying. *Blackmail* is in some ways his most innovative and experimental film. *I Confess* is his most overtly Catholic film—I feel obligated to sneak that in. *Vertigo* is probably his deepest and most resonant and profound film. But *Rear Window* is my favorite of Hitchcock's films, in part because it contains all the above elements and more, combined in an intricately structured whole.

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I'm not the only person that likes *Rear Window* so much. Many Hitchcock critics consider it to be what they call his testament film. By that they mean it's the film that seems to embody all the components that are quintessentially Hitchcockian: his recurrent characters, the Hitchcock blonde, his favorite themes and situations, his visual style, suspense, and wit. All these are in *Rear Window*. And it's his testament film in other respects, because it is also fundamentally a film about filmmaking—not only about filmmaking but about film watching. If it were only a kind of expression of what Hitchcock had on his mind, and if it were only a film about filmmaking it might not have the broad appeal that I think it certainly does. One of the reasons why I like *Rear Window* so much and rank it so highly is because it's not only a film that gives us Hitchcock full blown and reflects wisely on filmmaking and related processes, but also tells us quite a bit about the visual culture that we live in. It's a film that imaginatively and insightfully pictures and analyzes our daily life of incessantly looking at things and being looked at.

Not everybody shares this high opinion of *Rear Window*. When the film first came out, the critic for the *New York Times*, Bosley Crowther, had this to say: "Mr. Hitchcock's film is not significant. What it has to say about people and human nature is superficial and glib, but it does expose many facets of the loneliness of city life and it tacitly demonstrates the impulse of morbid curiosity." He couldn't have been further wrong. This is not a film about morbid curiosity. What I'm going to try to convince you of today, if you need convincing, is that, as the title of my talk suggests, *Rear Window* is a film about the pleasures and the dangers of the look. If it were only about morbid curiosity, the film itself would be just a curiosity, not the impressively shrewd and powerful film that it is.

I want to gear most of my comments around particular shots and sequences that I'll briefly describe and analyze to illustrate my interpretation of the film. But I want to start out with a few broad statements of what I emphasize in this interpretation. I promised all my friends and loved ones that I would not tell jokes today, but I couldn't resist the temptation to at least try to phrase my key propositions with a little bit of wit, to make them more striking and memorable if possible, so bear with me. I group these propositions

under the heading "Seven Ways of Looking at Hitchcock's Ways of Looking," taken up not necessarily in order of importance.

First, this is a film about the eyes that bind, as well as the eyes that blind. The eyes that bind: our notion, not just Hitchcock's, that looking at things helps us connect with the world. We have a sense that to gain knowledge, of course we open our eyes, but we also have an implicit faith that by looking at people, we establish a sympathetic connection; we become more fully human, more fully social and sociable, by looking. That's one of our hopes; it's the conventional wisdom, you might say, about looking, and it's both dramatized and also undermined in *Rear Window*. To put it bluntly, it doesn't always work out that way, and often works out in the opposite way. Hence, the eyes that blind: what Hitchcock suggests is that far from alerting us to the realities and the truths of the world, looking at things can blind us, can punish us and keep us from knowledge and human connection. For example, at key moments in the film, Hitchcock dramatizes that when we look at one thing, we are invariably missing something else. Later I'm going to focus on some sequences that highlight how sight leads us away from as well as toward important things. And the film also shows other ways that we are punished for looking: the eyes that blind and the eyes that, as we'll see at the very end of the film, almost get blinded.

Second, *Rear Window* is very much about the culture that we live in, tellingly described as a culture of the eye and a culture of the I, the person, the individual self. I mentioned earlier that one of the things that makes *Rear Window* so relevant and so compelling is that it tells us something about our contemporary society, which, even more now than it was in 1954, when the film was made and released, is a culture of looking and being looked at. So it is important to pay attention to the elements of *Rear Window* that tell us about the visual culture that we are inescapably immersed in. But Hitchcock also has quite a lot to show us and tell us and maybe worry us about the culture of the I, the individual self that's related to this visual culture. Some philosophers and psychologists talk about the assertion of the self, the definition of the self, as fundamentally oppositional. We define ourselves by saying that there's the world out there, and everything that is not the world is me.

That's the ground, I'm the figure; that's the Other, I am the Self. This dynamic is not necessarily negative. The process I am trying to describe is not pejoratively egotistical or selfish, but rather something that is natural, normal, perhaps necessary. We assert and define ourselves by separating from what we see out there. When Walter Brooks asked for a short blurb for publicity for this talk, I suggested the following: I see therefore I am. That's really what I'm getting at now: that sight is something that helps define, establish, and preserve our sense of self. But it can go beyond that, and *Rear Window* is a film that shows us the excesses of vision, that shows someone setting up and defining his self in such a way that it locks out the rest of the world. The person who looks remains disconnected from the Other. Without oversimplifying matters, Hitchcock gives us a stunning picture of the inevitability but also the limitations and risks of a culture of the eye and a culture of the I. That phrase may still be a little cryptic, but I'll try to clarify it later.

My third proposition may sound equally cryptic: this is a film about both looking good and looking well. If you are not a grammarian, you might say, "What's the difference?" We often use these words loosely and interchangeably, but *Rear Window* shows us the difference between those two terms, and interestingly enough, it shows them in a kind of gendered way. Not surprisingly, at least according to the generally accepted cultural stereotype, it's the main female character in the film who is concerned with looking good: when she is first introduced, she walks into a room dressed in a fancy gown; she likes being looked at; and her major concern is not only looking good, so that other people will look at her and make her feel good about herself, but trying to make her man look good. She wants to do a makeover of him: she wants to get him up and out of his wheelchair, change his clothes, and groom him behaviorally as well as physically. She buys him a new cigarette case, and wants to make him as stylish and accessorized as she is. Not surprisingly, that impulse is one of the things that keeps them apart, because he doesn't want to have anything to do with such a makeover or such a lifestyle. He's concerned with looking well. He's a photographer. He wants to be a skillful, creative, exploring, inquisitive man. That's what his job is. From the very beginning of the film he's defined by what he does, and what he does has to

do with looking, taking pictures and relating to the world that way. This fundamental difference between looking good and looking well is a theme that Hitchcock plays with throughout the film.

The film is set up as a kind of romance, so we wonder: Are these two philosophies ever going to merge? Are they ever going to come together: the person who emphasizes looking good and the person who emphasizes looking well? Not to give away any secrets, but for a moment it does seem to be possible. At one point, Lisa, played by Grace Kelly, typically dressed in high fashion with full makeup and her hair all done up, goes on an adventure: she leaves the apartment that the photographer is trapped in, climbs up a fire escape, and acrobatically makes her way through a window. He stays in his apartment and looks at her with a big smile, as though she's finally made it. She passes the test. She looks good—stylish and attractive—but she also looks well: she's become an inquisitor, a kind of explorer, just like him. In the context of the romantic frame of the film, this sequence is very important and optimistic, conveying a sense of hope that they can overcome their differences and their separation. But these two contrasting orientations are not so easy to reconcile; and in addition, there are other dangers that lurk in the world of the look, as I'll illustrate later.

Fourth on my list of introductory propositions, *Rear Window* shows many varieties of the look, and one of the most intriguing—and particularly Hitchcockian—is what I call the “exponential look.” Maybe I'm using this terms imprecisely, but what I have in mind is the look squared, the look quadrupled. I'm not a mathematician, but I am a musician, so maybe a musical reference will help. What I have in mind is captured nicely in an old Mose Allison song, when he sings: “I was looking back to see if she was looking back to see if I was looking back at her.” This is just once instance of the kind of complex doubled and redoubled and linked series of looks that we find in a Hitchcock film. In *Rear Window* we see people looking, but we see people looking at people looking. I could keep going: we see people looking at people looking at people looking. And just when we think we've reached the end of this series we add another link: to us in the audience looking at a film about a person looking at a person looking at a person

looking, and so on. It's a dizzying box within a box within a box kind of structure that Hitchcock loves to play with. But even more than a dazzling and witty design, the exponential look is also a philosophical problem and an accurate mapping of a key part of the way we lead our lives.

My fifth critical proposal has to do with Hitchcock's structures of identification, that is, how he gets us to relate to the people on screen. He does this in a very interesting and atypical way. Typically, in a Hollywood film or a television show, the spectator is drawn into the drama via techniques that are somewhat simplistic and obvious. You have beautiful people doing exciting things, and we as spectators say, "Oh, I love that" or "I wish I could be that person" or "I wish I could do what that person's doing or have what that person has." I don't mean to belittle that approach, because there are many of us who watch a lot of film and a lot of television, and that kind of identification is a key part of our enjoyment. Hitchcock indulges in these conventional techniques to a certain extent, but he has other ways of establishing complex patterns of identification, and the best phrase I could come up with to describe his approach is to say that it's not so much that he has us walk in another person's shoes but that he has us see through their eyes.

In *Rear Window*, we quite literally see the world primarily through the main character, L.B. Jefferies, played by James Stewart. This gets us into his head. It helps us identify with him, not in the typical way of "Oh, he's leading such an exciting life, he's such a handsome guy, that I sympathize with him," but rather because we see the world as he does. Hitchcock also does something else that is very intriguing and subtle: he creates situations in which we as the viewers of the film not only see what the character sees, but make the same misperceptions and mistakes that he does. We do more than just watch the film. We get deeply involved, and in a much different way than is described by the conventional phrase indicating our typical investment in and response to a film: I laughed, I cried. Here our response and relationship to the character is quite complex, as I'll discuss in more detail later.

In explaining my sixth proposition, let me begin by saying that in *Rear Window*, Hitchcock creates more than the classical "cinema

of attractions.” This term, which I hope that some of you are familiar with, calls attention to the fact that cinema from the very beginning showed exciting things and was visually spectacular in order to gain and hold our attention and interest. One of the emphases that defined early cinema was the desire to make it move, make it lively, make it “happen.” Hitchcock has a wonderful ability to do that, create a cinema of attractions that’s visually exciting, but he also alerts us to a cinema of distractions. One of the most provocative points about *Rear Window* is that the excitement and interest generated by the visual spectacles can sometimes be very deceptive. Watching can be distracting as well as engaging. All this is conveyed very powerfully and precisely in a little film within the film that I’ll discuss later, which I’ve given what I hope is a suitably haunting title: “Whatever Happened to Miss Lonely Hearts?”

Finally, the last point I want to make as a kind of hook to hang some of my comments about the film on is this: Hitchcock warns that you can touch, but you’d better not look. You’ve all heard this said the other way, right? You can look but you’d better not touch. That’s the conventional wisdom, and in fact it seems to capture so much of what the film is about: Jefferies is a photographer, and as such he wants to see lots of exciting things. But he doesn’t really want to get involved. As much as he wants to wander freely and independently through the world, in some respects that’s set up as a very childish position. He doesn’t want to get married, he doesn’t want to get domesticated, he doesn’t want to be bound to relationships, so he looks rather than touches. I guess if you want to psychoanalyze him, you could say that he looks so that the world doesn’t touch him, entangle him, and limit his freedom. That’s the most obvious interpretation of the character and a key dimension of the film, but the more subtle point that Hitchcock makes is the opposite one: you can touch but you’d better not look.

Looking turns out to be the most critical danger in the film. That may sound puzzling: what could be so dangerous about merely looking? Later I’ll try to illustrate that one of the basic premises of this film is that when you look more and more closely at the world, what ensues is not knowledge, not control, not pleasure, but confusion, chaos, and horror. I think of *Rear Window* as a film that lets the genie out of the bottle. Jefferies looks incrementally closer at

the world: first he simply stares out his window, then he picks up binoculars, then he picks up a huge telephoto lens. Our first impression might be that he's successfully keeping the world at a distance, and yet still peering into it, satisfying his curiosity, and getting the "truth" out of what's there. But in fact, it turns out that he is looking into the abyss. Those of you out there who are philosophers can probably guess what I am going to say next. As Nietzsche says, in one of his most haunting pronouncements, when you look into the abyss, the abyss looks into you. In this film, the abyss looks back at L.B. Jefferies, and its emissary actually pays him a visit, opens up his door, and throws him out the window.

* * * * *

Perhaps with these introductory propositions in mind, let's now look more closely at some of the details that Hitchcock uses to construct what is not only a cinematic drama but also a probing and analytical cinematic essay. I want to start with the opening sequence, because in typical Hitchcock fashion, it's a very obvious and at the same time very subtle and tricky introduction to a film about looking. As the camera pans across the inside of the room, Hitchcock is clearly trying to tell us the story of what has happened to Jefferies. Moving from object to object, from the cast on his leg to his camera to the various pictures on the wall, you all get it, don't you? If I gave you a quiz, you'd do pretty well: How did he break his leg? Yes, he was taking pictures and got run over by a car. What does he do for a living? The room is filled with camera equipment and pictures: he's a photographer. We know all that and more, without any words being spoken. The opening sequence is a good example of what Hitchcock calls "pure cinema," the ability to tell a story completely by visual means. You don't need to have a voiceover explaining that "Here's L.B. Jefferies, and isn't it a shame that he's laid up in a wheelchair," or to have somebody walk in and say "How's your leg, which you busted while you were on a camera shoot?"

Hitchcock wants to tell stories without relying on words. But this opening sequence does far more than visually give us some of the backstory, so to speak. It establishes not only that this is going to be a film about looking but also that we are going to be drawn into this activity: it sets us up as people who, like the main

characters in the film, are engaged in looking, interpreting, figuring things out, and maybe feeling a little self-satisfied about these activities. I don't know that we are very conscious of all this, especially at the beginning of the film. We simply watch and perhaps congratulate ourselves a bit: Yes, I get it. I can easily follow the clues left by the director. But I think that part of what Hitchcock is doing is setting us up for a fall. He sets up a little sequence that makes us feel very confident and complacent in our position as viewers and in our ability to see the world, understand it, wrap things up in a nice little package. As the film goes on, that nice little package unravels almost completely, for Jefferies but also for us.

Throughout the film Hitchcock presents an incremental dramatic progression of different varieties of the look and thoughts about looking, and in the process he analyzes the conventional wisdom, some of our common thoughts about voyeurism. That's the technical word describing the activities of the James Stewart character. In fact, he's not only a voyeur: he's a professional voyeur, paid for looking and capturing this look. One of the first "problems" that Hitchcock presents us with is the conventional idea of the immorality of voyeurism, captured in part by calling him a Peeping Tom and showing him enjoying his guilty pleasures. For example, as he talks on the phone, we see him looking out at women sunbathing—with a helicopter flying overhead also trying to get a close look, alerting us to the fact that voyeurism is the norm, and giving us our first of many opportunities to look at someone looking at someone looking. We don't judge Jefferies too negatively here, I think, but Hitchcock does want to show that voyeurism is in the very least a little bit naughty, and that it may have some troublesome consequences. At the end of his long phone conversation and a session of prolonged ogling, it may be that Jefferies simply needs to scratch a skin irritation inside his cast, but when he reaches a long stick with a little hand at the end of it down into his full-length lower body cast, tugs up and down on it, and then smiles, with an expression of pleasurable relief (fig. 1), we are fully justified in thinking that he is scratching another kind of itch. I don't think you could have been any more suggestive—or explicit—in 1954.



Figure 1

Part of what Hitchcock is suggesting here is something that probably all of us think: voyeurism is naughty, and it can lead to even naughtier things. He's conveying what conventional morality envisions as the consequences and the punishment for that kind of voyeurism. Stella, Jefferies's nurse, is the voice of conventional moralizing, and she reminds him in no uncertain terms about the price he may have to pay for such behavior:

STELLA: The New York State sentence for a peeping tom is six months in the workhouse. . . . and they've got no windows in the workhouse. You know, in the old days they used to put your eyes out with a red-hot poker. Any of those bikini bombshells you're always watching worth a red-hot poker? Ah, dear, we've become a race of peeping toms. What people ought to do is get outside their own house and look in for a change. Yes, sir. How's that for a bit of homespun philosophy?

JEFFERIES: *Reader's Digest*, April 1939.

STELLA: Well, I only quote from the best.

Keep in mind that this is Stella talking, not necessarily Hitchcock. I don't think of Hitchcock as endorsing that morality, and I don't think of him as a moralizer, here or elsewhere. I do think of him as a moralist, which is quite a bit different: he's concerned with issues of morality, but he's very skeptical about and often very

critical of everyday morality. Hitchcock presents Stella's response to Jefferies's naughtiness, and allows us to have a good-natured laugh at what he risks by indulging in such things. But he then goes on to present exactly the opposite position on voyeurism: what we've just seen is a little vignette of the conventional wisdom about the immorality of being a voyeur. Later on in the film he presents another conventional idea, this time in defense of voyeurism, asserting that some times it's morally useful as it allows us to connect with other people and is a sign of our sympathy and engagement with the world. The film ends with at least some kind of positive affirmation of the uses of voyeurism: as a result of Jefferies's relentless curiosity, a murder is discovered, a murderer caught, and Jefferies's relationship with Lisa is solidified because of their shared activities in solving the crime. But even before the end of the film, Hitchcock presents voyeurism in a positive manner. For example, at a key moment near the middle of the film, a woman screams and nearly everyone in the apartment building rushes to see what's happening. These are all people that Jefferies has been looking at throughout the film; now they become the spectators. They are aroused by the cry, and they look out, curious but perhaps also at least momentarily concerned. They see the body of a dog lying on the ground, and hear an impassioned speech by the distraught woman whose dog has been killed, berating the neighbors for being so unneighborly:

Which one of you did it? Which one of you killed my dog? You don't know the meaning of the word "neighbor." Neighbors like each other, speak to each other, care if anybody lives or dies. But none of you do. But I couldn't imagine any of you being so low that you'd kill a little helpless, friendly dog, the only thing in this whole neighborhood who liked anybody. Did you kill him because he liked you? Just because he liked you?

This is episode is set up in some ways as the moral center of the film, structured around a lengthy, uninterrupted speech (rare in Hitchcock's films) that is deeply felt and very moving, and alerts us to a key change that has taken place. Far from saying that the look

is immoral, the emphasis through much of the early part of the film, now the argument is that we need to look to be moral: to be fully human and establish a true community, people need to look at and look out more for one another. Interestingly enough, the only person that doesn't look at this point is Lars Thorwald, the suspected and, as it turns out, the actual murderer. Voyeurism, far from being immoral and naughty, is now a moral requirement, or at least a key signifier of moral engagement, and the truly immoral and villainous person is identified as the one who doesn't look.

At the same time as this sequence is set up as a serious attempt to educate us to our responsibilities, Hitchcock complicates things. I hope I don't seem insensitive, especially to those of you who have pets, if I say that there's something disproportionate as well as moving about the seriousness and hysteria that shroud this dramatic sequence. The victim is, after all, not a person but a dog, certainly worthy of concern, but perhaps not entirely compelling as a symbol of the ills of the world. And furthermore, Hitchcock subtly undermines the claim that a show of attention is a sign of real sympathy and good citizenship. The fact that these people go to their window to hear a woman cry out doesn't necessarily mean that they are acting morally or that they're good people. As soon as "the show's over"—a phrase specifically uttered by an unidentified onlooker—they go back into their apartments, and there is no indication that they are changed in any way by this spectacle and this experience. Looking at by no means translates easily into looking out for one another.

The basic point I've been trying to make with these first few examples is that Hitchcock presents the most common thoughts about voyeurism basically to suggest that they are predictable but insufficient explanations of a very complicated aspect of our behavior. We need to examine and analyze this subject far more deeply than by simply labeling it as immoral or moral. Hitchcock tries to reckon with the complexity of the look in several ways. One is to illustrate not the immorality of the look, not the morality of the look, but the amorality of the look. Looking at something doesn't necessarily qualify you as naughty or vain or detached, nor does it necessarily qualify you as moral, engaged, and sympathetic. Hitchcock's unsettling point is that looking is beyond morality, not



Figure 2

an index of right or wrong. And even more ominously, Hitchcock shows a deep connection of the look with a world that is chaotic and threatening. Much critical commentary on Hitchcock has examined how the look in his films is a strategy of power, especially a man's power over a woman, who becomes fixated and manipulated by a dominating gaze. But little attention has been paid to how the look, especially in a film like *Rear Window*, testifies to a more basic powerlessness, how, as I mentioned briefly earlier, the look discovers, reveals, and generates what Joseph Conrad so movingly calls "the horror, the horror."

First, let's consider the amorality of the look, captured best, I think, in the film within a film that I call "Whatever Happened to Miss Lonely Hearts?" Miss Lonely Hearts is one of the characters that Jefferies looks at through a window opposite in his courtyard. He's a kind of channel-surfer, and he goes from one window to another to another. Hitchcock is remarkably prescient in giving Jefferies this habit: we now live in an age of channel surfing that testifies to our love of visual spectacle but also our basic disinterest and short attention-span. As Stella and Jefferies are preoccupied with their plot to trap Thorwald, they notice Miss Lonely Hearts laying out a handful of sleeping pills, evidently ready to kill herself. The circular mask visible in the shot pictured in figure 2, one of many such masks used in the film, highlights Miss Lonely Hearts, and also captures how we are looking through a telescopic device with Jefferies, increasingly our alter ego.

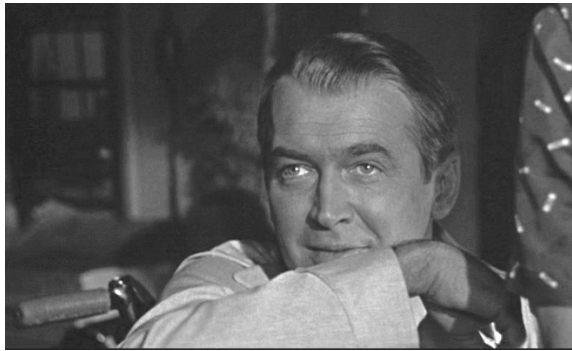


Figure 3

But at this moment Lisa returns and all attention goes to her. In particular, Jefferies is shown in a prolonged medium close-up staring at her, with an enraptured expression (fig. 3). He only has eyes for her. They talk excitedly about Thorwald and plan their next move to get him out of his apartment so they can have free access to it while he is gone. But haven't they forgotten something? And equally important, haven't we forgotten something? What about Miss Lonely Hearts? A new spectacle and object of attention has arisen, and for nearly three minutes after she somberly lays out the pills and sits down holding a Bible, contemplating last things, Miss Lonely Hearts is out of sight and out of mind.

With his usual impeccable sense of timing and slyness, Hitchcock inserts a quick cutaway of Miss Lonely Hearts lowering her blinds (fig. 4), as if to remind us that we have indeed forgotten about her. It's important to note that this cutaway is not to anything that the characters in the film see. At this point, Jefferies does not turn his eyes again to Miss Lonely Hearts, nor does Stella. But we do, and we get the message before Jefferies and Stella, alerted to the fact that we've been distracted from something important. This is all done very subtly, and I think it takes multiple screenings of the film to see that this is the level of complexity that Hitchcock is operating on. But when you look closely at the film, especially after having seen it a couple of times, you start to see the intricate structure of the film, geared at both manipulating and revealing us.

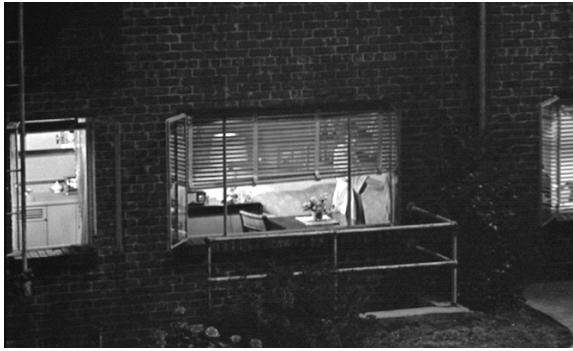


Figure 4

The sequence gets even more complex as it continues. It's not only Miss Lonely Hearts that we get distracted from and lose sight of. She is a secondary character, the eccentric, aging lady that lives across the way. Although earlier in the film we witness her on a disastrous misadventure with a gentleman caller and at least momentarily feel her disappointment and hurt, we never really get to know her, and perhaps do not develop a great deal of interest in or concern for her, thus—alas—making her eminently forgettable. But the same perceptual habit that leads us to forget about a person we don't really care much for can also distract us from the fate and fortune of someone we do care a lot about. As the sequence proceeds, Lisa climbs into Thorwald's apartment, looking for evidence that he is what they suspect him to be, the murderer of his wife. But as Lisa is discovering an important clue, Miss Lonely Hearts comes back into the picture, taken in by Jefferies's perpetually wandering eye. Four minutes after the cutaway to her that we see, Jefferies at last notices her again, and somewhat blithely and dismissively says that "Stella was wrong about Miss Lonely Hearts." This is a misperception: she is not yet out of danger, but he is unconcerned and returns his attention to Lisa. Within a few minutes, though, there is another shift. Stella looks again at Miss Lonely Hearts, appreciates how close she is to taking the pills, and urges Jefferies to call the police, which he does. Ironically, at this moment Miss Lonely Hearts is saved by the wonderful music from the musician's apartment nearby, enchanted by the completed



Figure 5

version of the song that the musician has been composing throughout the film, titled “Lisa.” Even more ironically, all this attention to the song and to Miss Lonely Hearts takes us away from the real Lisa. Jefferies is supposed to signal her by phone when Thorwald returns, but at a critical moment he is otherwise occupied. Hitchcock shrewdly cuts to a long shot that emblemizes exactly what we are normally unable to sustain: a double split-screen shows the two competing dramas at once, with Miss Lonely Hearts at the bottom of the screen, now out of danger, but Lisa at the top, with Thorwald just about to enter the apartment (fig. 5). The jolt we get from this shot comes, I think, not only because of our sudden awareness of Lisa’s vulnerability but also because of our sense that we, like Jefferies, are complicit in it. By diverting our attention, in a way we have allowed it to happen. Jefferies’s tormented expression as Lisa is not only threatened but throttled by Thorwald is thus a characteristically Hitchcockian mixture of sympathetic pain and guilt (fig. 6).

Jefferies’s expression here foreshadows what is to come as the film concludes, the revelation of the horror of the world, a horror that is generated by the act of looking. Despite the discomfort caused by it—Jefferies seems to be in even more pain than the person he is watching who is actually being beaten, and James Stewart expertly registers this pain almost to the point of disintegration—he simply can’t stop. Once the police arrive and Lisa is safe, both Jefferies and Stella pick up their viewing devices



Figure 6

and look out the window again. The desire to look is inexhaustible, and, as we are about to find out, the difficulties this causes accelerate. The emphasis on Lisa's vulnerability gives way to a sudden awareness of Jefferies's even greater danger. Perhaps most of you know Raymond Burr, the actor who plays Thorwald, primarily as the gruff but genial television character that he played later in his career on *Perry Mason* and *Ironsides*, but early in his film career he played mostly film noir heavies, and here he is the embodiment of menace. Thorwald sees that Lisa is pointing behind her back to the wedding ring—which Mrs. Thorwald presumably would presumably never have left if she were alive—and he then looks up and out the window, not only at Jefferies, but directly into the camera and at us (fig. 7). It is one of the most shocking moments in the film, perfectly capturing what I described earlier as the philosophical proposition that when you look into the abyss, the abyss looks into you, and our reflexive response is the same as Jefferies's: to instinctively recoil.

This feeling of menace intensifies, and leads to the climax of the film, which is not only one of almost palpable brutality, where Jefferies is assaulted by Thorwald and tossed around and then finally out of the room, but one of metaphysical horror as well. Hitchcock creates a powerful intimation of the uncanny as a puzzling murder mystery is resolved, but only to rip the veil off a much deeper unresolvable mystery. What Jefferies's inquisitive look discovers is not primarily the truth about a crime, nor sympathy or



Figure 7

connection or knowledge, nor any sense of the world commanded by an imperial and controlling gaze. Instead, it reveals how horrifying, how chaotic, how threatening the world is, and we see this quite concretely, not abstractly, when the abyss, when the monster from the abyss makes his way through Jefferies's door. Jefferies tries to defend himself the best way he can, with flash bulbs. He's a photographer, so according to Hitchcock's logic, he would of course defend himself by the means at his disposal. But this proves to be pathetically ineffective, and adds to rather than defeats the welling up of chaos. Instead of keeping Thorwald more than momentarily at bay, the flash bulbs serve as an opportunity for a dazzling and deeply significant special effect: red suffusions that momentarily blot out the threat but also do exactly the opposite, showing us the triumph of the threat by taking us inside Thorwald's head, as it were. The flashes, meant as protection from Thorwald, instead highlight him, and then give us glimpses of the world as seen through his eyes. This shift in point of view is often used in monster films, isn't it? All of a sudden you see things from the perspective of the beast coming at you. But I don't think it's ever done in monster films quite as expertly as it is here, and what we get is not only a physical but also a metaphysical jolt.

This is the second of the sequences in the film, besides the death of the dog, that brings the spectators out. For the first time in the film, we see things from outside Jefferies's window rather than looking through his window. Jefferies the spectator has become the



Figure 8

spectacle, and in the last special effects shot of the sequence, a disorienting matte shot, we see him falling into chaos (fig. 8). Unlike in *Vertigo*, here the person falling survives, but we wonder what kind of life he survives into. To me this sequence is one of Hitchcock's most intense and meaningful cinematic renderings of what critics refer to as the "chaos world" that is never far from us. And again, as I've tried to emphasize, it's a world that's revealed and released by looking. We've come a long way from the early moments of the film where we get a presentation of what seems to be a kind of venial sin of voyeurism. We've come a long way from the complacent and confident hope of the morality of the look, the belief that it will socialize and humanize us. We end with a look into—and a final reminder of how deeply the look is connected to—"the horror, the horror."

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Let me conclude briefly. One of the impulses of film from its very beginning was best captured by the great early film director, D.W. Griffith, who was famous for saying "The task I'm trying to achieve is above all to make you see." Of course: motion pictures are a visual art. But he means more than that: he wants us to experience, understand, and enjoy the world and ourselves through the expanded visual medium of movies. "Above all to make you see" is a defining statement of the primal desire meant to be addressed and satisfied by cinema. I think Hitchcock goes one very long step past that. He

seems to say (the following are my words, not his, but I'm speaking for Hitchcock today): I want you to understand as fully as possible the subtleties, complexities, consequences, and responsibilities of seeing—that is to say, as in my title, the pleasures and dangers of looking. In *Rear Window*, Hitchcock makes Griffith's declaration, "I'm trying . . . above all to make you see"—a defining phrase not only of cinema but also much of modern life—ominous, provocative, endlessly fascinating, and endlessly disturbing. For that reason, among many others, Hitchcock is my favorite director, and *Rear Window* is my favorite Hitchcock film.