

Rear Window (1954)

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"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" – Stella

PRODUCTION CREDITS:

A Paramount Pictures Production.
Directed by Alfred Hitchcock.
Screenplay by John Michael Hayes from a short story by Cornell Woolrich, "It Had To Be Murder."
Cinematography by Robert Burks
Original Music by Franz Waxman
Running Time: 112 minutes (in Technicolor)

CAST

James Stewart as L.B. Jeffries
Grace Kelly as Lisa Carol Freemont
Thelma Ritter as Stella
Wendell Corey as Thomas J. Doyle
Raymond Burr as Lars Thorwald

Thinking about *Rear Window* (1954)

As I have already suggested, one way to look at *Rear Window* is to view it as a metaphor for film itself. As you will immediately see once you have seen the film, Jimmy Stewart views the events in the apartment block across the courtyard from his window as if he were watching events unfold on a big screen. Stewart himself sits immobilized in a chair in the dark, as we do or we would do when we go to the movies. We sit in a darkened room and view events unfold on a big screen. Sitting in the dark is part of what it means to be a moviegoer.

In *Rear Window*, the people who live in those apartments opposite Jeffries' apartment, Lars and Anna Thorwald, Miss Lonelyhearts, the Newlyweds, Miss Torso, the Sculptress, the Lady and her Husband and their dog, move in and out of Jeffries' field of vision as they pass by their windows going from one room to the next and so they appear and disappear and re-appear like characters on film. Indeed, the windows in the apartment block opposite Stewart's apartment occupy a space as if they were frames of a film. The windows 'frame' the characters. The windows of Thorwald's apartment 'frame' Raymond Burr (remember from his long-running role on the TV series, *Perry Mason*?) playing the part of the sinister Lars Thorwald whom Jeffries (Jimmy Stewart) suspects of having murdered his wife.

Now if it makes sense to view Hitchcock's *Rear Window* as a way that Hitchcock himself explored the medium of film, it's both fun and productive to identify moments in the film that seem especially conducive towards this end. So, here in what follows, are several such moments that are likely to be fruitful in this regard.

Reading In and Reading Off: Reality and “Projection”

If Jeffries (Jimmy Stewart) might be seen in the position of a moviegoer, it is also true that much of what he ‘sees’ unfold on the ‘screen’ (the apartment block opposite) is what we see.

Our view is his view but it is also a view of the world from the camera’s point of view. What does a camera do? A camera records some aspect of the world turned into a print and projected for us onto a screen in a movie theatre. What might we make of this link between the camera and Jeffries’ point of view?

One connection that immediately comes to mind is the idea that what Jeffries “sees” is his **own** “projected” vision. Recall Stella and Lisa’s skepticism at Jeffries insistence fairly early on in the film that a “murder” has taken place and that Thorwald “did” it. Both Stella and Lisa think Jeffries is fantasizing, making up the whole thing, “projecting.”

Here we see Hitchcock’s genius at work. Part of what holds our attention is our wondering whether what we are seeing is really happening or not. Did it happen? Did Thorwald do it? Or is Jeffries just making it up, out of boredom? Perhaps, he is suffering from the heat.

Hitchcock creates room for us to think each of these thoughts and thus to wonder whether we are seeing something that is *real* or merely a *projection* of the real. But then how surprising should this be? After all when we go to the movies, we watch a film that is *projected* onto a screen.

Long Shot, Medium Shot, Close-Up

As if to bring home the suggestion that Jeffries is in the camera’s position, Hitchcock occasionally has Jeffries pick up his camera. Since Jeffries is a professional photographer (remember the opening sequence?), he has a battery of lenses. One of these is an oversized telephoto lens, which he uses to get a better view of what the inhabitants of the apartments across the courtyard are up to. He also has a simpler, less powerful lens in the form of a pair of binoculars, and, of course, the use of his “naked” eye. In each of these “views” of the world, Hitchcock expresses the underlying vocabulary of the camera “eye,” the camera’s triple threat, long shot, medium shot, and close-up.

Photography and Film: The Real and the Imaginary

Interestingly, Jeffries, whose profession is photography, never takes a picture during the course of the movie, although he has taken a photo “before” the events started to unfold in Thorwald’s apartment. It’s a photo of the flowerbed, and at one point in the film the slide of that flowerbed plays a fairly crucial role in the unmasking of Thorwald’s guilt. It also serves as an example of one of the primary uses of photography, its use as “evidence.” The photo of the flowerbed is a frozen frame, a “still,” and although photography is the basis of film, one difference between film and photography is that one *moves* and the other doesn’t.

The fact that Hitchcock never shows Jeffries take pictures with his still camera, even though it is his profession to do so, suggests that Jeffries has entered a new world, the world of film, and left his “old” world behind.

He has *moved* on.

It also suggests a contrast between the powers of the two mediums. One helps us to pick out a detail of the world that we might otherwise have missed; the other helps us to see the bigger picture, to tell the 'larger' story.

As students of visual culture such as Victor Burgin have noticed, "photographs, like dreams in Freud's analysis, are typically laconic," i.e., short on narrative. Or photographs might be seen as "stencils off the real:" whereas film is a way of world making. Indeed, if you go back and look at the opening sequence of **[the]** *Rear Window*, you will see that Hitchcock shows us what caused Jeffries' accident, what laid him up. The camera pans over a wall of Jeffries' apartment to which several photos are pinned, one of a racecar, another of its front tire that has come loose.

So, we may safely conclude, the tire of a racecar hit Jeffries as he stepped out onto the racetrack to get a picture. But it also suggests that Jeffries has suffered his accident, in part, because he did not see it (that tire) coming, did not see very far beyond the frame, failed to "see" the bigger picture. This might, in turn, be seen as Hitchcock's way of declaring the limits of the medium of photography.

Film as a Story-Telling Art

The power of movies is to tell stories, to provide us with a narrative of how various bits and pieces of our world might be seen to fit together is what Jeffries himself does while watching events unfold in Thorwald's apartment. He pieces these events together and comes up with a narrative of what Thorwald has done with his wife.

His photography seems to have been about capturing things as they are, to leave very little to the imagination. As a photographer he was always traveling around the globe to get this or that photo of a thing - a globe-trekker in the hunt for rare game. He teases Lisa, insisting she is not up to slogging through the 'muck and mire' of Brazil or India to get a shot of something.

But now, here he is, in his apartment, laid up for six weeks, immobilized in a chair in the dark, with little or nothing to do. And what does he do? Well, he continues his travels after a fashion, but without leaving his own stand-point, by using his imagination, by making "stuff" up about the world rather than slogging through it or clambering around in it to capture one of its "sights." Given this transformation of Jeffries from photographer to filmmaker, Hitchcock opens the way to our thinking about *Rear Window* as an exploration of the narrative possibilities of film.

Solving Crimes v. Gathering Facts: Holmes and Watson

In light of this last observation, it is interesting to think about the relation between Jeffries and Doyle. Doyle, like a photographer, seems interested in evidence and the evidentiary. His role as a police detective is to gather evidence, collect facts, and as a photographer might be seen as a collector of bits and pieces of the **real, fragments** of the world. The things in a photograph are, **to quote a remark of Rudolph Arnheim, "like flies caught in amber."** Doyle's role is to insist on the facts, just the facts, and nothing but the facts. Doyle, on this way of looking at him, might be seen as Jeffries' former self, the photographer before he broke a leg.

The two of them together might be seen as pair of investigators of a crime on the order of Watson and Sherlock Holmes. That the last name of the creator of that most famous pair of criminal investigators was also Doyle cannot be a mere coincidence.

And what might be said of that relation? Well, Holmes works differently from Watson. Holmes deduces things intuitively, by leaps and bounds, by leaping over evidence to conclusions faster than anyone else and always sooner than Watson. The same might be said of Jeffries and Doyle. Jeffries leaps to the conclusion that Thorwald “did it.” Doyle is much more cautious. Where are the facts? What’s the evidence?

In the end, the man with the powerful imagination and the intuitive sense that Thorwald must be up to something gets it right; the man who insists on the facts and nothing but the facts fails to unravel the mystery. If we put all this together, Doyle is in the position of Jeffries before the movie began. He’s the guy who doesn’t see it (that tire) coming.

From Bachelorhood to Married Man

I mentioned earlier that Jeffries does not use his still camera once he’s laid up. It’s as if, I suggested, his photography days are over and he has moved into a new world, the world of film. In any good story we look for character development. This [’] development, from photographer to filmmaker, is a way of marking the development of Jimmy Stewart’s character in *Rear Window*.

But there is another development that also takes place. Jeffries seems resistant to marriage and to marrying Lisa at the beginning of the film, but by the end, she appears to have ‘got’ her man. He has broken his “other” leg, but he appears, nonetheless primed to marry Lisa, ready for marriage. How might these two developments be linked? Well, one thing to think is to see marriageability as requiring a leap of the imagination, a willingness to take a risk of some sort before all the evidence is in. If this is so, we might see Jeffries transformation from photographer to filmmaker as marking a development in his psychology that turns this confirmed (obstinate) bachelor into the marrying kind.

The Body Dissected: Making and Editing Film

If Jeffries’ view of the world is the world viewed from the point of view of a movie-goer and/or a filmmaker, it is interesting to uncover all the many ways that *Rear Window* underwrites this metaphor. Take the fact that we learn near the end of the film that Thorwald has managed to rid himself of his wife’s body by cutting her up. Indeed he has hidden parts of her body in that flowerbed, but decides to remove the “evidence” after the neighbor’s dog starts digging around the area where these parts of Anna Thorwald’s body have been buried.

In many of Hitchcock’s later films women’s bodies have suffered a similar fate. They get cut up. And film critics have sometimes attributed this recurring theme to Hitchcock’s childhood and to his own odd and somewhat perverse psychology. But here is a less sinister explanation, one suggested by viewing Hitchcock’s movies as metaphors for (of) filmmaking. To be made a film first needs to get shot, but once shot, the footage then needs to be pieced together. To piece the film together where does the director of the film spend most of his time? In the cutting room. And where does much of the original film end up? On the cutting-room floor. So cut up bodies may have (in Hitchcock) a fairly innocent explanation. They are there in the film not due to the director’s perversity, but because director’s in the course of making films make cuts.

The Movie-goer as Voyeur, as a “Viewer Unseen”

As if to confirm the very idea of Jeffries as moviegoer, Hitchcock has Jeffries defend himself against Thorwald’s advances near the end of the film when Thorwald enters his

(Jeffries') apartment, not with a gun, club or a knife, but by 'shooting' him with his flash. Jeffries method is, of course, not as effective as he might have been had he had a gun in hand, but he does manage to stop, at least temporarily, Thorwald in his tracks. He manages to do this by temporarily blinding Thorwald. By blinding him, Jeffries momentarily confirms his own position as a viewer unseen, i.e., as moviegoer. A moviegoer is unseen by those up on the big screen, is unseen by those who the moviegoer is watching, unseen by those in the scene.

This is the feature of the movie-going experience that many film critics have commented on: its voyeurism. The particular way of viewing the world that is installed into the mechanism of the camera and that is screened is the way the world looks to a viewer sitting still in a room where that viewer is hidden from view. Hence the viewer of a film is a "viewer unseen." And that position of a "viewer unseen" is tellingly reproduced by Jeffries' blinding of Thorwald, who at the moment of his temporary blindness is for that brief moment at least unable to view (to see) Jeffries.

The Limits of a Cinematic Way of Looking at the World

I mentioned earlier the suggestion by Hitchcock that photography has its uses but is also not without limits. *Rear Window* might also be viewed as a commentary on the limits of film as well as commenting on film's peculiar power. One place in the film where Hitchcock may be letting us in on one of the limitations of a cinematic view of the world is in the exchange that takes place between Lisa and Jeffries about Miss Torso when she is entertaining a number of men in her small apartment. Already we have a hint of what's to come in the very name that Jeffries gives to the person he watches from his apartment. By calling her "Miss Torso," Jeffries reveals a tendency to over-simplify, to reduce the world he sees to manageable proportions. His name for Miss Torso reveals his fascination with the surface of things. He reduces her to a stereotype.

In any event, watching the get-together in Miss Torso's apartment, Jeffries wonders aloud which one of these gentlemen Miss Torso might be interested in, but Lisa insists that she is not interested in any of them. She is waiting for someone. Jeffries asks how she knows and Lisa reminds him that he had mentioned that Miss Torso's apartment was like hers. At the end of the film "Stanley" returns to Miss Torso's apartment, thus confirming that Lisa had it right and Jeffries got it wrong. Lisa has figured it out by putting herself in Miss Torso's shoes, by being empathic, by doing imaginatively what she does literally later on when she "**crosses-over**" and enters the Thorwalds' apartment. Here, at this moment, she enters Miss Torso's body and looks out at the world through her eyes. She does this by identifying with her, by seeing her as someone with whom she can identify, someone like herself, living alone in a small apartment in Manhattan. Jeffries' view is limited in part by **his** hanging back and looking at what's going on in the apartment block opposite from 'his side' of the courtyard, **[and]** by looking at its world and the world he surveys from the outside in.