

# Rear Window

## (1954, Hitchcock)

### Component 1 Key Developments in US Film

#### Focus Areas Genre, Narrative, Context

#### PART 1: Key Sequence(s) and timings and/or links

##### Sequence 1

The opening - 0:00 – 00:3:51

##### Sequence 2

Lisa is trapped - 1:31:14 – 1:37:54

##### Sequence 3

Thorwald comes for Jeffries - 1:40:24 – 1:45:54

#### PART 2: STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

##### Cinematography (including Lighting)

- Lighting important to create red skies, night-time effects, shadows in the rooms – all on the single elaborate studio set.
- Camerawork restricted but also facilitated by the set.
- Pans across the set and movement up and down.
- Use of Close-ups and Long Shots for interior of Jeff's apartment and shots across the courtyard.
- Voyeurism emphasized by shots through the telephoto lens of Jeff's still camera.
- Many shots are POV from Jeff's perspective or subjective camera shots (i.e. through binoculars/camera viewfinder).
- Until closing scenes, all shots are from inside Jeff's apartment.
- The opening is generally bright and well lit; natural lighting seems to dominate and establishes that we can clearly see across the yard and with good detail visible. This allows us to be 'welcomed' into the scene and view lots of detail and pick up visual cues.

- As with the editing, camera movement is largely motivated and seems to suggest a sense of POV perspective taking place. When Stewart's character moves his head or eyes, the reaction shot that follows looks out from his position and moves as well. It helps to clearly establish that we are aligned to his perspective and his viewpoint; we, like him are voyeurs.
- The use of the restricted POV also helps to establish the generic convention of restricted narrative. Given that the audience is never allowed to see into the apartments beyond what the lead character L.B Jeffries sees, mystery in this film revolves around what we *cannot* see.
- 00:15:08 in, the orange/red sunset shows that not only is it evening but that it also helps to suggest that it is summer; it appears to be a classic summertime sunset.
- First seen at 00:37:30, Jeffries moves back into the apartment so that he can't be seen by others in the yard. This is reinforced by the subtle use of shadow that is cast across his face and body to show that he is 'hidden' from view. This is also foreshadowing for events later in the film where Jeffries is attempting to 'hide' from the view of others.
- Hitchcock deploys a delayed POV shot at 00:46:58; characters look off screen and visibly react before we are allowed to see what they are looking at. This helps to heighten the idea of mystery as we don't see what is happening immediately-both the narrative and our POV is restricted and therefore our own possible reaction is prevented.
- There is a somewhat basic but useful trope in terms of the lighting; lights on in an apartment tell us that someone is there and have nothing to hide. Lights out indicate either someone is hidden or does not want to be seen. This simple code allows an audience to understand how to react at several key moments in the film.

##### Mise-en-Scène

- Use of costume – Miss Lonelyhearts,

Miss Torso, Lisa – as signifiers of job, social status, mental state

- One of the first things we see is a thermometer which establishes the temperature; we know that people are living 'outdoors' because of the heat of summer and explains why blinds aren't shut and therefore how/why Jeffries can look into apartments easily.
- There is use of circular 'vignette' style on the POV when Jeffries is looking through either binoculars or a camera. This establishes the sense of 'voyeurism', and this visual cue is a trope of the genre.
- Lisa's elaborate dresses contrast to those of others in the film; they set her apart as being fashionable, as being important and almost someone who is significantly more 'important' than others in the film. Note how they become less elaborate and more 'pragmatic' the more she becomes involved in the 'mystery'. By the end of the film she is wearing blue jeans and a shirt; she is metaphorically 'wearing the trousers' at this point.
- During the opening scene (key sequence 1), we see inside Jeffries' apartment with a clever 'tour' of key props via camera movement. This helps to tell us that Jeffries is wheelchair-bound due to a broken leg. The broken camera and photograph then reveal that the injury was caused as the result of photographing a motor race which featured a crash. It's also a neat way of instructing the audience on how to 'read' the narrative-look for visual clues and draw conclusions from these.
- The final scene features another look around the yard and this replicates the start of the film. This time however, we see the thermometer again, but now to indicate that things are colder and therefore that time has passed.

### Editing

- Consistent use of 'fade to black' between sequences to denote time passing.
- Use of rapid cutting between camera viewfinder shots contrasts with panning camera earlier on – increased intensity of voyeurism.
- 'Action montage' when Thorwald attempts to throw Jeff out of the window.
- Suggestion that the rhythm of cutting increases in the second half of the film.
- Throughout the film there is a clever use of motivated cuts via the use of eyeline match; Hitchcock frequently cuts from Jeffries looking

off-screen to various people and events that are assumed to be the focus of his gaze.

This helps to make clear and establish to the audience that this is a voyeuristic viewpoint.

- A good example of this occurs at 00:22:06 when Jeffries watches Miss Lonelyhearts raise a glass to an imagined person; through use of cross-cutting we can see Jeffries raising his glass as a reaction to hers.
- During the sequence where the Lars Thorwald leaves and comes back, a fade to black is used frequently to show that time is passing but also that Jeffries is falling asleep and waking up sporadically. This helps establish the key aspect of the mystery; what happens during one of those periods is key but with the audience aligned to Jeffries' perspective, we are not sure what has actually happened.
- A classic example of 'Hitchcockian', cross-cutting is used in key sequence 2. This creates tension and is a generic convention of someone racing against time to prevent something from happening. It's classic Hitchcock.
- This scene also allows the audience to appreciate just how vulnerable Jeffries is to enable some foreshadowing for the later scene involving Lisa being trapped in Thorwald's apartment (key sequence 2). The use of cross-cutting and the eyeline match allow us to experience Jeffries' frustration and pain at not being able to help.
- The editing is much slower in key sequence 3. The tension, a key generic convention, is instead created through the longer shot length. By focusing on one shot for a few seconds, something which we haven't seen too much of thus far, this forces the view to consider what might happen and therefore creating tension and mystery.

### Sound

- Piano piece 'Lisa' becomes a major signifier in the narrative
- Diegetic music from the songwriter's apartment, songs on radios etc.
- Sound effects of city life
- Some sounds over-emphasised (e.g. Thorwald's footsteps on the landing)
- Diegetic sound from other parts of the yard, both dialogue and the score, has an echoing quality to help make clear that they are not taking place in Stewart's apartment.
- The argument scene with the Thorwald at 00:24:42 features highly muffled speech

so that we are unaware of what is actually being said, leaving the audience to attempt to guess what is happening in that apartment; this is a classic way of establishing ambiguity to help establish the mystery.

- Cleverly, the soundtrack for the film often comes from the 'Songwriter' in the nearby apartment. This makes the soundtrack essentially diegetic. Interestingly, it's *somewhat* contrapuntal in so much as it doesn't immediately reflect what is happening on screen. Therefore, it doesn't suggest or create an obvious reaction for the audience and this aids in the somewhat ambiguous narrative.
- The only indication that something significant and dramatic is happening during key sequence 2 is through the use of the increase in volume-it quietsens when the police arrive and the drama and danger to Lisa stops.
- Key sequence 3 uses sound in a different way; the soundtrack and almost all other sound stops. The sound of echoing footsteps instead suggest that someone is near or coming for Jeffries.
- Score by Franz Waxman.

## PART 3: STARTING POINTS - Contexts

### Social

- Released in 1954 and based on a 1942 short story called *It Had to Be Murder* by Cornell Woolrich. It is considered to be one of Hitchcock's finest films and in 1997 was added to the US Nation Film Registry as being "*culturally, historically or aesthetically significant.*"
- The film was shot entirely at Paramount Studios under huge expense as a set was built to replicate a courtyard including apartments.
- There is a meticulous attention to detail in the set, from the working drainage system, the clever lighting system which produced natural-looking lighting to the manipulation of the acoustic properties of the courtyard, allowing for the use of realistic diegetic sound effects that could be heard across the whole yard.
- It was nominated for 4 Academy awards but won none of them.
- Voyeurism is key to this film; Jeffries acts as our 'eyes' in the film and the audience can only see what he sees. Throughout the opening scenes he is admonished for being a voyeur which should be a negative; Jeffries' nurse in particular makes it clear that what he is doing

is wrong. Yet there is a clear longing from all characters in the apartment to see more, to wish for more and as an audience we revel in their fascination as it enables us to see more.

### Historical

- In 2007, the American Film Institute ranked *Rear Window* as the 48th Greatest Movie of All Time and in 2008 ranked it number 3 in the "Mystery" genre.
- *The Simpsons* spoofed the film in the episode *Bart of Darkness*. Bart suffers a broken leg forcing him to spend time in his bedroom window where his inquisitive nature means that he watches people through a telescope and suspects Ned Flanders of killing his wife Maude, only to discover that in fact, Ned killed Maude's plant.
- *Disturbed* is a 2007 thriller and a modern-day 're-working' of the voyeuristic concept where Shia LeBeouf plays a person under house arrest who believes that his neighbour is a serial killer. A lawsuit was levelled at the producers who were accused of infringing copyright on the original Woolrich story. The lawsuit was unsuccessful.
- When compared to many of Hitchcock's other films, *Rear Window* is notable for its economical and streamlined use of locations. Throughout his career Hitchcock created thrillers which had sprawling adventures covering many countries. Often protagonists would be on the run and would travel from country to country trying to clear their name/escape. *Rear Window* however creates mystery and tension by rigidly sticking to one location and one POV. This makes the audience voyeurs but to things that are largely unseen, with the narrative also not revealing all.

## PART 4: STARTING POINTS - Specialist Focus - Genre, Narrative & Context

- The film is a **romance thriller** – a genre very closely associated with Hitchcock, so much so that some films within this genre are often described as 'Hitchcockian'.
- Some commentators describe it as a **mystery** – possibly because of its origins as a short story.
- Might also be categorized as a **detective story** with an amateur sleuth.
- The narrative links the troubled romance of Lisa and Jeff to the murder of Thorwald's wife .
- In the Hitchcockian romance thriller, the threat of violence is felt by the central couple

and it causes them to doubt each other. 'Solving' the crime/removing the threat will usually bring the couple together.

- The narrative has two strands – the identification of an investigation of the murder and the survival or not of Lisa and Jeff's relationship. The two gradually meet.
- The narrative is constrained by time and space. Everything happens between Wednesday morning and Saturday night and it takes place on the same set (though what happens elsewhere can be inferred, i.e. Thorwald's trips, the movements of the police etc.)
- The events/actions are 'narrated' by Jeff – nearly everything is seen from his perspective.
- Some crucial 'clues' are manipulated by the director – we see a woman leave Thorwald's apartment when Jeff is asleep.

## Comparison to *Witness*

- *Witness* (1985), directed by Peter Weir and starring Harrison Ford is typically listed as a thriller/crime/romance film, clearly sharing genres with *Rear Window*.
- As the title suggests, the film, much like *Rear Window*, focuses on a murder to which someone is a witness. In the case of this film, it is an 8 year old boy however.
- Roger Ebert compared the thriller aspect of the film to something which Hitchcock "would have been proud to make". He continues "It is a movie about adults, whose lives have dignity and whose choices matter to them. And it is also one hell of a thriller", something which *Rear Window* could easily be compared with.
- Whilst the key murder in *Witness* differs from

*Rear Window* in that it is seen and it is clear who the killer is, the use of the POV through the toilet stall door shows a direct link with the voyeuristic nature of the Hitchcock thriller.

- Tension is created in the murder scene in *Witness* however through the use of cross cutting, much in the same way as key sequence 2 in *Rear Window*. By cutting between the voyeur and the person looking for the 'spy', tension is created and therefore makes some direct links with how editing is used in *Rear Window*.
- In a similar manner to that of key sequence 1 in *Rear Window*, we as an audience learn about the police and, ultimately who the murderer is, through the use of a 'tour' of the police station as Samuel surveys things around him. Props indicates to him and us not only where he is but also how decorated and successful the police are there, but, as with key sequence 1 in *Rear Window*, a printed information on the wall reveals key information.
- As with several moments in *Rear Window* (including key sequence 3), *Witness* has John Book hiding from others in shadow. As he avoids the corrupt policeman in the grain store, tension is created as he attempts to hide by moving into shadow and cross cutting shows him being hunted.
- The finale of *Witness* features the protagonist, Book, being outnumbered. *Rear Window* is much more streamlined and is one versus one, but throughout the film Jeffries is battling against most of the others in his belief. In both films the male lead is 'fighting' against others to protect what they believe is right and correct.