

Film and Psychoanalysis: Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*.

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Written for a lecture of
"Literature and Psychoanalysis"
(MA degree)

Re-release film poster:



This essay will try to give an overview of two interpretations of *Rear Window*, both of which focus on the gaze and voyeurism of the movie, and both of which can be situated (to a greater or lesser extent) within a psychoanalytic context. Mulvey's interpretation is explicitly inspired by psychoanalysis and feminism, while Žižek's interpretation has to be situated in a Lacanian context and is an attempt to come to terms with the "Hitchcockian Blot" – the uncanny moment in a Hitchcock movie.

The Voyeurism of *Rear Window*.

It is a commonplace to say that *Rear Window* deals with curiosity and the need to pry into the lives of others. Jeff's curiosity begins harmlessly enough, but gradually, this innocent curiosity turns to semi-professional spying. For example, he starts to use a photographic tele-lens and binoculars from his job as photographer. At this point, it also becomes obvious that being curious is Jeff's job. His nurse Stella and his fiancée Lisa feel very uncomfortable and accuse him of being an immoral voyeur, a Peeping Tom. Moreover, they do not believe his story about Thorwald. Stella calls him a "window shopper", someone who "should have [his] eyes put out with red hot poker." After Lisa starts spying too, she says they are "two of the most frightening ghouls [she has] ever met". The other characters in the movie indeed present Jeff as a typical voyeur:

"The voyeur is presented as a 'diseased', often paranoid, violent individual who violates the norms of everyday life. Films validate these depictions of the voyeur by having persons in power (family members, editors, supervisors, the police) articulate how and why the voyeur is a sick or deviant person and why his or her gaze is inappropriate." (Denzin 1995: 3)

They analyze Jeff's obsessive gaze as inappropriate and immoral. However, very soon they cannot escape becoming Peeping Toms themselves.

Firstly, Jeff's voyeurism gives him an insight in his own future choices with regard to his relation with Lisa. The different windows represent images of Jeff or Lisa or both. The windows are held up as mirrors, and the people inside could become, or already are, their doppelgängers. For example, in Mr and Mrs Thorwald, Jeff sees a man who is stuck with an invalid and nagging wife. In the case of Jeff and Lisa's relationship, Jeff is the invalid, and Lisa is the nagging wife. Indeed, Lisa wants Jeff to commit himself to her through a marriage. Lisa and Jeff are reflected in Miss Lonelyhearts and the lonely composer. Miss Torso displays a similar exhibitionism as Lisa. In the future, they could be the newlyweds, or the sterile childless couple whose only joy in life is their little dog.

Laura Mulvey's psychoanalytic and feminist interpretation.

This analysis of *Rear Window* can be complemented by, for example, Laura Mulvey's interpretation of the traditional Hollywood narrative film. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", an article written in 1973, and

published in *Screen* in 1975, Mulvey adopts a radical critique of contemporary cinematic discourse by using psychoanalytic and feminist discourse to analyse *“the way film reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle.”* (Mulvey 1989: 14) Her article revealed classic Hollywood film as an expression of the patriarchal ideology, basically establishing the woman in an inferior position subjected to the male gaze. An ideal case in point in Laura Mulvey’s analysis is the so-called voyeur’s film – like *Rear Window* – which mostly *“deploys an investigative narrative structure, often presupposing a male hero ‘in search of the truth about an event that has already happened, or is about to come to completion’.”* (Denzin 1995: 8) The action in such a film is usually defined from the male point of view. Moreover, the woman is often the object of investigation (as in most films noir). At the same time, the woman can function as the dangerous femme fatale or as an obedient wife or girlfriend: *“Within this framework, the voyeur’s film [...] probes the secrets of female sexuality and male desire within patterns of submission and dominance”.* (Denzin 1995: 8) Mulvey argues that Hollywood film is profoundly phallogocentric, the woman being the danger, which the man at once desires and denies. Central in Mulvey’s article is the concept of ‘scopophilia’, or the pleasure in looking, which cinema offers. Looking itself becomes a source of pleasure. Scopophilia was originally linked by Freud to the component instincts of sexuality, which he associated with taking other people as objects to be subjected to someone’s controlling gaze. In its most extreme form, the pleasure of looking becomes a perversion *“producing obsessive voyeurs and Peeping Toms whose only sexual satisfaction can come from watching, in an active controlling sense, an objectified other”* (Mulvey 1989: 17). This of course aptly describes Jeff in *Rear Window*. Mulvey also links the experience of watching a film to this, arguing that film often produces a similar kind of separation, and plays on the same voyeuristic fantasies as, for example the child’s. The spectator’s position is, in essence, one of *“repression of their exhibitionism and projection of the repressed desire onto the performer”* (Mulvey 1989: 17). This situation arises by taking the other as object of sexual stimulation. In contrast with this, the pleasure of looking can also be related to Lacan’s mirror stage. Jacques Lacan’s analysis of the mirror stage denotes the constitutive moment when the child recognizes its own image in the mirror and identifies with an image of itself, resulting in the articulation of its subjectivity (which is of course not based on the ‘real’ self, but on an image of the self). Analogous to this is the identification of the ego with the objects or subjects on screen. Contrary to the first scopophilic position, this position arises through narcissism, and is the result of the identification with the image seen (in a mirror/on screen), and is a function of the ego libido.

Screen capture: Jeff looks at Lisa who is on the bed.



In the traditional movie, the woman has been displayed as an (erotic) object for both the other (male) characters within the movie and the (male) spectators in the audience. At the same time, a male/active versus female/passive dichotomy is at work controlling the narrative sequence. The man both holds control of the action, and of the gaze (character and spectator): *“As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence.”* (Mulvey 1989: 20) The importance of the look *“of the spectator in direct scopophilic contact with the female form*

displayed for his enjoyment (connoting male fantasy) and [...] of the spectator fascinated with the image of his like set in an illusion of natural space, and through him gaining control and possession of the woman within the diegesis” becomes obvious (Mulvey 1989: 21). The woman, in this type of movie, becomes *“isolated,*

glamorous, on display, sexualised" – which is how not only Miss Torso is presented in *Rear Window*, but also Lisa.

In this psychoanalytic interpretation, the woman also represents the lack of the phallus and is as such the symbol of the man's castration anxiety: "Ultimately, the meaning of woman is sexual difference, the visually ascertainable absence of the penis, the material evidence on which is based the castration complex essential for the organisation of entrance to the symbolic order and the law of the father." (Mulvey 1989: 21) Voyeurism, which is set to demystify and investigate the object (the woman), is one of the ways to channel that fear. An example of this is Jeff's relationship with Lisa. In the beginning he does not really show any interest in Lisa. He is afraid to commit to her through marriage. Lisa's display of sexuality (a form of exhibitionism accented by her insistence on clothes and jewelry) triggers this sense of fear, the symbol of his castration anxiety, in Jeff, and which he consequently has to try to channel. The female threat has to be eliminated (hence Thorwald's murdering of his wife as Jeff's dream scenario) or neutralized (e.g. by a marriage). Subsequently, Jeff's anxiety for Lisa's sexuality (and exhibitionism) can only diminish when she becomes a part of the world he looks at from his window, when she can be gazed at and controlled like the other objects in his gaze. We can therefore argue that Jeff's submissive gaze at Lisa canalises and neutralises his fear. Lisa only becomes desirable to him (sexually) when she enters the perspective of his window (1).

The woman means a threat for the man, she is the evidence of his castration complex: "*Thus, the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified.*" (Mulvey 1989: 21) The man has two solutions for this: voyeurism or a "*re-enactment of the original trauma*" which has sadistic overtones, or, "*disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish*" (Mulvey: 1989 21). Generally speaking, both solutions can be found in Hitchcock's movies. Mulvey's psychoanalytic and feminist analysis provides an adequate critique of traditional narrative film as similar to the patriarchal ideology: "*women in representation can signify castration, and activate voyeuristic [Rear Window] or fetishistic [Vertigo] mechanisms to circumvent this threat.*" (Mulvey 1989: 25)

Taking this analysis one step further, we see that spectators are, moreover, almost forced to identify with Jeff's male gaze objectifying the woman. However, we should also remark that the female spectatorial look works somewhat different from the male look in this situation. On the one hand, she (the female spectator) is described as a passive exhibitionist. Miss Torso is the extreme representation of this exhibitionism as a character in the movie, but Lisa's accent on clothing is also an element contributing to this exhibitionism. On the other hand, the female spectator is also able to identify with the gaze of the male hero, which turns her look into a masochistic look (as opposed to the male spectatorial look which is sadistic), at which point she turns into an active voyeur rather than a passive exhibitionist.

Laura Mulvey thus explains how identification mechanisms work different for the female and the male spectator. In doing so, she elaborates on the analysis of *Rear Window* as Hitchcock's most self-reflexive movie, which takes the movie as a metaphor for cinema itself.

Screen capture: Thorwald's reflection in Jeff's photo-lens.



This analysis takes Jeff's apartment as the ocular centre from which the action is described. The spectator's view is limited to Jeff's view, since we often see events through the limited vision of his lens. This makes it particularly tempting for the spectator to identify with Jeff, an element of the movie, enhanced by the use of the subjective camera.(2)

The theme of reflexivity, mirror effects and doubles can be worked out on another level. Jeff's specific position in his apartment looking out on the different windows/screens is reminiscent of a viewer in a film theatre. In this self-reflexive analysis, Jeff's double is the spectator in a theatre. Jeff himself admits that he can be looked at by the other

characters in his fictive world: *"Of course, they can do the same thing to me – watch me like a bug under a glass if they want to"*. However, the same holds for the world outside of the fictive world on screen. The spectator, from his safe seat in the theatre gazes at Jeff, the way Jeff gazes at his screens/windows. This self-reflexive meta-narrative moment complicates *Rear Window*. The cinematic apparatus automatically turns the movie spectator into a voyeur gazing at a window or a screen himself. The *"voyeur watches a voyeur gaze"* (Denzin 1995: 3). Jeff is the spectator's double, like the spectator is Jeff's double. However, Jeff's gaze is doubled on yet a third level by the perspective of the director behind the camera. This is, for example, symbolized by Jeff's profession as photographer. But, the spectator is allowed to see only what the director wants him to see. The spectator's vision is thus reduced both by Jeff's lens and by Hitchcock's camera: *"[In Rear Window], a paradigmatic instance of reflexivity, the film performs the metalinguistic dismantling of the structures of scopophilia and identification operative in dominant cinema generally."* (Stam & Pearson 1983: 137)

In a psychoanalytic interpretation, voyeurism generally establishes a separation between the object gazed at, and the source of the 'drive' (the eye) producing this gaze. The voyeur tries consciously to establish a division between object and eye, between the object and the own body. This happens in *Rear Window* as well. There is a clear separation between Jeff and the objects he gazes at. He is not a part of the world in front of him, but sits in his dark room and insists that Stella and Lisa do the same. However, this distance proves to be only illusory and in the course of the movie that distance is progressively broken down. This happens for example when Lisa consciously turns on the light, exposing Jeff to the world outside of his window, or when Thorwald looks out of his window and Jeff tries to hide. Another instance is when Lisa herself steps into the space of the spectacle and Jeff asks in a panic: *"Lisa what are you doing? Come on, get out of there!"*.(3)

In a theatre, the distance between object and eye is normally too remote for the spectator to be aware of his own gaze. Because the images he sees are produced by an absent entity, the spectator usually looks without hindrance. The film voyeur is a stealthy spectator. His viewing pleasure is no more authorised than the viewing "pleasure" of a child in front of the "Ur-scene" in which a similar prohibition is at work. However, on the other hand, even if the kind of voyeurism that takes place in a theatre is as such not authorised, it is certainly an institutionalised form of voyeurism. Film is a legitimised practice of a forbidden gaze. In contrast with the primary voyeurism of the "Ur-scene", going to the movies is a legitimate enterprise. The "Ur-scene" is doubled in the spectator's view, which in turn is doubled in Jeff's gaze. Moreover, Jeff's situation is described as if he is spying through a keyhole sitting in his dark room. Stella, for example, explicitly calls his lens a portable keyhole. Feminist critics like Laura Mulvey argue convincingly how women are often turned into passive objects of the male gaze in Hitchcock's movies, also in *Rear Window*, and how this also affects the spectator's viewing habits.

Slavoj Žižek and the Hitchcockian Blot: The Uncanny.

Slavoj Žižek's interpretation takes Lacan as starting point. This interpretation more explicitly deals with the uncanny moment in a Hitchcock movie, something which Žižek calls the "Hitchcockian Blot". This element is in accordance with the effect, which Lacan would call the *"point de capiton"*: *"a perfectly 'natural' and 'familiar' situation is denatured, becomes 'uncanny', loaded with horror and threatening possibilities"* (Žižek 1991: 88). In the case of *Rear Window*, this element is constituted by the gaze itself, and is most aptly demonstrated by one of the last scenes of the movie. At that point Jeff's gaze is returned by Thorwald, which very much creates a doppelgänger effect, as I will point out. However, before focusing on that last scene, an explanation of Žižek's analysis of what constitutes this *"Hitchcockian Blot"* is in place.

Žižek distinguishes three ways of how an event can be shown on screen, based on the different stages in a person's libidinal economy: oral, anal and phallic. He places Hitchcock in the third category. The 'oral' stage can be compared with the silent slapstick movie, in which a scene is simply shot, the spectators just 'devour' the scenes with their eyes. However, a seemingly direct natural rendering of reality is, already in this oral stage, an illusion. Indeed, we see only fragments within a well-specified frame. Reality has already been manipulated. The 'anal' stage of a movie is introduced by montage. As a result of montage, the illusion of

continuity is lost completely. Montage, e.g. parallel montage, introduces metaphorical meanings. In this type of montage two courses of action are shown alternately, linking the first course of action to the second one in doing so – this is a horizontal process. The ‘phallic’ stage no longer just plays on a horizontal, but also on a vertical level. The threat is not to be placed outside one action sequence, but within, it “*under it, as its repressed underside*” (Žižek 1991: 89). The uncanny aspect of an everyday scene is introduced. For example, suddenly someone sees too much (e.g. at a dinner table), and becomes a ‘man who knows too much’, resulting in a sort of “*surplus knowledge*” which has “*an abyssal effect on the perspective of the host (and ours with it): the action is in a way redoubled in itself, endlessly reflected in itself as in a double mirror play.*” (Žižek 1991: 90) There is a clear link with Freud’s analysis of das Unheimliche. Das Unheimliche, as well, is not something completely unknown, but an anomalous aspect in that which is already known: “*things appear in a totally different light, although they stay the same*” (Žižek 1991: 90).

Analysed within the libidinal economy, desires, visions or hallucinations are internalised or repressed: “What we actually see becomes nothing but a deceptive surface beneath which swarms an undergrowth of perverse and obscene implications, the domain of what is prohibited. The more we find ourselves in total ambiguity, not knowing where ‘reality’ ends and ‘hallucination’ (i.e. desire) begins, the more menacing this domain appears.” (Žižek 1991: 90)

This is what Žižek calls ‘phallic’: the element (in a scene) which does not really fit, something which renders a scene uncanny, the point of anamorphosis:

“The element that, when reviewed straightforwardly, remains a meaningless stain, but which, as soon as we look at the picture from a precisely determined lateral perspective, all of a sudden acquires well-known contours.” (Žižek 1991: 90)

This is exactly how Lacan also defines the phallic signifier.

As I said, the aspect in *Rear Window*, which makes those scenes in a similar way uncanny, is the gaze itself. To exemplify this I refer to one of the last scenes (4), which has a particular accent on the gaze and the eyes. When Thorwald gazes back at Jeff, Jeff is taken out of his voyeuristic passivity very much as if his double looks back at him. At the same time, the spectator who has identified with Jeff is confronted with his own gaze, and is left with the bad taste of embarrassment:

“The shock of our gaze’s intrusion comes when Thorwald, the ‘murderer’, sees Grace Kelly gesturing across the courtyard to Jeff at the wedding ring on her finger. The camera pan shots from Thorwald’s glance at the ring then to his sudden gaze back across the courtyard at Jeffries, whom he sees for the first time. At that point, the gaze is a weapon turned back upon his abuser.” (Orr 1993: 68-69)

Screen capture: Mrs. Thorwald's wedding ring on Lisa's finger



At this point, the separation between voyeur and his object proves an illusion. Jeff is confronted with his own desire, which can be illustrated by the questions Thorwald asks repeatedly: “*Who are you? What do you want from me?*” This is even intensified when Thorwald in return invades Jeff’s privacy, literally, like Jeff has done before by his gazing. When Thorwald storms in, Jeff tries to ‘blind’ him – again to be taken literally – by flashing the light of his camera. Jeff tries to remove the source of the threat, Thorwald’s eyes, which constituted his own crime as well, of course. At the same time, he closes his eyes not to be blinded by the light himself. However, Jeff cannot avoid a direct confrontation with Thorwald: Thorwald pushes Jeff out of his window, the frame of his safe neutral world. This whole scene is

intensified by the fact that it is shot in a wholly ‘unrealistic’ way:

“Where we would expect rapid movement [the repeated flashes of the lightbulb], an intense, swift clash, we get hindered, slowed-down, protracted movement, as if the ‘normal’ rhythm of events had undergone a kind of anamorphic deformation.” (Žižek 1991: 91)

Jeff's initial fascination with Thorwald and his wife, stems, as already indicated from the fact that Thorwald reflects Jeff's own desire. Jeff too aims at evading a sexual relationship. Žižek argues that Jeff transforms his own impotence in his relationship into power through his gaze: "*he regresses to an infantile curiosity*" (Žižek 1991: 92). His window is a fantasy window through which he sees his own possibilities reflected back to him (5). Moreover, after this confrontation with Thorwald, Jeff is ready for marriage, because "he has been confronted by the darkness that Hitchcock sees as underlying – or as surrounding – all human existence: the chaos of our unknown, unrecognised "*Under-nature*" (Wood 1989: 106). In other words, the end is only possible because Jeff has submitted himself to the process which lies at the origin of his voyeurism: "the indulgence of morbid curiosity and the consequences of that indulgence: a process which in itself is a manifestation of his sickness. Only by following it through does progress become possible for him" (Wood 1989: 106).

The solution for Jeff lies in not ignoring his problem, but in coming to terms with it, accepting it. Characteristically, the end does not show Jeff as the ultimate victor, but both his legs are now broken. Moreover, the end scene shows Lisa dressed up in men's:

"Order is restored, within and without – in the microcosm of Jefferies' personality, and in the external world which is on one level an extension or reflection of it; but we are left with the feeling that the sweetness-and-light merely covers up that chaos world that underlies the superficial order." (Wood 1989: 107)

Of course, when she sees that Jeff is not watching, she just picks up her woman's magazine once again. In this way, we can again refer to the 'familiar' aspect within the uncanny. There is still a stain left, an incongruous element, a Hitchcockian blot.

As a final point, I would still like to say that Žižek also mentions the soundtrack of Hitchcock's movies, which can bring out the uncanny, more specifically the background sounds. There are different sounds coming from the different windows in the apartment block and we can always attribute the sound to a particular person. "*All except one, the voice of an unidentified soprano practicing scales and generally emerging just in time to prevent the fulfilment of sexual union between Stewart and Kelly.*" (Žižek 1991: 93) The bearer of this voice is not visible through Jeff's window: "*the voice remains acousmatique and uncannily close to us, as if its origins were within us.*" (Žižek 1991: 93)

Endnotes.

(1) Although this is clearly the overall tendency in the movie, a certain nuance is in place since at several points in the movie both Stella and Lisa have an active gaze as well. Jeff's voyeurism seems to be quite contagious and Lisa and Stella who were very cautious at first, start to gaze at their neighbours too. And, without Lisa's crucial (female) interference, Jeff would not have solved the mystery: it is Lisa who finds Mrs Thorwald's wedding ring.

(2) Note, however, that at several important points in the movie, Jeff's gaze is broken, e.g. in the flashlight scene at the end, cf. infra.

(3) At this particular moment in the lecture this scene from the movie is shown.

(4) At this point in the lecture, another scene from the movie is shown.

(5) Note that the Hitchcockian 'blot', the uncanny moment in his movies, is formally brought out by the typical Hitchcockian tracking shot. Žižek explains this quite thoroughly and links it to Lacan's objet a. However, the scope of this paper forces me to refer to Žižek's book for more information about this (Žižek 1991: 93-106).

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