

## The Exposition of Rear Window



One can always point to the obvious strengths of a great film. What a sensational twist! Look at the way they handled exposition! Subtext! Visual storytelling! Look! Truffaut was right! She wasn't simply showing the wedding ring to Stewart simply because it was the crucial piece of evidence needed to indict Thorwald! She finally PROVED herself to him! That was her PROPOSAL! Wasn't that brilliant?

Studying the strengths of great films always seemed to be a kind of elusive game to me because successful moments in one story does not necessarily equate into successful moments in a different story. You can't live off someone else's successes. You have to use your imagination and create great moments in the context of your own story. I also get kind of fearful about being too knowledgeable about films because I'm afraid I'll borrow too liberally from the past when I should be creating something new we haven't seen before. Failure, on the other hand... failure holds universal truths. Flat characters. Lack of tension. Telling instead of showing. You always learn more from failure than success. You take those failures with you when you sit down to write. Because half the battle of screenwriting is avoiding mistakes, and believe me, there's an infinite field of landmines ahead of you.



However, there's much to be learned from studying the development of great films. When you see how a story began, read the choppy ideas in its infancy stages, and then study the decisions the filmmakers made about the story to make it truly great, that's where you find your lessons. Steven DeRosa has a great chapter on *Rear Window* in his book, Writing with Hitchcock.

Consider this.

*Rear Window* started out as a short story by Cornell Woolrich published in *Dime Detective* in 1942. There was no love story. A man was stuck in his single bedroom with an unscreened bay window and not unlike the film, watched the nameless "rear window dwellers" and suspected a salesman named Thorwald of murdering his invalid wife.

First, the studio had a 13-page treatment written by playwright and director Joshua Logan. To brutally simply things, Logan provided a backbone to the film, although the details were kind of weak. Jeff was a sportswriter who enjoyed playing amateur sleuth when he had the time. He broke his leg by, uhh, slipping down stairs. He had a girlfriend by the name of Trink who was struggling as an actress. He didn't think she'd ever make it, which was the source of their conflict, and he couldn't commit to a relationship. In that pivotal scene where she's caught inside Thorwald's apartment, she "acts" her way out convincing Jeff she's a great actress and thus, they get married.

When Hitch and his new writer, John Michael Hayes, got onboard, they made a number of significant, yet fascinating changes. They wanted to make Jeff's occupation more EXCITING and the reason for his broken leg more DRAMATIC. Thus, they made him a photographer who was wounded in the line of duty. They also wanted a more plausible way for these two characters to meet. So he wasn't just a photographer, but a foreign correspondent who had to do a fashion shoot and that's how they met. I've said that characters come first. But when you have a great concept like *Rear Window*, I see nothing wrong with designing characters that fit perfectly into that concept.



Question – how much dialogue do you think would be required to establish all of this information about Jeff's background, accident, and relationship to his girlfriend? Answer - NONE.

This was all established wordlessly in the opening shot that pans across Jeff's apartment. Here's Miriam from her [film breakdown](#): "The camera comes back inside the apartment to show the thermometer at 90° and Jeff asleep in his wheelchair. The camera runs down his left leg to take in the full cast and then around his apartment to show his smashed camera, the amazing shot that broke both the camera and his leg, and finally his girlfriend on the cover of a magazine: Lisa (played by Grace Kelly), who is both beautiful and smart."

Isn't that amazing? It's debatable to me whether the scene that followed, the conversation Jeff has with his editor, was truly essential to the story. We didn't need it. In any case, this opening sequence really should be the crowning achievement in film on the art of exposition. How many amateurs write master scene headings and then action lines to describe the look of a room when the materials inside the room has very little to do with the story? But here, the visuals were used to convey essential information to the audience.

Here's John Michael:

"So that's how one thing – to break his leg in an interesting way – led to his occupation, and led to something that would get him together with Lisa. That's how it grew. But there was more you could do with it. He had a telescopic lens we could use later with the picture of the flowers going up and down in the garden. He had flashbulbs to fend off the villain. Out of this grew a whole lot of interesting things."

The addition of Stella was a masterful creation on the part of Hayes, because this character was the hard-bitten realist. If she buys this story, even the most cynical viewer in the audience will buy it.



Let's talk about the couple's story. As you know, their different lifestyles became the source of their conflict. She was fascinated with him, and he was naturally interested in her. It was a twist suggested by Hitch that the woman chases after the man for a change. But Jeff figures models are frivolous and there wasn't a chance for him. He's a poor safari guy, and she's wined and dined by wealthy men. And so, over the course of this mystery, it was really about this couple being tested and her proving herself to him in a deeper way. It was certainly deeper than what we encountered in Logan's treatment. This was more than a struggling actress proving her skills to the man she loves. Here, she has to prove that she is much more *as a person* than how he views her, which was a woman only interested in a new dress, lobster dinner, and latest scandal. When she's caught in Thorwald's apartment and wiggles her finger to Stewart to indicate that she had the big piece of incriminating evidence, that is, Mrs. Thorwald's wedding ring, there was ALSO the implication, as Truffaut pointed out, that since she just proved herself to Stewart, this was her proposal to him. The two plots came together so perfectly in that one moment.

Of course, at this moment Stewart realizes how wrong he was, how great she is, how he can't live without her, which was taken out of Hayes' real-life experience with his wife following a car accident. In any case, at that moment of Stewart's revelation about Grace Kelly, the tables are immediately turned, the watcher becomes the watched, and his onetime dream of freeing himself from Kelly even at the prospect of "welcoming trouble," becomes his own real nightmare. It's a story ROOTED IN THE CHARACTERS, who they are, what they do, with obstacles created for them, and a conflict that escalates and gets resolved within the

context of the murder mystery.

There was also a bit of a problem with the disposal of Thorwald's wife, because in an early treatment, Thorwald dumps his wife's head in the newly poured concrete foundation at a construction site. This meant that Grace Kelly would have to follow Thorwald to the location, which we won't see, be in a danger, which we won't see, and then recount this whole adventure in a long-winded piece of verbal exposition. It was far better to have Thorwald bury her head in the garden.



The ending was a bit of a problem in Hayes' first draft, too. Let me quote Derosa from his book: "Thorwald is shot and killed by Coyne, which is consistent with the story and treatment. There is also an attempt to wrap up the stories of the surrounding windows neatly. Stella advises Miss Lonely Hearts, 'Just throw away those pills, honey. If this face could trap a man, yours could get there.' The newlyweds are observed. 'H-a-a-r-r-e-e,' calls the bride in a desirous tone, playing on the audience's expectations of a honeymoon couple. 'Start without me,' calls the young groom, as the camera reveals they have been playing a game of chess. Miss Torso compliments the Songwriter for his lovely tune, and he invites her up to his apartment. Finally, the first draft ends with Coyne, Lisa, and Jeff. Coyne reveals, 'You were right. There was something in that garden. And I just got a signal. It's in Thorwald's icebox now.' Jeff replies dryly, 'That reminds me. Two heads are better than one.'" Ho hum.

Consider how they ended it with another long, single take that mirrored the opening shot. Here's [Miriam](#) again, "The final scene wraps up all the stories with the same kind of pan shot that started the movie. Miss Lonelyheart helps Mr. Songwriter paint his apartment and tells him his music has been an inspiration to her. Mrs. Balcony-sleeper teaches her new puppy to ride down in the basket. And Miss Torso welcomes home her dumpy boyfriend with a hug and a kiss. The first thing he wants is a good meal. Inside Jeff's apartment, we find that the temperature has dropped and that he now has two casts: one on each leg. [The 'new' Lisa is wearing jeans and a cotton shirt] reading a book about life on the road in a foreign land, but when she sees that he's asleep, she sneaks out her fashion magazine."

Posted by Mystery Man at [12:00 AM](#)