

HITCHCOCK'S REAR WINDOW AS A METAPHOR FOR SURVEILLANCE

Prapti Mittal

Visual Ethnographer and Independent Researcher

Sangeeta Mittal

Associate Professor, Maharaja Agrasen College, University of Delhi

A-301, Antriksh Nature Apartment, Sector 52, NOIDA-201301. Uttar Pradesh. India.

The gaze as the critical-theoretical tool for surveillance and spectatorship

ABSTRACT

Rear Window has been one of the most acclaimed and discussed Alfred Hitchcock movies

From voyeurism to the changing dynamics of the film industry at the beginning of the television age to a metaphor for films itself, *Rear Window* has raised numerous questions. This paper looks at *Rear Window* as a metaphor for surveillance and how the film creates an experimental staging of surveillance tactics. The film also compels a look at the different players involved in the surveillance machinery. The paper follows the methodology of contextualising those who are watching and those who are being watched because this sheds light on the motive and moral of the act of voyeurism. The paper discusses the ethics of surveillance discussed in *Rear Window* (or the lack thereof) and the relationship between the stakeholders in the said machinery. As *Rear Window* brings the irreconcilable dilemmas surrounding surveillance to the fore, the paper posits that it indicates the increasing duality and complexity in the information societies of today that mounts on both sides of the window, vision, spatiality and spectacle as the gap closes in on the act of sexual voyeurism and political surveillance, privacy and governance, technology and espionage and freedom and control.

Keywords: Alfred Hitchcock, Rear Window, Surveillance, Voyeurism, Lacanian gaze

INTRODUCTION

**Image 1**

Rear Window has been one of the most acclaimed and discussed Alfred Hitchcock movies. The number of issues it may be thought to represent makes it one of the most intriguing movies in film history. From voyeurism to the changing dynamics of the film industry at the beginning of the television age to a metaphor for films itself, *Rear Window* has raised numerous questions. This paper looks at *Rear Window* as a metaphor for surveillance and how the film creates an experimental staging of surveillance tactics. It is interesting to explore the dilemmas that emerge in the movie about ethics of 'watching' and by extension, of surveillance. The film also compels a look at the different players involved in the surveillance machinery. To do that, the paper follows the methodology of contextualising those who are watching and those who are being watched because this sheds light on the motive and moral legitimacy of the act of voyeurism. While critics like Robert E. Kapsis (1992) have theorised *Rear Window* as a parable for the movie going experience which renders the viewer a passive entity, while others like Robin Wood (2002) and William Hare (2007) argue that the brand of voyeurism that *Rear Window* portrays pushes the viewer into action because of the access to unprecedented information. Using these diverse lines of thought in the context of surveillance, I would like to discuss the ethics of surveillance discussed in *Rear Window* (or the lack thereof) and the relationship between the stakeholders in the said machinery.

The script focuses on the voyeuristic activities of L.B. Jeffries aka Jeff (played by Jimmy Stewart), who is confined to his apartment in Greenwich Village, New York as a result of an accident at his job as an action photographer (or photojournalist). To pass his time during the house arrest, Jeff occupies himself with observing the activities of his neighbours, whose windows face across the common courtyard. One of the members of this community is Miss Torso, a beautiful dance performer, who practices in her apartment and is constantly the center of social life and male attention. Then there is Miss Lonelyhearts, a suicidal single, who plays out dates in her apartments, but is repetitively failing to find love. We see the arrival of a newlywed couple who is madly in love. They shut their blinds and are impervious to Jeff's voyeuristic activities. There is also a frustrated music composer banging on his piano, the sunbathing sculptress and the bungling middle-aged couple with a dog who sleep on the fire escape to find respite from the summer heat wave. And finally, there is the antagonist of the movie, Lars Thorwald, the mysterious salesman, whose nagging, dependent wife's sudden disappearance raises Jeff's imaginative suspicions. He starts his immobile adventure with the help of his binoculars, his photojournalist camera, his nurse Stella (played by Thelma Ritter), and his "too perfect" girlfriend Lisa Fremont (played by Grace Kelly).

POWER OF THE GAZE



Image 2

The movie sensitises the audience to the dangers that are associated with the power of the gaze. Michel Foucault's (1979) idea of panopticon states that the gaze confers certain 'powers' to the supervisor, but he also warns about the turning of the gaze upon the supervisor himself. In the larger framework of surveillance, this helps prevent corruption and preserve order, since no one is immune from the all seeing eye. Robert Stam and Roberta Patterson (2009) talk about the resemblance between *Rear Window* ethics and the era of McCarthyism:

McCarthyism is, after all, the antithesis of neighbourliness; it treats every neighbour as a potential other, alien, spy. It fractures the social community for purposes of control. Jeffries is an anonymous accuser whose suspicions happen to be correct, but the object of his hostile gaze might easily have been innocent. (p.208)

This is the achievement of *Rear Window* that it brings the irreconcilable dilemmas surrounding surveillance to the fore: weighing the crimes prevented or brought to justice against the relentless claustrophobic penetration into privacy of an entire population. Since Jeff is able to bring justice to Mrs. Thorwald, no one questions his intentions and he is celebrated even, but the film leaves us to question the other side of the argument: the grievous repercussions of his vigilantism functioning on suspicion and intuition. What if Mr. Thorwald was innocent and what of the burglary and theft caused in the process of sleuthing, we wonder.

WHO IS WATCHING?

Rear Window dismantles structures of scopophilia that exist in dominant cinema and questions the relationship about the film and the spectator.



Image 3

Jean Douchet has pointed out that the entire movie reflected on the inherent nature of the cinematic experience as Jeff “invents his own cinema (2009, p.19)”. Even though the spectators can shift the onus of responsible or irresponsible voyeurism onto Jeff, they cannot escape their responsibility as viewers of the film. Robert Stam and Roberta Pearson (2009) have argued that “He is the warden, as it were, in a private panopticon. Seated in his central tower, he observes the wards (small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery) in an imaginary prison. (p.203)”. The question ‘Who is watching?’ is an interesting one in the film’s context as inversely, the courtyard dwellers could have seen Jeff’s activities too, as Jeff notes. Moreover, the people living on Jeff’s side of the building, which Chion (1992) calls the “Fourth Side” could have better vantage points to observe the Thorwald household. The fact that it is Jeff who is the protagonist, who carries out the surveillance and who eventually, faces the consequences of his activities is a great revealer on the nature of the institution of surveillance itself. As David Company (2008) points out, for Hitchcock, a photojournalist is above all someone who “looks for a living” and thus represents the socially acceptable form of voyeurism (p.54). Jeffries is exemplary of the race of peeping toms that Stella warns him about in the beginning. His profession as photojournalist monetizes and commercialises voyeurism. Since the beginning of the film, we see how his personal life is next to none, he is restless without his work and sounds miserable about his house arrest. The leisure activity he thus takes on, not surprisingly, replicates his work. He is aware of his well-to-do position in society- he has a respectable job, he

has a “too perfect” girlfriend and he has the right contacts in society. He knows he is smarter than his neighbours, thus allowing him to assume the role of the supervisor in the Panopticon scheme.

Foucault (1975) talks about the development of differential treatment based on an individualised notions of surveillance. “Tell me what you see and what you think it means,” Lisa tells Jeffries and her words evoke the constant dilemma of vision and interpretation, analysis and inference, inherent in the reading of any surveillance feed. Even though the movie is directed from as close to Jeff’s gaze as possible, it does retain elements of evasion that represent the blind spots that can plausibly exist despite round- the- clock surveillance. We watch the courtyard as Jeff sleeps in the beginning, and the slippage of Thorwald from his apartment with the mysterious woman in black in the middle. Similarly, when the dog is murdered, the camera moves from inside Jeff’s home to the courtyard and gives us a sense of space inside the living environment of those being surveilled, or metaphorically, a different perspective on the life of panopticon inmates, other than that of the supervisor. It is not necessarily the most objective gaze, but in our knowledge of Jeff’s gaze, it seems to be one that is liberated of a certain kind of bias.

WHAT/WHO IS BEING WATCHED?

At several points in the film, we come across fleeting moments of association between the voyeurs and the watched. Lisa associates herself with Miss Torso’s gregarious personality, who is nevertheless unhappy with the male attention since she doesn’t love any of those men. Jeff realises that he does not want to end up an old lonely man, when he looks at Thorwald. Since we hear almost none of the neighbours actually speak anything (except the dog owners rant about neighbourliness), our perception of them is based purely on the reflections of Jeff, Lisa and Stella, which inversely, tells us more about their way of thinking than it does of the neighbours. The neighbours of the Greenwich Village in New York provide a wholesome microcosm of life itself- a happy newlywed couple and a marriage that ends in murder, a popular young woman to a socially under-confident woman, two old women to two shapely women in swimsuits- the Hitchcock Village provides for an interesting mix of characters that leaves no box unticked with respect to the diversity of people and human relations in society. This diversity relates to surveillance in two ways. On the one hand, it makes clear that the surveillance mechanism is applicable on all people equally and no one can escape the ubiquitous eye. On the other hand, it

makes us realise the fallibility of those responsible for surveillance because of their own intrinsic interests, which makes them lean on moral legitimacy derived from Hobbesian arguments like authority as savior of essentially self-serving humanity. Assuming we do not know the end of the story and are in speculation about Thorwald's guilt, Lisa's statement about them being ghouls for wishing for murder is a great revealer about the important role that perspective plays in the characterisation of the objects under the gaze.

As a contributor to magazines like *Life* and *Look*, Jeff in the movie becomes a parable for the changes that were occurring in the American media consumption in the 1950s. In criticism of the coming of age of television, Lynn Spigel (1992) notes that the new medium was prophesied to turn men "into passive homebodies", a description that accurately fits to Jeff (p.61). His recent injury turned him into a domestic spectator that watches the 'show' that unfolds in front of him, without any necessity of thinking or doing, much like the culture of television viewership. Jeff transforms his neighbour's lives into a personalised television drama and the neighbours themselves into "realistic movie characters" (Kapsis, 1992, p. 148). Except Miss Torso, who is a natural performer, the others in the courtyard are unconsenting participants in this staged spectacle (Kapsis, 1992, p. 148). As Christian Metz (1982) says, the reason the cinematic experience is rewarding for spectators is because they feel comfortable in knowing "that the object being looked at does not know it is being looked at. (p.55)" Thus, it lifts the burden of involvement and reciprocity from the spectator's shoulder and one can enjoy a movie without needing to reflect on ourselves. The difference between the voyeuristic gratification that Metz talks about vis-a-vis cinema and the surveillance that Jeff indulges in lies in the consent of the human objects being looked at.

WHY DO WE WATCH?

Voyeuristic life that has taken over our lives provides the perfect means to escape the difficult situations of real life, so much so that Jeff prefers looking at the scenes unfolding outside than pay attention to the interlocutors in the same room as him. He would rather watch Miss Torso than talk to the flesh and blood Lisa standing next to him. Through the course of the film, we see that not just Jeff, but Lisa too finds an escape from the constricted society that she is a part of by transforming into the woman that she thinks Jeff would want to marry. By observing the character of Miss Torso, the viewer encounters a dilemma about the nature of voyeurism. Even though the

detective, since the beginning, has detested Jeff's stories of murder and condemns the unnecessary peeping, he is also inclined towards the voyeuristic endeavour when he glances towards Miss Torso (Hare, 2007, 183). This raises the questions- what is peeping and what is policing? Policing is a metaphor for the society that we live in, which refuses to acknowledge the quintessential similarity of prying involved in both voyeurism and detection. While watching a woman in her private domain is naturalised under scopophilic desire, watching for a possible crime is solemnised as professional governmental duty of restraining that very same desire.

As Foucault (1975) tells us,

it does not matter who exercises the power... Similarly it does not matter what motive animates him; the curiosity of the indiscreet, the malice of the child, the thirst for knowledge of a philosopher who wishes to visit this museum of human nature, or the perversity of those who take pleasure in spying and punishing (p.202).

As Foucault argues, the panopticon provides the perfect opportunity to study characteristics that only emerge in a group, in opposition to those that occur when the individual is alone. Thus, surveillance techniques provide the perfect opportunity for anthropological and sociological study, and subsequently for devising methods of social influence and decision making. According to Bentham's idea of the panopticon and absolute surveillance, power is the power to manipulate and control those being surveilled, not the actual action of manipulation and control (Foucault, 1975, p.220) Thus, even though the supervisor in the surveillance system is invisible and cannot ostentatiously showcase his knowledge of other's lives, he or she has the internal satisfaction of having the power to alter people's lives (for the better or the worse). Feeling powerless due to the immobilisation after the accident, the watching gives him a sense of control and power. He starts assuming the role with vociferous resilience, until forced into seeing the other side of the gaze. The nick-naming of the neighbours by Jeff is a case in point of the existential brand of humour that is both wish-fulfilment and a means to provide a sense of adventure amidst a meaningless life that he is living due to his isolation from the real world. In the case of *Rear Window*, we observe insomnia and boredom provide the ideal catalyst to the constant thirst for knowledge and adventure that define Jeff's character. A sense of existentialism causes Jeff to indulge in a constant search for answers in the lives of others, thus feeling like a lone intellectual looking at a bunch of foolish mortals from the outside. His permanently

mobile and lonely lifestyle as a photojournalist leaves him with no engagement with family and community life, as showcased by his hesitance to marry Lisa. This opportunity to vicariously experience family and community life from within his comfort zone without actually engaging with it makes him provides him the real motivation to watch.

WOULD WE LIKE TO BE WATCHED BACK?

Towards the latter half of the movie, we see the transformation of Jeff from the subject of the gaze to the object of the gaze.



Image 4

As Jeff starts getting engulfed in the daily lives of the community, the illusion of voyeuristic distance begins to shatter. The distanced voyeurism initially provides him a pastime to vile away his time as well as a sense of

superiority. But this comfort and superiority soon comes under attack. Lisa tries to keep Jeff from being a mere spectator by switching on the lights, thereby jeopardising the espionage on Thorwald. Jeff tells Lisa, “Of course they can do the same thing to me. Watch me like a bug under a glass, if they want to.” However, his reaction when Thorwald comes to the window the morning after and looks around is one of panic and he wheels back into safe distance. From this point in the film, the gaze progressively turns to the point that Jeff becomes the bug under the glass. When Lisa steps out of Jeff’s apartment (the supervisor’s side) to Thorwald’s apartment (the scene of the spectacle), we see for the first time, the spilling of Jeff’s personal life onto the stage of performance. At the moment when Thorwald enters his apartment with Lisa still inside, we reach the epitome of Hitchcockian suspense. We are face to face with Jeff’s powerlessness, ourselves also feeling helpless about our inability to intervene. Right after this scene, there are two moments that mark Jeff being touched by surveillance (or the gaze) for the first time: one, when he is metaphorically touched by Thorwald’s gaze and two, when Thorwald enters Jeff’s apartment and tries to strangle him. At this moment, both men, Jeff and Thorwald have been proven guilty by each other and to each other. In a split second of drama, all the judgements that had been passed on Thorwald through the course of the film (“That’s no ordinary look. That’s the kind of look a man gives when he’s afraid someone might be watching him.”) are applied back to him since spying into other people’s business is a punishable offence after all. The safe distance of the surveillor has come to invade him.

CONCLUSION

Foucault argues that there are two forms of social control which utilise surveillance, one that he calls ‘Discipline Blockade’ and the other ‘Discipline Mechanism’. The former aims to regulate society through surveillance only to prevent the negative (“arresting evil, breaking communications, suspending time.”) while the latter aims to reform society and make it more efficient by “subtle coercion for a society to come” (Foucault, 1975, p.209). In the beginning of *Rear Window*, when Stella warns about the punishment for peeping as red hot poker in the eyes, she is referring to the lawful ‘discipline blockade’ system, but the statement’s inability to convince Jeff to stop peeping highlights the nature of surveillance in our society today, especially in the digital age. Today there is largely no privacy as we realise that our lives are being constantly scrutinised- by friends, strangers and authorities alike on different platforms. This gaze shapes the way we conduct ourselves, portray ourselves and increasingly

give no notice to the omnipresent eye. The great achievement of *Rear Window* is its capacity to leave the viewer question the integrity of each of the characters, and consequently of humankind, as we grapple with the pleasure as well as ethics of voyeurism and surveillance. We can celebrate Jeff's actions or condemn him, but only by virtue of indulging as spectators in the same action that he is performing- that is voyeurism. Thus, *Rear Window* does not seek to answer the questions of power and principles of voyeurism and surveillance, but seeks to indicate the increasing duality and complexity that mounts on both sides of the window, vision, spatiality and spectacle as the gap closes in on the act of sexual voyeurism and political surveillance, privacy and governance, technology and espionage and freedom and control.

FILM INFORMATION

REAR WINDOW (Paramount, 1954). Producer: Alfred Hitchcock, Assistant Director: Herbert Coleman, Script: John Michael Hayes, from the story by William Irish (pseud. of Cornell Woolrich), Photography: Robert Burks (Technicolor), Editor: George Tomasini, Sets: Hal Pereira, Joseph MacMillan Johnson, Sam Comer, Ray Mayer, Music: Franz Waxman, Costumes: Edith Head, Players: James Stewart (L.B. Jeffries), Grace Kelly (Lisa Fremont), Wendell Corey (Tom Doyle), Thelma Ritter (Stella), Raymond Burr (Lars Thorwald). 112 minutes.

IMAGES CREDIT

Hitchcock, A. (1954). *Rear Window* [Screenshot by Author]. Amazon Prime Video.

<https://www.amazon.com/Rear-Window-James-Stewart/dp/B002RSOTSM>

Bibliography

1. Company, David. (2008). Re-Viewing *Rear Window*. In *Aperture*, no. 192, 52-55.
2. Chion, Michael. (1992). The Fourth Side. In Slavoj Zizek (Ed.) *Everything you always wanted to know about Lacan but were afraid to ask Hitchcock*. Verso, 155-160.
3. Deutelbaum, Marshall and Leland A. Poague (Ed.). (2009). *A Hitchcock Reader*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
4. Deutelbaum and Leland A. Poague, 2nd ed. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 208.

5. Foucault, Michel, and Alan Sheridan. (2012). *Discipline and punish*. New York: Vintage.
https://monoskop.org/images/4/43/Foucault_Michel_Discipline_and_Punish_The_Birth_of_the_Prison_1977_1995.pdf
6. Gottlieb, S. (Ed.). (1995). *Hitchcock on Hitchcock, Volume 1: Selected writings and interviews*. University of California Press. Retrieved May 12, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt13x1hpm>
7. Hare, William. (2007). *Hitchcock and the methods of suspense*. McFarland.
8. Kapsis, Robert E. (1992). *Hitchcock: The Making of a Reputation*. University of Chicago Press.
9. Manlove, Clifford T. (2007). Visual drive and cinematic narrative: Reading gaze theory in Lacan, Hitchcock, and Mulvey. In *Cinema Journal* 46, no. 3 (2007): 83-108.
10. Metz, Christian. (2000). *The Imaginary Signifier* (1st ed.). Indiana Univ. Press.
11. Rothman, William. (1982). Hitchcock: The Murderous Gaze. In *Harvard Film Studies*. Harvard University Press.
12. Spigel, Lynn. (1992). *Make room for TV: Television and the family ideal in postwar America*. University of Chicago Press.
13. Stam, Robert and Roberta Patterson. (2009). Reflexivity and the Critique of Voyeurism. In Marshall Deutelbaum and Leland A. Poague (Eds.) *A Hitchcock Reader*. Wiley-Blackwell.
14. Toles, George E. (1989). Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* as Critical Allegory. In *Boundary 2* 16, no. 2/3, 25-45.
15. Wood, Robin. (2002). *Hitchcock's Films Revisited* (Rev. ed.). Columbia University Press.
16. Žižek, Slavoj. (1992). *Everything you always wanted to know about Lacan but were afraid to ask Hitchcock*. London: Verso.