



Rear Window Study Guide

Alfred Hitchcock, 1954, USA, 112 mins

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REAR WINDOW STUDY GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

Rear Window is a classic film and is often quoted and referenced in other screen texts.¹ This is not just because it is so witty and well-made, but because it is the definitive film about the experience of watching. *Rear Window* asks viewers to consider how they engage with film narratives and how their ideas and values align with those presented in the narrative.

It is a real advantage when you study *Rear Window* to have the opportunity to watch it on a big screen, in a darkened cinema, as part of an audience. This may not be possible, so try to maximise your viewing experience by watching it all the way through in a darkened room and without distractions. Give yourself up to the journey that it takes you on.

The director of *Rear Window*, Alfred Hitchcock, is a renowned filmmaker and is known as the master of suspense. Keep this in mind when you are watching the film as well as when you are building your interpretation. Keep in mind that suspense is about how the audience feels and responds to the events taking place in the narrative. One of the reasons Hitchcock was such a popular filmmaker is that he had an expert understanding of how to shoot and edit a film to draw viewers into the story and elicit a particular set of responses from them. Along with the suspense, Hitchcock uses comedy to draw viewers into the story.

The interweaving of comedy and suspense gives the narrative a rhythm: suspense is about keeping viewers on the edge of their seats, while the comedy (delivered through dialogue and visual jokes) adds a lot of fun along the way. And sometimes the two elements come together, such as the moment when Thorwald looks straight down the camera lens. This gives viewers a fright because of the suspense that has been built up around Jeff's investigation of Thorwald's crime, but the initial gasp often turns into a laugh as viewers realise Jeff has finally been caught out.

AFTER VIEWING

It is always a good idea after watching a film to reflect on your response to the film and think about what led to that response.

- Give yourself a ten-minute time limit and write down everything you can remember about your responses while watching, the elements that particularly stood out, the ideas generated.

¹ For instance, you won't be surprised it has been referenced in [The Simpsons](#)

- Make a list of the characters and write a couple of sentences to describe them. (You can check [IMDB](#) if you need a reminder about character names.)
- Try to remember details about the world of the film. Provide a description from memory of the interior of each apartment and of the backyards.
- Think about what we don't know at the beginning but know by the end of the film.
- Think about all that is left unresolved or explained at the film's conclusion.
- If you want to start tackling the themes and ideas, check out [this short introduction](#).

The next time you watch the film repeat this process, but this time think about all the new things you notice, including how differently you view Jeff, as well as the community he watches. (It is essential you watch the film a second time, at the very least, if you want to be able to understand how the narrative is constructed.)

SOME BACKGROUND

Alfred Hitchcock

Alfred Hitchcock is celebrated as an auteur. This means that his films revealed a strong and individual creative vision. Considered for much of his career by his English-speaking audience as a popular entertainer and a craftsman, his gradual elevation as a creative artist began in France with director Francois Truffaut becoming one of his greatest fans. French critics admired Hitchcock for being able to create such a distinctive and individual body of work despite working within the Hollywood studio system. Hitchcock's reputation is one of the world's most renowned filmmakers is now well-established, with *Rear Window*, *Vertigo*, *Psycho* and *North by Northwest* often included in lists of [the best films ever made](#).

He was prolific, beginning his career in Britain during the silent movie era, achieving success there and then moving to Hollywood. You can see the influence of silent cinema in *Rear Window* with the use of exaggerated gestures and expressions, the fact that Jeff (and the audience) see much more than they hear and in the expressive use of light to communicate mood and atmosphere.

A significant quality of Hitchcock's filmmaking and attitude to the role and purpose of cinema relates to the way he foregrounded and orchestrated the responses of the audience as they engage with the narrative. He stood out for the meticulous care with which he planned and designed the visual language of his films. For instance, he was one of the very few filmmakers of the period who carefully plotted the visual elements of his narrative through sketches and storyboards. He commented that his work was so meticulously planned and imagined prior to filming that he found the actual filming a bit tedious. Hitchcock's incredible

attention to detail is very much in evidence in *Rear Window* with the careful design of the shots, the light and the mise-en-scène being a significant element of a project that left nothing to chance.

Because Hitchcock is such an interesting and beloved filmmaker, you will find an enormous amount of criticism and commentary online about his filmmaking in general and *Rear Window* in particular. Some of this is great and some of it misguided. It is always interesting to explore and consider new ideas, but make sure that you think carefully about other people's comments and test them with reference to the film.² This also applies to your own interpretation. Make sure that what you are writing about *Rear Window* can be supported with evidence from the text.

Explore further

You can get a quick intro to Hitchcock's work and signature style in [this short video](#).

- As well as elements that relate to *Rear Window*, note those elements that are not part of the *Rear Window* narrative.
- Consider what their absence reveals, particularly about the claustrophobic nature of the *Rear Window* narrative.

Hitchcock LOVED discussing the concepts and planning that underpinned his filmmaking and unique approach to suspense. Check out each of these quotes and apply them to your experience of watching *Rear Window*:

- The difference between mystery and suspense
- *“There’s a great confusion between the words ‘mystery’ and ‘suspense’ — and the two things are actually miles apart. You see, mystery is an intellectual process, like in a whodunnit. But suspense is essentially an emotional process. Therefore, you can only get the suspense element going by giving the audience information.”*
- The ‘bomb under the table’ analogy
- *“Four people are sitting around a table, talking about baseball or whatever you’d like. Five minutes of it. Very dull. Suddenly a bomb goes off. Blows the people to smithereens. What does the audience have? Ten seconds of shock. Now, take the same scene and tell the audience there is a bomb under that table and [it] will go off in five minutes. Well, the whole emotion of the audience is totally different, because you’ve given them that information.”*

² Jason Fraley's blog post on the *Film Spectrum* website is a good summary but be aware that he mistakenly identifies the woman in the negative and on the cover of the magazine as Lisa – it isn't. He also misspells diegetic!
<https://thefilmspectrum.com/?p=241>

If you are looking for something a bit meatier, you can access online a pdf of the introduction of an excellent collection of essays about *Rear Window* published by Cambridge University Press. John Belton, "Introduction: Spectacle and Narrative", *Alfred Hitchcock's Rear Window*, CUP, Cambridge 2000 <http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/samples/cam032/99012160.pdf>

- Leave the shock and horror to the audience's own imagination
- *"There is one difference between what I prefer to make and very often what you see. And that is to convey, visually, certain elements in storytelling that transfer itself to the mind of the audience. Whereas other films make visual statements so that the audience becomes a spectator... that's why you see a lot of blood on the screen. There's no subtlety about it because you present it to the audience in the visual form, and that's it. Whereas I prefer to suggest something and let the audience figure it out."*³

James Stewart

James Stewart, who plays L. B. Jefferies the protagonist of *Rear Window*, was a beloved Hollywood leading man. He typically played sensitive, sympathetic heroes, albeit instilling them with nuance and complexity. Audiences watching *Rear Window* in 1954 would have found Stewart's portrayal of Jeff very different from previous characters he had played. He was also known for his distinguished service in the air force during WWII.

Grace Kelly

Known for her cool elegance and beauty, Grace Kelly was playing against type in her portrayal of Lisa as a sexually assertive career woman. Kelly's performance reveals that refinement and passion can co-exist in a character. Lisa was chic *and* driven by physical desire, and offered audiences of the period a new and more complex type of female character and a new and more complex approach to female sexuality.

Thelma Ritter

It is hard to imagine the role of Stella being played by someone other than Thelma Ritter, who typically played characters who are sardonic, observant and shrewd. Stella is an integral character in *Rear Window*, and she initially presents as the wisecracking voice of reason, but she is gradually drawn into Jeff's obsession. It could be argued that Stella represents the film viewer, who also becomes caught up in the mystery that Jeff is investigating.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT: POST-WAR USA

Although *Rear Window* highlights Jeff's claustrophobic isolation in his room and the constrained parameters of the world that he engages with, in many subtle ways it references the complex, multifaceted and evolving nature of American society at this time. This is post-war America; it is less than a decade since this period defined by loss of life and social upheaval came to an end.

The position of women and the family

³ I have taken these great quotes from thescriptlab
<https://thescriptlab.com/features/screenwriting-101/9806-3-writing-lessons-on-suspense-from-alfred-hitchcock/>

During wartime, women were encouraged to fill vacancies in manufacturing, agricultural, transport and other essential services. When servicemen, who were predominantly men, returned from combat, they wanted their jobs back. While many women remained in work, the normative family structure was of a nuclear family in which a male head of the family went out to work leaving a wife at home to care for the household. (In today's society we can also see how a way of life can be represented as the norm, even when so many people live quite different lives and share very different values.) The 1950s nuclear family structure reinforced the values of a patriarchal society based on male power and privilege.

In *Rear Window*, we do see an example of what might be described as a conventional nuclear family – child on tricycle, mother sipping coffee and father ready for work. This family is of no interest to Jeff and is balanced by the many different lives lived in the apartments opposite. Nevertheless, when Jeff imagines what marriage might be like, he draws on conventional and clichéd ideas drawn from popular culture: “Can't you just see me, rushing home to a hot apartment to listen to the automatic laundry and the electric dishwasher and the garbage disposal and the nagging wife?” Unlike many of his fellow servicemen, including Tom Doyle, Jeff has avoided marriage and domesticity. Instead, he describes his life as one of constant travel and is fearful of being ‘tied down’ by marriage to Lisa.

Viewers are unlikely to be convinced that this is what marriage with Lisa would be like. Indeed, Lisa is defined by her work; and the role she plays in *Rear Window* is integrated with the rhythms of the working week. We know that she can only come to Jeff's place in the evening after work but can sleep over on Friday and spend the day sleuthing on Saturday. Even at the end of the film, when she is pretending to adapt to Jeff's lifestyle, she returns to her work context by reading *Harper's Bazaar*.

An apartment in the city versus a house in suburbia

The post-war era was a time when conformity and social cohesion were valued as a common good in a society rebuilding itself after the upheaval of war. There was a rapid rise in childbirth – known as the baby boom – and many families chose to move out of the city to the suburbs where large housing estates made home ownership more affordable.

Rear Window is set in a part of New York called Greenwich Village. It is expensive now but in the 1950s, it was a cheap area that attracted a lot of artists. We see this with Miss Torso, the Sculptress and the Composer. The ramshackle collection of apartments that make up Jeff's Greenwich village neighbourhood is everything the suburbs are not, with diverse people and households living close together. The opening of the film introduces city life as vibrant and interconnected while also highlighting the individuality of each household. While Jeff is stuck inside his apartment, apartment life is represented as outward facing unlike the enclosed private space of the suburban home. Jeff's surveillance of the neighbourhood involves a kind of misreading of the community he is living in – the figure of the peeping Tom is much more aligned to the private and enclosed homes of the suburbs. In the *Rear Window* community, people assume they have the freedom to live their lives more visibly, especially as for many of them, their home is also their workspace.

In his essay “Architecture of the Gaze”, Steven Jacobs expands this idea:

Instead of an absolute privacy behind doors and walls, the courtyard is characterized by a conditional or mediated form of privacy, which is based on the knowledge that others can watch but usually do not. It is a delicate social balance based on the collective use of spaces and on implicit rules of conduct between neighbors. Precisely the relative isolation and the lack of interference in the everyday life of others are the attractive elements of big city life. The story of Rear Window is unthinkable in a small town or in suburbia since the balance between individualism and collectivity is completely different in such places.⁴

Masculinity in crisis

With the arrival of Lieutenant Doyle, we learn that Jeff and Doyle flew planes in the war, a fragment of information that provides an important clue about why Jeff might be the way that he is. Many returned servicemen struggled to accommodate themselves to both civilian and domestic life after the war, and Jeff would seem to be in this boat. Domesticity and family life were presented as an ideal during this period but the reality of people’s experience in private could never measure up to the public representation of what life in the home should look like. As mentioned above, women struggled with these expectations but it was the difficulty many men had adapting to family life in the suburbs and coping with the role of breadwinner that was discussed most openly. It is this popular representation of the male perspective that Jeff is referring to in his discussion with his editor. During the 1950s books and articles suggested there was a crisis in masculinity as many men felt their lives had become limited and constrained.

The narrative of *Rear Window* primarily channels this struggle over what it means to be a man through the character of Jeff, but also – at least as seen from Jeff’s perspective – through the other male characters, particularly Thorwald, the Composer and the Newlywed. A lot of the comedy is generated by Jeff’s anxiety about his male identity and his resort to spying on his neighbours to reassure himself that he is still powerful and in control.

Surveillance and the McCarthy Era

Through his surveillance, as well as through his limited perspective, Jeff invokes the mood of suspicion and distrust that circulated in American society at this time. During the period known as the Cold War, people were both fearful of the threat of communism and of the threat of being named as a communist sympathiser. While there is absolutely no reference to these fears in *Rear Window*, viewers of the period would have been very aware of the roaming camera in the opening scene (where the viewers are the ones surveilling the neighbourhood) and the implications of Jeff’s continual spying on his neighbours. When Jeff wakes up and begins the process of watching (while talking to his editor) the appearance of the helicopter and its all-seeing pilot hovering over the apartments foregrounds this theme.

Explore further

- The Khan Academy website provides some very well explained and thoughtful information about this period such as: the threat of Communism, family values

⁴ “Architecture of the Gaze: Jeffries Apartment and Courtyard”, in *Toward a New Interior*, ed. Lois Weinthal, Princeton University Press Princeton NJ, 2011 <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/55854539.pdf>

and the rise of suburbia. Have a look at it and take notes on the connections with *Rear Window*.

- How does finding out more about the historical context of *Rear Window* add to your understanding? Which events and characters does this information shed light on?
- How differently from present-day viewers do you think audiences of the time would have responded to Hitchcock's portrayal of the *Rear Window* community?

THE TEXT

Narrative

Hitchcock used many of the features and elements of the classical Hollywood realist narrative form in making his films. This kind of storytelling was established in the very early days of Hollywood cinema and is one of the reasons Hollywood films became so successful.⁵

Typical features of this style include:

- the three-act structure
 1. opening that sets up the characters and their story
 2. middle based on plot and character development
 3. final act where a resolution is reached.
- Two plot lines: heterosexual romance plus another – in this case, the murder mystery
- events organised through cause and effect
- viewers encouraged to adopt the point of view of a protagonist or main character
- viewers enter the world of the story **as if** it is real
- continuity editing draws viewers into the story
- incorporates a set of familiar camera shots and techniques
- follows established rules around sound and music

For many years, this way of telling a story became so familiar that it was accepted as the natural way to construct a film narrative. Familiar narrative techniques – the ones

⁵ You can check out this short definition here: <http://www.filmreference.com/encyclopedia/Independent-Film-Road-Movies/Narrative-CLASSICAL-REALISM.html>

people are used to and don't even notice -- are called conventions. While this form is associated with Hollywood films made before the 1960s, many films and TV shows continue to use this form of storytelling. Think about times when you have criticised a character's motivations for not being believable – that is an example of you engaging with a narrative **as if** it is real.

While it is a lot of fun losing yourself in the world of a film narrative, this kind of storytelling encourages viewers to be less critical of the worldview, values and ideas being presented. For instance, for many years viewers **expected** the protagonist in a feature film to be a white, heterosexual man. Hollywood films also tended to represent individual achievement as the ultimate good – rather than focusing on collective action or questioning the values around ideas of success and achievement.

What is wonderful about *Rear Window* is how Hitchcock constructs the narrative within this form but employs the conventional techniques in such a way that viewers notice them and think about them. As part of this process, elements that are usually so familiar they are taken for granted, become strange and our attention is drawn to this process of representing society and human interaction. Most daringly, Hitchcock makes viewers reflect on the very process they are engaged in – watching!

As part of this process, Hitchcock makes viewers hyper-aware of:

- adopting Jeff's point of view (particularly through camera and editing)
- the prejudices and limitations of this point of view i.e. Jeff's patriarchal (male-focused) perspective
- the drawbacks of individualism (which values individual freedom over social connection and community)
- the act of 'looking' as a voyeuristic process. Voyeurism relates to the act of looking at others without their knowledge or permission and is a way of asserting power.
- 'rear window ethics' -- which are a critique of looking and watching without human connection and empathy

Explore further

- Take the time to reflect on your response to the film narrative. Think about:
 - the moments when you felt uncomfortable looking
 - how your opinion of various characters changed as the narrative unfolded
 - elements that have dated and why

- If you want to find out more about the development of this way of telling stories on film, you can read the short definition [here](#) (but ignore the paragraphs on D.W. Griffith).

Two intertwined plots

David Bordwell is a renowned film theorist who identified the presence of two plot lines as a narrative convention associated with classical Hollywood films, with “one involving heterosexual romance, the other line involving another sphere—work, war, a mission or quest, other personal relationships, each line will possess a goal, obstacles and a climax.”⁶ In *Rear Window*, the romance and thriller plots are cleverly intertwined one feeding into the other so that, as Jeff gets more and more fearful of Lisa’s desire, he also gets more and more drawn into watching the lives of his neighbours and interpreting what he sees in relation to *his* life. His suspicions in relation to Lars Thorwald and his wife grow as he grapples with his ambivalent feelings for Lisa and his fear of her getting too close.

Once Lisa becomes actively involved in helping Jeff solve the mystery, he allows her to get closer to him while also using her (and Stella) as stand-in detectives. They get close to the source of the mystery, while he stays at a safe distance. When the mystery is solved, the romance is resolved. Lisa and Jeff end up together, but in keeping with Hitchcock’s strategy of alerting the audience to the artificial nature of the narrative style and structure they are so used to, the resolution highlights Jeff’s ‘captivity’ and incapacity.

Explore further

Alfred Hitchcock often expressed an affection for a narrative device that he called a MacGuffin, an object or event that motivates the events of the story but is not itself important. In *Rear Window*, the MacGuffin is Mrs Thorwald’s death – an event that quite shockingly seems to make no impression on anyone. Instead, her death allows the intertwined romance and thriller plots play out until they achieve resolution.

- Find out more about this device in this [helpful blog post](#).

Jeff’s point of view

In 1954 viewers expected film narratives to be told from the point of view of a white, male, heterosexual protagonist and that he would drive the story forward with his actions and deeds.⁷ The characterisation of Jeff disrupts this expectation because of the limitations of his perspective. Rather than taking viewers on an adventure, Jeff is stuck not only in his apartment but in his limited mindset. The audience is trapped with Jeff’s narrow perspective, a perspective that limits understanding of and connection with the rear window community Jeff observes.

⁶ “Classical Hollywood Cinema: Narrative Principles and Procedures”, in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, ed. Philip Rosen, Columbia University Press, New York, 1985, pp.18-19

⁷ There were many famous female stars who had the role of protagonist in a genre of films known as the “woman’s film”. Despite their popularity, these films were considered a subset of mainstream filmmaking.

The audience's captivity within Jeff's perspective means that they not only become complicit with Jeff and his voyeuristic looking but are also made aware of their position as Peeping Toms. Throughout the film a recurring motif is the ethics of looking at and making assumptions about other lives from a distance, an approach that highlights Hitchcock's fascination with the power of cinema and the deep connection it makes to people's deepest fears and desires. This process of looking also highlights the individualism that is such a focus of narrative film within the classical period of Hollywood. Think about how many Hollywood films are about individual achievement, particularly that of an active male protagonist. Jeff, in his self-appointed role as vigilante determined to solve the mystery of the Thorwalds is potentially one of these heroes, but Hitchcock demonstrates to us the disconnection and self-absorption that characterises his point of view.

Viewers not only share Jeff's point of view for most of the film but are also drawn into his **fantasy** that the lives in front of him are being played out for his own entertainment and pleasure – it is as if, for him, the individuals he observes only exist when he is looking at them. A great way to remind yourself about how much influence Jeff has over the version of the neighbourhood presented to viewers through much of the narrative is to compare the view of the world presented when he is awake with what viewers learn about the community in the opening/prologue and the conclusion/epilogue/coda when he is asleep. These framing scenes are significant structural elements. They frame and contain the suspense narrative aligned with Jeff's point of view and present a different and more connected version of the community from the one that he constructs – in fact, he is blind to any sense of community.

Explore further

- In what ways is Jeff a conventional Hollywood protagonist? (To get you started: he is the focus of the leading lady's desire.)
- List the ways that Jeff's characterisation undermines his status as hero of the story.

Voyeurism

As Jeff looks in at the private lives of the people in his neighbourhood, he becomes a voyeur. The pleasure of the voyeur relates to the power of watching someone without them resisting or countering the look by looking back. People become vulnerable and powerless if they don't know they are being observed or if others intrude on areas considered private. Imposing this vulnerability on someone gives the voyeur a sense of dominance and authority.

Jeff's profession as a photographer means that he is "accustomed to nosing into other people's affairs and own[s] an arsenal of professional viewing devices (binoculars, telephoto lens), [that] he eagerly deploys to spy on his neighbors".⁸ Secret and controlling Jeff's

⁸ Jacobs, Steven, "Architecture of the Gaze: Jeffries Apartment & Courtyard." In *Toward a New Interior : an Anthology of Interior Design Theory*, ed. Lois Weinthal, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, NY, 2011, 546–558
<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/55854539.pdf>

voyeurism is linked with anxieties about masculinity and male identity. In Jeff's case, he is compensating for the threat posed to his masculinity by both his confinement to the domestic space because of his injury and his fear of being captured by Lisa and her love. Jeff is not only terrified by her desire for marriage but also by her sexual assertiveness, which undermines his perception of himself as an active and powerful man. This is another way that Hitchcock is making the audience rethink the conventions of the classic Hollywood realist narrative. Jeff is a leading man who is so anxious about the attributes he considers to be part of being a man, viewers begin to question Jeff's perception that male identity is about being powerful and in control.

It is interesting to think about this idea of the voyeur and the power of the gaze when we live in a time when there seems to be nothing but people presenting themselves to be looked at and others delighting in looking. Yet, there is a huge difference between being the unknowing or unwilling focus of someone's attention. Moreover, each of us has a very clear idea of what we consider public and private and can feel violated if someone invades our privacy. Think, for instance, about the difference between deciding to share an image or video online and someone else posting material about us that we consider private or personal.

Viewers of *Rear Window* become voyeurs through their intimate connection with Jeff's perspective and are implicated in his illicit and obsessive fascination with the lives of his neighbours. They become just as fascinated by the Thorwald mystery as Jeff. That this fascination is problematic is made clear when Stella first arrives. To emphasise that Jeff has been caught doing something socially unacceptable, we **hear** her catch him out off camera: "State sentence for a peeping Tom is six months in the workhouse". During this scene Stella maintains her disapproval and catches Jeff out for a second time as he checks out the newlyweds.

Remember too that for the 1950s audience of *Rear Window*, Jeff's voyeurism would also have triggered associations with the culture of surveillance and control which was a significant part of American life during the Cold War. This extra consciousness of the destructive effects of duplicity and deceit would have made Jeff's relentless gaze particularly sordid.

Explore further

While Jeff's voyeuristic gaze controls the viewer's perspective for much of the narrative, this is not how the film begins.

- Take another look at the opening scene.
- Consider and describe how the themes of voyeurism and surveillance are initially introduced.
- Why do you think the film begins this way?

Stella says to Jeff during the first act: "What people ought to do is get outside their own house and look in for a change."

- What does she mean?

- What would Jeff learn by doing this?
- Would you agree that this is a key message of the film?
- How does this comment foreshadow subsequent events?

This is [a terrific summary](#) of the visual language and narrative techniques Hitchcock uses in *Rear Window* to highlight the theme of voyeurism.

- Focus on each element and match it with your own examples taken from the film.

Explore even further

The following info is for those of you who want to dig a bit deeper into the theme of voyeurism (but you absolutely don't have to!)

In a number of his films, Hitchcock demonstrates his fascination with Freudian psychoanalysis. *Rear Window's* exploration of voyeurism foregrounds Freud's notion that the secretive controlling gaze is fuelled by the male fear of castration. Hitchcock even creates a pun in relation to this theory with Jeff in a plaster cast up to his waist to reinforce his panic-stricken response to the threat Lisa poses to his perception of himself as an active and powerful man. Jeff fears Lisa's sexual assertiveness so that when he is in her company, he is constantly looking out of the window as if to reassure himself that he is still whole and intact.

- Watch the scene (and listen to the dialogue) where Lisa is in Jeff's arms trying to inspire some passion in him, while he is captivated by what is going on in the neighbours' apartments and reveals that rather than fantasising about Miss Torso's beauty, he is trying to work out how Thorwald managed to dispose of his wife's body.

Bookending

Note how the closing scene echoes the film's opening. In the conclusion, Jeff is asleep with his back to the window while the life of the neighbourhood goes on around him. He is in the same position as when he is introduced in the opening scene. When the closing scene refers back to the opening scene like this, it is called bookending and the purpose of bookending is to make viewers think about what has or has not changed as a result of the events that have made up the story.

Explore further

- Make a list of what has and has not changed by the conclusion of the narrative.
- Explain what each of these elements reveals.

As well as communicating a (little) bit more about what has happened to Jeff and Lisa, the final scene reveals new details about the lives of the apartment dwellers Jeff has been so fascinated by. In each case, the new information surprises audience expectations.

- How does the conclusion reinforce the limitations of Jeff's perspective?
- Why is it significant that Jeff is asleep while these scenarios play out?

Mise-en-scène

Mise-en-scène is a term that comes from theatre and relates to the “staging of the scene”, it basically means everything that you can see at a particular moment in a film. The term for the actual process of placing actors and objects is the blocking of the scene. It refers to visual elements such as: set, props, costume, actors, colour, lighting and composition (where things and people are placed within the frame and in relation to each other). Mise-en-scène is often used to discuss the overall look or feel of a film or to home in on a scene and what it is being communicated through the visual language. One of the things you might notice about *Rear Window*'s mise-en-scène is that the world is generally represented in subdued earthy tones — unsaturated colours -- highlighting that this is a gritty urban environment. But there are pops of saturated colour -- blue, red and green -- that really stand out within the subdued urban landscape. The colour patterns are a fascinating element of *Rear Window* with links made between: the blue sky, Jeff's blue pyjamas and Thorwald, Doyle and Jeff's blue eyes; Lisa and Miss Lonelyhearts' green outfits and Mrs Thorwald's green bedroom, the red flowers that are so closely associated with Thorwald but that also sit outside Miss Torso's apartment; the woman in black and the black dress Lisa wears the following day.

When exploring mise-en-scène in *Rear Window*, the detail that has gone into the set is something to really think about. Hitchcock's films are very carefully designed, and each element has a purpose. With this in mind, take the time to look carefully at the interior design of each of the apartments, as well as to focus on what they look like from the outside as well. You can learn a great deal about the characters that Jeff watches. Just as Jeff's apartment is filled with information about him, so too are the other characters' apartments. During the first viewing of *Rear Window*, Jeff's blinkered perspective is so dominant, but on a second viewing, viewers have wider information that gives them the ability to question Jeff's dismissal of Mrs Thorwald as a nagging wife – it is very likely she is furious about Thorwald's relationship with the woman in black. And just looking at the Thorwalds' apartment and noticing the care that has gone into its decoration provides a more nuanced vision of their marriage. Their apartment is also distinguished by the pretty red geraniums on the fire escape, while Lars Thorwald tends the flowers in the garden with loving care. Miss Lonelyhearts' apartment is distinguished by the warm shade of pink she has painted her walls communicating her romantic personality as well as the fact that while she may be lonely and unhappy, she has made her home pretty and welcoming. Miss Torso's apartment is a simple studio -- she is a young dancer and clearly not making a lot of money. The only detail that can be seen of the apartment of the couple with the dog is the white porcelain statue of a rearing horse, a clue to a private interior world that will never be revealed, just as the dog owner's pain at her dog's death offers an insight into her humanity that was absent from Jeff's perspective.

As well as the precise detail in the interior and exterior design of the apartments, another noteworthy element of the set design is the lighting configuration. The move between day and night is an important element of the storytelling in *Rear Window* with the mood changing dramatically at night to emphasise Jeff's voyeuristic gaze as he looks into the windows lit up for the 'evening performance'. The lighting design also signals the passing of time, highlighting the gradual building of tension that reaches its peak in the classic/generic night-time scene when Thorwald crosses over to Jeff's apartment. In the final scene, not only is it a brand new day but it is as if the world has been reset, with the temperature dropped to a pleasant 70 degrees (21 degrees Celsius) and the lives of the *Rear Window* community taking on a new shape.

Explore further

Because the visual design of *Rear Window* is so detailed and precise, it can be useful to pause the film at random points and take note of everything you see

- You can begin by simply listing everything you notice and then you can start piecing this information together.
- A strategy that can help with this kind of visual 'detective work' is the visible thinking strategy: '[See Think Wonder](#)'. As you look closely at the details of the scene, ask yourself: What do I see? What do I think about that? What does it make me wonder? Try applying this to particular moments in *Rear Window*.
- How does what you see work on a symbolic level or in terms of metaphor or analogy? For instance, think about the images of captivity and freedom in the opening scene, the fact that the garden Thorwald tends seems more like the garden of a detached home in the suburbs, and the analogy between the broken camera and Jeff's broken body.

When thinking about mise-en-scène in *Rear Window*, take a look at [The Hitchcock Zone](#) which hosts [1000 frames of Rear Window](#).

- If you scroll through the 1000 frames that have been captured from the film, you will get a strong sense of the 'look' of the film, the dominant colour palette, the framing and rhythm of the shots, the use of costume, the sense of time passing and the interplay between Jeff's apartment and the apartments that he watches.

Costume is a significant element of the mise-en-scène in *Rear Window*. Take the time to note what each character wears.

- What does costume tell you about each character?
- How does costume connect or differentiate between characters?
- How is class communicated through costume?
- How does costume highlight themes relating to gender?
- How is costume used to communicate the border between public and private life?

The *Rear Window* set

The set is such a significant part of the *Rear Window* story, it could almost be described as a character, with its own personality and impact. In fact, when planning how he was going to film *Rear Window*, Hitchcock foregrounded the set as the most significant element. It cost a fortune, along with its detailed lighting design, individualised apartments (some fully furnished with running water), elaborate exteriors and intricately landscaped yards. The story is primarily told from inside Jeff's room, and the set is constructed in such a way as to make Jeff's focal point central, supporting the narrative as seen from Jeff's point of view. The set is structured and oriented so that Jeff's apartment has a central position from which Jeff can survey the lives of his neighbours, giving him, for much of the narrative, a position of power – the power of the look. This power is supported by the fact that the camera doesn't 'look back' at Jeff's apartment until the scene where the dog dies.

And it is not until Thorwald throws Jeff from the window of his apartment, that viewers see the apartment as part of a block in the same way as the apartments opposite: “the dominant point of view makes us forget that there may be on Jefferies' side of the block other apartments from which one can see just as well and perhaps even better what goes on in Thorwald's place”.⁹

Because of the way that the camera and the set design support Jeff's powerful point of view, it is almost as if the people in the apartments opposite are prisoners in their cells being guarded and surveilled by Jeff. That Jeff sees himself in these terms is emphasised during his first night-watch when he struggles to stay awake in order not to miss anything. (The joke is that he falls asleep and misses Thorwald's return with the woman in black. In fact, Jeff misses every significant event that takes place in the narrative.)

In the opening, the scene where the dog dies and the conclusion, the camera leaves Jeff's apartment and reveals the connections between the apartments and the apartment inhabitants. However, viewed from Jeff's perspective, the divisions between and within the apartments highlight the fragmentation of the collection of people living within the buildings, as well as their vulnerability as they live their lives as the unknowing focus of both Jeff and the audience's surveillance. Because the separation of each household is emphasised by Jeff's perspective, for much of the film viewers are encouraged to engage with Jeff's **fantasy** that the lives in front of him are being played out for his own entertainment and pleasure. In fact, it has been suggested the windows are like screens that Jeff watches from his position in the apartment opposite. A further take on this idea is that the way Jeff switches his viewing from window to window is like changing TV channels.¹⁰

For Jeff, the people in the apartments opposite only come to life when he is watching them – he imagines they only exist for his entertainment and are part of his story. Yet, as the opening scene emphasises, Jeff is much more a prisoner of his apartment and the rear

⁹ Steven Jacobs, "Architecture of the Gaze: Jeffries Apartment and Courtyard", in *Toward a New Interior*, ed. Lois Weinthal, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 2011 <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/55854539.pdf>

¹⁰ Sue Brower, "Channeling *Rear Window*", *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, Volume 44, Issue 2, pp. 89- 98 <https://people.southwestern.edu/~bednarb/filmstudies/articles/brower.pdf>

window world than anyone. Everyone else, with the exception of Mrs Thorwald, is continually coming and going. For most of the narrative, viewers are trapped in Jeff's apartment with him, but are tantalised by glimpses of the world outside via the limited view of the busy street at the end of the lane, a view that reminds us of the many lives and stories beyond what Jeff sees.

Explore further

- Take note of the glimpses of the world beyond the back area of the apartments.
 - What are some of the activities you notice?
 - Which activities counter and which confirm Jeff's perspective on his community?
- Much has been written about the *Rear Window* set. You can find out further details on various fan sites.
- If you want to think more deeply about the way the set, space and architecture work to draw us into Jeff's point of view, check out [Architecture of the Gaze: Jeffries Apartment and Courtyard](#) by Steven Jacobs. (Just note that Jacobs misspells Jefferies!)
- Compare the representation of the *Rear Window* community as seen from Jeff's point of view with the scenes where viewers are set free from Jeff's controlling gaze (the opening and closing scenes and the scene with the dead dog).
- Note how Jeff's perspective never offers a sense of the community as a whole but views the lives in each of the apartments as if they are disconnected and lived in isolation.

Soundscape

As well as the physical set design, the world of the apartments is created through sound. The sound design is made up of dialogue, music and a range of sound effects. For most of the narrative, Jeff's apartment is at the centre of the soundscape, with the layering of the sounds that come from outside his apartment highlighting the centrality of his perspective. The dominance of his aural perspective is challenged by the dog owner in the scene where she discovers her dog has been killed and, then again, in the films' conclusion.

In films sound can be diegetic or non-diegetic. Diegetic sound comes from the world of the film and can be heard by the characters within the story, whereas non-diegetic sound is not part of the story – viewers can hear it, but the characters can't. The most common form of non-diegetic sound is the musical score and there were very few films made in Hollywood in the 1950s that didn't feature a prominent orchestral score. *Rear Window* is distinctive because, apart from the jazzy intro and a few jaunty notes at the very end, all of the sound AND music is diegetic – it emanates from the world the narrative. This approach to sound

design contributes to the detailed representation of the apartment community as a self-contained world and further supports Jeff's dominant and inward-looking point of view. Yet, as with the glimpses of a wider world through the view at the end of the lane, there are sounds that come from places and spaces beyond Jeff's world; places that can't be seen. For instance, think about the opera singer practising her scales or the blast of the ship's horn. These sounds are a reminder there is much more to life and experience than what is presented to through Jeff's perspective.

Explore further

To become more aware of the role of sound in a film, it can be useful to watch significant scenes with the sound off and note down what is lost through this – not so much dialogue but other elements of the sound design.

- After doing this listen to the same scene and note what:
 - you learn about the sound design
 - the relationship between what is communicated visually and what is communicated through sound.

When analysing scenes in *Rear Window*, focus on what you hear by using the following prompts:

- Take note of the diegetic and non-diegetic elements of the soundscape.
- Distinguish between the different layers of sound and the different kinds of sound you can hear: music, song lyrics, dialogue, sound effects, ambient (background) sound What is the sound contributing to the story?
- What information is communicated through the sound?
- How does the sound contribute to the mood of the scene?
- What is the impact of the sound on the viewer?
- How does Hitchcock's decision to use diegetic sound and music affect the way the story is told? Consider how this decision:
 - builds mood
 - contributes to the story
 - connects with and extends key themes
 - adds humour and comedy

Diegetic sound that relates to events off-camera is called acousmatic sound.

- What are some of the acousmatic sounds you have noticed in *Rear Window*?

- What is the narrative (purpose of these sounds? (i.e. What/how do they add to the story?)

If you want to get a more detailed consideration of sound in *Rear Window*, read this fascinating article by John Fawell:

[“The sound of loneliness: *Rear Window*’s soundtrack”](#) from *Studies in the Humanities*, Vol. 27, No. 1, June 2000, p. 62.

Cinematography

Along with the orientation of the set, the cinematography supports the illusion that Jeff has the dominant perspective. The events that take place in the rear window world are typically viewed at a distance from inside Jeff’s apartment and many of the shots are from his point of view. This becomes more and more obvious as he starts to pull out zoom lenses and binoculars. The shots that let us look through Jeff’s eyes and see what he is looking at are called point of view (POV) or first-person.¹¹ It is also sometimes called subjective camera, a useful term because it highlights that Jeff is the subject of the look/gaze – in other words, he is the one who is doing the looking. The people he looks at are the objects of his look/gaze -- in Jeff’s case,¹² He **objectifies** them. We become more and more aware of Jeff’s controlling subjective and limited gaze as we increasingly join him in looking at the neighbourhood through the telephoto lens and binoculars. [This scene where he watches Thorwald in his apartment](#) is a good example of how this works.

While Jeff’s voyeuristic perspective is dominant, there are significant points in the narrative where viewers escape Jeff’s controlling gaze:

- the opening/prologue
- Thorwald’s return with the woman in black
- the death of the dog
- the scene with Thorwald
- the conclusion/epilogue/coda

In the case of the opening and the conclusion, the roving camera (attached to a crane) creates connections between the apartments to represent them as part of a community.

The scene where the older couple finds their dog has been killed is constructed out of a different set of shots from the rest of the narrative. The shots signal a change in perspective with the camera moving out of Jeff’s apartment to offer a much more personal and less distanced view of the people in the apartments opposite. Notably, for the first time, a shot that looks in at Jeff’s apartment from outside reminds viewers that Jeff is also

¹¹ [This](#) is an outstanding introduction to the point of view shot.

¹² The term ‘gaze’ is used to refer to the viewer’s perspective and is most often associated with the ‘male gaze’, a visual strategy that objectifies female characters within the narrative. Male protagonists typically represent this perspective for the viewer. In Jeff’s case, viewers are made aware of the process of looking which gives them the potential to critique it.

vulnerable to the gaze of others. One wide shot reveals the whole three sides of the community (but not Jeff's fourth side). There are also some unexpected low angle shots that are not attached to any specific character's subjective point of view. The close-up of Miss Torso's distressed face and the midshot of Miss Lonelyhearts as she gazes up at the couple are also distinctive. The camera forges a connection to these characters and the dog owner that reveals them as three-dimensional human beings, rather than the two-dimensional caricatures the Jeff perceives them to be. The unexpected visual language employed in this scene, particularly the variety of shots, highlights the multiple ways of seeing the world and draws attention to the limitations of Jeff's point of view.

Explore further

Take the time to analyse the visual language used in key scenes in *Rear Window*. Use the following prompts as a guide:

- Pay attention to the variety of camera angles used. Are close-ups used? What is their intended purpose? Take note of any other camera angles that convey meaning.
- What different camera shots are used? How does the focus of a shot affect the audience's perception of the scene? Are there mobile shots (such as panning, tracking, crane shot or dolly shots)? How do these compare with static shots?
- What types of lighting are employed and what is the effect?
- What relationship does the camera create with the various characters?

Don't get too hung up on shot descriptions, but make sure you have the language to describe the narrative and film techniques you need to make your point.

- If you want to brush up on your knowledge of camera shots, there are plenty of guides online such as [this one](#) and, if you want a lot of detail, you can check out [this one](#) which targets filmmakers.

Have a look at this [explanation of the POV shot](#). It offers examples of how it is used in a range of films.

- In this explanation, the writer singles out the striking POV shot in *Rear Window* of Lisa leaning over Jeff when he wakes up. Explain how this shot is incorporated into the scene and what it tells us about Jeff and Lisa's relationship.
- You might like to compare the use of the POV shot in *Rear Window* with how it is used in other examples provided here.

Once Lisa and Stella become complicit with Jeff's investigation into Thorwald, shots from their point of view become part of the visual narrative. There are two ways of interpreting this gradual change:

- Lisa and Stella have been absorbed into Jeff's point of view

- Lisa and Stella "gain control of the investigation and of the camera's look".¹³
- Which of these interpretations fits with your reading of the film?

It is no accident that Jeff's fight with Thorwald takes place in the window so that the neighbours can get a good view of what is happening.

- Why do you think Hitchcock decides to speed up the film as the various neighbours (whom previously Jeff had been watching) rush out to see what is happening?
- What is the effect of this technique?

Editing: the Kuleshov effect

Viewers are trapped within Jeff's perspective through editing, as well as through the use of camera (the cinematography). To achieve this, Hitchcock uses an editing technique known as the Kuleshov effect. This is a technique we are all very familiar with where meaning is created through the juxtaposition of separate shots. (Juxtaposition means placing two contrasting things together for a particular effect.) In *Rear Window*, this kind of editing is central to the inescapable connection that the viewer forms with Jeff and the consequent ability to read what is going on in his mind. Notice in particular how this effect is used in the scenes where Jeff is looking out the window: he looks; viewers see what he is looking at; the camera returns to his face to show his reaction to what he is looking at. (When he looks, we look, and then we look at him looking!)

When Jeff looks out of the window, he interprets or reads what is happening in people's lives as if it relates to his own life, thoughts and feelings. Jeff's facial expressions and responses control viewers' understanding of the various activities taking place in the apartments opposite. There are several significant scenes (discussed later in this resource) where viewers break free from Jeff's perspective but for the most part there is no escape. In fact, *Rear Window* has been described as a "feature length demonstration of the Kuleshov effect".¹⁴

Explore further

Choose a short scene from *Rear Window* and observe the way it is edited.

- How does the editing of the shots contribute to the story being told?
- How does the editing process build an understanding of theme and character? (If you don't think your selection does this, give reasons and consider why not.)

¹³ Elise Lemire, "Voyeurism and the Postwar Crisis of Masculinity", in John Belton (ed.) *Alfred Hitchcock's Rear Window*, CUP, Cambridge, 2000, p. 81.

¹⁴ For more information about the Kuleshov effect, check out [this helpful description](#).

The Male Gaze

The term gaze is used to refer to the viewer's perspective and is most often associated with the male gaze, a visual strategy that objectifies female characters within the narrative. Male protagonists typically **represent** this perspective for the viewer. In Jeff's case, viewers are made aware of the process of looking which gives them the potential to critique it. The term was coined by a theorist called Laura Mulvey in her essay "[Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema](#)". Mulvey contends that the Hollywood realist narrative film was constructed to align the male heterosexual viewer with the camera so he could imagine himself in a position of control and subjectivity: "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female." She argues that the viewer identifies with an active male protagonist through the sadistic perspective of voyeurism or by turning the female figure into an object defined by beauty. According to Mulvey, Lisa is constructed in *Rear Window* "as a passive image of visual perfection" but that, because of his own imposed inactivity, Jeff cannot get far enough away from her to control her through the gaze. Mulvey argues that Lisa's closeness terrifies Jeff (think about the monstrous shadow she casts, before her face is revealed in close-up through a POV shot). Mulvey suggests that Jeff cannot even see Lisa until she has crossed over to the other side of the courtyard and therefore establishes the space required for him to look at and objectify her. It is certainly true that when Lisa and Stella join the world of the neighbours, they each put on a kind of performance for Jeff, gesturing and communicating what is happening in a kind of dumb show, reinforcing that they are participants within his narrative.

Mulvey describes Lisa as a "passive image of visual perfection" but Lisa is far from passive. This is communicated when she is first introduced via a foreboding shadow casts over Jeff's vulnerable body, when she invades his apartment with her tasteful plans for the evening and his life, in assuming the active role in uncovering Thorwald's crime and then, finally, in the conclusion where it is revealed she has achieved what she set out to do. In fact, Lisa's energy and determination contribute to Jeff's anxiety about her becoming a part of his life.

Just as in the close-up shot from below when Lisa is initially introduced, Lisa typically dominates the frame in the scenes between her and Jeff. Often this is because Jeff is in a wheelchair and she is standing but it also relates to her often being placed in the foreground of the shot. When discussing the placement of characters or objects in the frame, we are referring to the composition of the shot. Note in this shot (below), how Lisa's dress pushes Jeff out of the light and to the edge of the shot.

In the film's coda, Jeff's plaster cocoon has expanded to both legs, a confinement that is connected visually with Lisa's own unrestricted and freely reclining body. Her casual outfit and the book she is reading potentially suggest that she has taken on the female role of humouring the narcissistic male. And she picks up *Harper's Bazaar* surreptitiously, making sure Jeff doesn't catch her. Yet, however surreptitious, her glance at the sleeping Jeff places her in a text that is all about the power of looking as the character with the final look.

The concept of the 'male gaze' is useful, whether or not you want to take on the whole gamut of Freudian psychoanalysis. It highlights the focus on how female characters look rather than on **what they do** in Hollywood films of the period and identifies the

representation of the world in narrative films as organised around a dominant masculine point of view. However, Mulvey's observations about the male gaze in *Rear Window* fail to recognise the difference between: incorporating this way of looking seamlessly into a film as if it is the natural way of looking at the world and exposing the voyeuristic gaze as perverse and egocentric through the character of Jeff. There are many ways of reading the representation of male and female characters in *Rear Window*. Hitchcock is actively engaging with and drawing attention to both established film conventions around gender and pressure points around male and female roles within American society at the time.

Explore further

For a concise and accessible explanation of the male gaze, read: Janice Loreck, "Explainer: what does the 'male gaze' mean, and what about a female gaze?" *The Conversation*, January 6, 2016

<https://theconversation.com/explainer-what-does-the-male-gaze-mean-and-what-about-a-female-gaze-52486>

- What does the term male gaze add to your understanding of *Rear Window*?
- How does the representation of Miss Torso connect with the concept of the male gaze?
- What do you make of the fact that while Miss Lonelyhearts is not at all sexualised through Jeff's voyeuristic gaze, she is the one who distracts him from the 'main game'? (He is caught up in his concern for her and misses alerting Lisa to Thorwald's return.)

THEMES

For Hitchcock, the most important consideration was to begin with a great story and then tell it well. He placed great significance on engaging viewers, a concern that connected up with his fascination with suspense and its capacity to make viewers' responses an integral part of the narrative. Nevertheless, As Hitchcock's eventful stories unfold, they revisit and shed new light on themes relating to:

- human nature and psychology
- relationships
- gender roles and identity
- personal and social ethics
- issues within contemporary society

Rear Window is no exception and, as the earlier discussion of the historical and social context attests, the 1950s audience would have recognised and identified with

the social issues and themes explored in the narrative and been fascinated by the psychological insights that accompany the portrayal of contemporary urban society.

The themes of voyeurism and surveillance are of course at the heart of the narrative and refract outwards to take in the process of watching the film and challenging viewers to reflect on their role as 'spectators' sitting in the dark looking in on other lives as they play out within the narrative. The interconnection between voyeurism and the male gaze also draws attention to the issues around gender identity and masculinity driving Jeff's obsessive watching. For 1950s audiences this process would have had a great impact but the issues it raises around the borderline between what is public and private continue to be very real.

In the same way as the themes of voyeurism and surveillance, the exploration of marriage and the single life engages directly with people's lived experience, creating a form of 'cost benefit analysis' where the freedom and opportunities offered by the single life are weighed up against the loneliness and dissatisfaction of the lives lived by, in particular, Miss Lonelyhearts and the Sculptress. The Composer and Miss Torso are seen entertaining visitors, but they too are perceived to be isolated within their apartments and unfulfilled by their socialising. By the same token, the married couples whom Jeff observes have not necessarily reaped the rewards that come with commitment and companionship. The Thorwald's are alone *within* their marriage and the impression at the end of the film is that the newlyweds may well be heading in the same direction. While the dog owners appear to be a contented couple who have found companionship and live their lives in a kind of mutual rhythm, the death of their dog brings home their aloneness within the community.

The theme of community is a profound one in *Rear Window*. Jeff and Lisa are both individualists with no real sense of community or social responsibility. They are each defined by their distance, Lisa because of her Park Avenue privilege and Jeff because of his desire to hide behind his camera and avoid any kind of dependence or responsibility through constant travel. When Jeff looks out at the world beyond his window, he only sees individuals living in their box-like apartments and rather than seeing a world of movement and change as people come and go and live their lives. When the *Rear Window* community is presented in the film's opening, the impression is of a shared rhythm – in fact the brilliant choreography of this scene suggests some form of clockwork mechanism. It is by no means a perfect world, with Thorwald snapping at his nosy neighbour and Miss Torso's music annoying the neighbourhood, but it could be described as functional, operating according to the give and take required when people live together in such close quarters. If you refer back to the discussion about set design, you will remember the observation that the windows that Jeff looks into are like screens. But it is worth reflecting why people, including Thorwald, are willing to live their lives so publicly. The 'cause and effect' answer is that this was a period before air conditioning became a typical feature of private homes and everyone has their windows open. However, the preparedness of the people to live their lives in front of Jeff also draws out the idea of 'rear window' ethics that Jeff briefly wrestles with just before the scene with the dog. By watching his neighbours so intently, Jeff is breaking an unspoken social contract which decrees you allow your neighbours to live their lives without feeling like "a bug under glass".

One of the points that the dog owner makes relates to the meaning of being a neighbour: “Neighbours like each other, Speak to each other, care if anybody lives or dies!” In other words, the human emotions and responses that build connection and make a community liveable – compassion, empathy and kindness. This is so clearly lacking in Jeff’s engagement with his fellow human beings and particularly in his lack of feeling for Anna Thorwald -- something that Lisa points out just prior to the scene with the dog. While there is much critical debate about whether Jeff changes or learns anything as a result of the events that take place in the *Rear Window* narrative, it is notable that he is deeply distressed when he sees Miss Lonelyhearts with the pills and, as a character defined by his inaction, he rushes to phone for help.

In *Rear Window* Hitchcock explores and dramatises a range of themes and ideas and poses knotty questions around human nature, and all of this is channelled through characters with elusive and conflicted motivations. As the narrative unfolds, the ground continually shifts as new questions arise. The narrative is replete with an ambiguity and contradictory possibilities. This is one of the reasons *Rear Window* is such a rich text to interpret but it also means that there will always be an alternative reading to the one that you carefully construct. What is Hitchcock communicating about the value of community, the single and the married life, male and female gender identities, the ethics of looking? For instance, the conclusion to John Fawell’s essay “The sound of loneliness: *Rear Window*’s soundtrack” offers an exquisite reflection on the human themes explored in *Rear Window*, but does this reading tell us as much about Fawell as it does about Hitchcock’s opinion of humanity?

*Despite Hitchcock's reluctance to make statements about the human condition in his films, Rear Window comments movingly on certain universal themes, particularly the loneliness and isolation of humans and the even more particularly a certain kind of modern, American, urban loneliness and isolation. The commentary is particularly eloquent because it rarely resorts to words, but is expressed through acute and poignant observation of the sounds and images of loneliness, and a touching counterpoint of the two.... Hitchcock was less voluble about the gentler aspects of his art but a deep empathy for humanity and a sympathy for its loneliness is evident in Rear Window, less in the film's words than in its sad and quietly echoing sounds.*¹⁵

Explore further

- Respond to each of these prompts with textual evidence from *Rear Window*. Remember to draw on narrative elements (such as sound, camera, editing and mise-en-scène) as well as plot and character.
- How would you describe the view of human nature presented in *Rear Window*?
- How would you describe Jeff’s attitude to the members of his community?
- Describe the representation of gender relations in *Rear Window*.

¹⁵ John Fawell: “The sound of loneliness: *Rear Window*’s soundtrack” from *Studies in the Humanities*, Vol. 27, No. 1, June 2000, p. 62 http://www.jcatalfano.com/uploads/2/0/2/0/20204407/rear_window_sound_article.pdf

- Which *Rear Window* characters would you describe as guilty and which ones as innocent? Explain your answer.
- Does Jeff believe in justice? How is justice viewed in *Rear Window*?
- What does Jeff want from Thorwald?
- What do we learn about community in *Rear Window*?
- What are 'rear window' ethics?
- What does each character's 'rear window' ethics communicate about their humanity?
- What is the purpose of the heartfelt speech from the dog owner after she discovers her dog's body? Describe and explain its impact with reference to narrative techniques as well as character and story.
- How does sound contribute to *Rear Window*'s exploration of loneliness and isolation?
- What different meanings does marriage have in *Rear Window*?
- Can human relationships be understood when viewed from a distance?
- What does Jeff and Lisa's relationship reveal about gender relations during the 1950s?
- How is female sexuality represented in *Rear Window*?
- Discuss the significance of public and private spaces in *Rear Window* and how does the cinematography and editing add to this understanding?
- How does the design of the *Rear Window* set influence the viewer's understanding of the lives lived in the apartments opposite Jeff's apartment?
- What, if anything, does *Rear Window* have to say about social responsibility?

CHARACTERS

Jeff

Jeff's character is so central and integral to the narrative of *Rear Window* virtually any discussion of the film draws out more information about his characterisation. We have already covered Jeff's issues with his masculinity, his narrow point of view and his anxieties about becoming trapped by Lisa. His job as a photographer is based on him travelling to dangerous and faraway places to take photographs that will *connect* the American readers of his magazine to these places and the people who live there. But he himself avoids human connection. Jeff may be prepared to put himself in danger to get close

to his subject, but he uses his camera to come between him and genuine human interaction.

Jeff constantly talks about his action man credentials, as if to prove his powerful manliness to himself as well as to the rest of the world. Yet, Jeff's idea of himself as a man of action is continually revealed as deluded. In fact, Jeff never actually *does* anything but is instead limited to watching and judging those around him. In part this relates to the fact that he has a broken leg, but Hitchcock takes it further so that, for instance, while he begins to open the bottle of wine Lisa has brought with her, the waiter takes it from him and removes the cork. You might have noticed that while Jeff uses his telephoto lens to watch the neighbourhood from a distance and uses the flashbulbs to fend off Thorwald, Jeff never actually takes any photos in the course of the narrative.

You may also be interested in some of the critical commentary around Jeff's obsession with Thorwald and his wife. Some critics argue that it is almost as if Thorwald plays out Jeff's displaced fantasy of getting rid of Lisa because of the threat she poses to his freedom – it is notable how similar Mrs Thorwald looks to Lisa with the same blond hair and slim figure and, when Lisa comes to spend the night, her seductive nightgown is very similar to the one Mrs Thorwald was wearing the night of her murder. On the other hand, this simple analogy gets a bit more complicated if you think about the fact that it is not Lisa who is confined to her apartment, but Jeff and in the end, it is Jeff, like Mrs Thorwald who becomes the victim of Thorwald's violence.

Lisa

Lisa is both a woman with a career as well as a woman of privilege. This gives her more power and authority than any other female character in *Rear Window*. However, within the parameters of the conventional romance narrative, what Lisa has going for her would not make up for what she is missing out on – Jeff's commitment. But in keeping with Hitchcock's approach to other familiar narrative elements, Lisa is never represented as someone who is lacking. Instead, her active and successful public life is placed in contrast to Jeff's confinement to his apartment and obsession with the private world's opposite. When Lisa describes a day of work, it is jam-packed with activities and meetings, with the fact that much of her work involves connecting with others, highlighting that she is an extrovert in contrast to Jeff, who is quite the opposite. Her work also takes priority -- Lisa visits Jeff in her spare time and waits until the weekend to actively engage with the mystery that has captured Jeff's imagination.

Costume plays a large part in expressing how different Jeff and Lisa are and in demonstrating Lisa doesn't belong. Lisa's designer frocks are artfully coordinated while Jeff never changes out of his pyjamas. The power of Lisa's presence and of her taste and privilege are communicated through the invasion of the upmarket New York restaurant 21, and her off-the-cuff dismissal of Jeff's well-worn cigarette case and determination to replace it with her simple – and expensive – choice.

By the same token, Lisa is in many ways very similar to Jeff. She is also committed to having her own way and is just as reluctant to change. Both Lisa and Jeff are self-centred

individualists, used to getting their own way. The implication is that Lisa's interest in Jeff is piqued by the challenge he represents. It is worth taking a look at the discussion they have about her potentially going on the road with Jeff – it is not really a conversation as she refuses to take what he says seriously in the same way as he refuses to contemplate her plans for him to become part of her world. In fact neither of them really listens to the other – and during the first and the second acts, Jeff is also less interested in looking at Lisa than he is looking out his window. As Lisa tries to take control of his life as well as express her desire for him, Jeff reassures himself he is still powerful and in control through his voyeuristic gaze at the neighbours.

When Lisa looks out of the window, she offers her own interpretation of the meaning of what she sees. From her point of view, Lisa perceives Miss Torso as having to manage the unwanted attention of the wolves in her apartment, rather than as the sexualised temptress that Jeff sees. She is also able to identify with the loneliness of Miss Lonelyhearts, and build a connection with Mrs Thorwald. Lisa's curiosity is piqued when she becomes aware that Mrs Thorwald has been separated from her handbag, jewellery and, most disturbing of all, her wedding ring. For Lisa this is evidence that something is wrong, a deduction drawn from her alternative perspective as a woman that marks the point in the narrative when Jeff acknowledges her subjectivity and pays respectful attention to what she has to say. At this point he recognises the value of Lisa's expertise as a woman who knows about other women -- an expertise that he has previously dismissed.

Once Lisa also becomes interested in getting to the bottom of the mystery, she moves into action. While Jeff watches and speculates, Lisa heads out of the apartment to gather more information and, as a result of Lisa's observations based on her understanding of female behaviour, Jeff contacts Doyle, his former army comrade who is now in the police force. At this point, Lisa with some help from Stella takes on the role of heroic protagonist who solves the mystery through action and adventure. Typically, in Hollywood films made in the 1940s and 1950s, the defenceless victim is female, and it is the job of the active male protagonist to rescue her. In *Rear Window*, Jeff becomes the defenceless victim – something that is highlighted by his ineffectual use of the flash bulbs. After his fall, Lisa cradles him in her arms and he tells her how much he admires her for her actions and deeds -- a reversal of the classic Hollywood romance in which the hero proves through his deeds that he deserves the love of the heroine. In this case, the resolution to the romance narrative involves Jeff's acknowledgment of Lisa's adventurous spirit.

The conclusion/epilogue/coda (that harks back to the opening scene) has generated a great deal of critical discussion, as in some ways it is almost a 'choose-your-own-adventure' with viewers having the opportunity to decide how the narrative has actually been resolved. It is apparent that Lisa has changed out of her designer frocks into jeans, shirt and loafers and she is reading a book about the Himalayas. She glances at the sleeping Jeff to make sure he doesn't catch her reading *Harper's Bazaar*. This surreptitious glance suggests a meekness that is out of character for the feisty and determined Lisa. Has Lisa decided to give up her life to fit in with Jeff's? Maybe the excitement of investigating Thorwald has made a life on the road more attractive.

For those with an alternative interpretation, Lisa's casual outfit seems far from convincing. It is very stylish – the carefully turned-up jeans reveal Lisa's slim ankles, her shirt

is silk and the shoes are made from expensive leather. It could be regarded as a costume, rather than a commitment to a life of adventure and hardship. Within this scenario, the book is a prop that is part of her performance. Once Jeff is asleep, she can get back to work -- remember that, for her, *Harper's Bazaar* means business. Moreover, however surreptitious, her glance at the sleeping Jeff positions her in the text as the character with the final look. In a film focusing on the power and significance of the look, this placement of Lisa suggests, according to Elise Lemire, that she "has garnered the power to watch over [the sleeping Jeff]."¹⁶ That Lisa has achieved her goal of getting inside Jeff's life and emerges triumphant is further reinforced when the last word heard in the film is her name, sung as part of the composer's song.

Stella

Stella is at first sight very different from Lisa. She is plain, middle-aged, working class and married. However, from the beginning of the narrative, she champions Lisa's efforts to get Jeff to commit to their relationship. "I've got two words of advice for you: Marry her." Like Lisa, Stella sees marriage as being about physical attraction and desire and not at all about conformity: "When I married Myles, we were both a couple of maladjusted misfits. We are still maladjusted, and we have loved every minute of it." By identifying the capsules Miss Lonelyhearts has laid out by their colour, Stella reveals that she (like Lisa) is good at what she does. What is more, her practical/professional understanding of the human body gives her a greater capacity to envisage the bloody reality of what the dismemberment and disposal of a body might entail. Jeff and Lisa are in turn repulsed by Stella's pragmatic comments about bloody bathtubs and body parts. Like Lisa, Stella works in a job that requires continually moving around and meeting new people. They both share their knowledge and intuition with Jeff who gradually recognises the value of their perspective, and they end up forming a team actively pursuing clues, while Jeff can only watch. When he concedes the women are the ones "taking all the chances", the pair agrees to vote him into the group.

Stella, like Lisa, is gradually drawn into the narrative that Jeff has created around his neighbours. She is initially introduced policing Jeff's voyeurism – catching him out on her first appearance and then again at the end of the scene. (The fact that Jeff, and the viewing audience, hear Stella before seeing her, heightens the impression that Jeff has been 'caught out'.) She makes her disapproval more than clear and correctly predicts the trouble Jeff will bring by looking out the window and seeing things he shouldn't. The irony is that not only does Stella become increasingly implicated in Jeff's point of view, she ends up joining Lisa in actively assisting him in his process of surveillance. Through this trajectory, Stella represents the audience's compromised perspective, as she moves from a morally-driven awareness of the tawdriness of Jeff's voyeurism to keen interest. In fact, the last thing we hear from her is a question – about what was in the hat box – a final reference to and reminder of the physical reality of the murder.

¹⁶ Elise Lemire, "Voyeurism and the Postwar Crisis of Masculinity", in John Belton (ed.) *Alfred Hitchcock's Rear Window*, CUP, Cambridge, 2000, p. 81.

Tom Doyle

Doyle is everything Jeff isn't -- calm, measured, concerned to do everything by the book. The implication is that Doyle is a grown-up aware of the rules and responsibilities of his job. He responds to Jeff's frustrated desire for Thorwald's apartment to be searched by reminding him ("at the risk of sounding stuffy") of Thorwald's Constitutional right to maintain the privacy of his home – a hot topic during this era and a reminder of Jeff's failure to respect private space. Doyle's stance towards Jeff's eager desire to play "amateur sleuth" builds on the representation of Jeff as struggling to maintain a sense of power and control without the authority that comes from his work. Doyle lectures Jeff using reason and the institutional authority of the law, an approach that leaves Jeff appearing irrational and over-emotional and reinforces Jeff's feelings of powerlessness. When it emerges that Doyle and Jeff know each other from their time flying together in the war, the audience is alerted to the different ways that the friends have chosen to live their post-war lives, with Doyle working in an unglamorous job and settling down with a wife and family while Jeff is free to travel the world. Doyle's reference to the part he played in helping Jeff take the photos that won him "a medal, and a good job, and fame, and money" adds a subtext of envy that adds further complexity to this examination of post-war masculinity. As does his fascination with Lisa's overnight bag which reveals a suburban narrowness out of place in the bohemian neighbourhood of Greenwich Village.

Apartment dwellers

Each neighbor is not a random supporting character, but a carefully-chosen representation of a possible future for Jeff.¹⁷

A number of the apartment dwellers have their own narrative arc which reaches a conclusion in the final scene – a scene that highlights the limitations of Jeff's perspective and perception. As with all the important information in the narrative, Jeff misses out on these revelations.

Lars Thorwald

It has been argued that Jeff's fascination with Thorwald relates to his own fears about marriage and having his life restricted by Lisa. At the very least, Jeff has come to believe that he somehow owns the lives that are lived in the apartments opposite, and that they have become part of a narrative that he controls. Because of this belief, it is not so much that Jeff cannot forgive Thorwald for murdering his wife, but that he cannot forgive him for doing it when Jeff wasn't looking.

Within the murder mystery narrative that Jeff constructs, Thorwald is a two-dimensional villain. However, when Thorwald enters Jeff's apartment and asks him: "What do you want from me?", he becomes more than this. He is shown in close-up. Moreover Thorwald's

¹⁷ Jason Fraley, "Rear Window", *The Film Spectrum*, 1 November 2011, <https://thefilmspectrum.com/?p=241>

decision to head over to Jeff's apartment and then throw him out of the window in front of all of the neighbours implies that a similar impulsive reaction led to his wife's murder.

When Jeff spots Thorwald sitting alone in the darkness, the only person in the neighbourhood not to come out to see what is going on, Thorwald's solitariness becomes analogous to the distance that separates Jeff from his fellow human beings and which has given him the detachment to recognise Thorwald's guilt. The interconnection between Jeff and Thorwald that is explicitly played out in the scene where Jeff is talking to his editor about marriage reaches its climax in the moment where Thorwald looks straight back at Jeff. In staring straight at the camera, the character breaks the fourth wall something that film viewers are not typically prepared for and, in this moment, the audience's connection with Jeff's point of view is severed. The reorientation of perspective continues when Thorwald enters Jeff's apartment and a series of point of view shots reveal Thorwald's view of Jeff as each flash bulb is set off. By throwing Jeff into the space between his apartment and the rest of the community, Thorwald turns him into an object to be looked at by others.

Miss Torso

Even more than Lisa, Miss Torso would seem to be the object of the male gaze -- just think about the nickname Jeff has given her. In his eyes, she is defined by her brief clothes and seductive body, and her constant eating reinforces the emphasis on her body. In Jeff's eyes, her dancing and constant movement are a form of private performance, but it could more accurately be viewed as the exercise and rehearsal required for her job. Just as Lisa's gorgeous clothes are an integral part of her profession, Miss Torso's body connects her to the world of work. In contrast to the sexually charged object it becomes when viewed by the voyeur, her continually moving body can be related to her professionalism as a dancer.

In the scene where the dog owner discovers her dog has been killed, Miss Torso is shown in close-up for the first time. Her empathetic response to the dog owner's pain reveals that she is not the caricature Jeff has perceived her to be. Just as Jeff's view of Miss Torso is filtered by his preconceptions and obsessions, Stella, Lisa and Doyle each view her through a lens based on their own experience of the world. When Stella looks at Miss Torso, she imagines her in middle age ("she'll wind up fat, alcoholic and miserable"); Lisa experiences a sense of fellowship seeing her as a beautiful woman fending off unwanted male attention; and Doyle's mesmerised attention implies the allure of forbidden fruit. The joke in the film's conclusion is that the love of her life barely looks at her before heading to the refrigerator.

Miss Lonelyhearts

Miss Lonelyhearts is the character we learn most about and her story is almost fleshed out enough to be described as a subplot: her loneliness is established, followed by an unsuccessful search for love leading to self-destructive despair before salvation is achieved through the beauty of music. Her desire to connect opens her up to pain and unhappiness but also challenges Jeff's desire to remain separate and emotionally disconnected from others. You probably noticed Miss Lonelyhearts shows her emotions on her face, almost as though she is in a silent movie, something that makes her vulnerable and unprotected. She is also the only character who actively reaches out to the dog owners when they discover their dog has been killed. She picks it up and tenderly lays it in the basket. It has been suggested that Jeff's attention and emotions are captured by Miss Lonelyhearts because

she is a woman who appears to need help and protection, restoring him to a position of strength and efficacy. When Jeff has the responsibility of warning Lisa of Thorwald's return, his attention drifts instead to Miss Lonelyhearts' apartment. Her potential overdose distracts him and Stella from the main game and they don't get a chance to warn Lisa of Thorwald's return.

Explore further

Construct your own profile of each main character.

- Identify style of speech, dialogue, tone of voice, actions, body language, gestures and facial expressions. What do costume, setting and props add to this profile?
- How do the characters interact with others?
- What are their major strengths, flaws, weaknesses? What do they value or believe in? What are their motivations?

Focus on the representation of these characters.

- How are they shot? What does this tell us about the role of the character in the story?
- What is the role of editing in establishing the character's place in the narrative?
- How do elements of mise en scene help develop character? Consider set design, costume, composition, props, lighting, the use of colour etc.
- How do sound elements build your understanding of character?

Construct profiles of minor characters -- don't just stop at the ones mentioned above.

- What do you learn about them from Jeff's perspective?
- What other information is available for you to that might help you build a more complex understanding of the character?
- How does the character connect with the rest of the community?
- How does your understanding of the character change as the narrative unfolds?
- Compare what you initially learn about the character when they are first introduced from Jeff's perspective to what you have discovered by the end of the film?
- Focus on representation, asking questions about camera, editing, mise-en-scène and sound.

The *Rear Window* narrative is constructed around patterns of mirroring that make connections between the minor characters and Jeff and Lisa. For example, Lisa's elegant take-away dinner is reflected in Miss Lonelyhearts' solitary meal and the composer's discontentment connects him with Jeff.

- What other examples of this mirroring process have you observed?