

## REAR WINDOW

*Rear Window* is perhaps the first of Hitchcock's films to which the term masterpiece can reasonably be applied; and at the time of writing no copy of the film is available in this country, either for public or private viewing. I mention this unhappy fact by way both of apology and of protest. Apology, because this chapter is necessarily based on three-year-old memory and a few notes scribbled in the cinema: if there are inaccuracies, and if my analysis is here less particularized, the reader's forgiveness is asked, on these grounds.

There seem to be two ways, in general, of looking at *Rear Window*: (a) It constitutes a whole-hearted condemnation of curiosity, prying, voyeurism, *libido sciendi* and *delectatio morosa* (see Rohmer/Chabrol); (b) A corrupt, distasteful film, it shamelessly exploits and encourages curiosity, prying, etc. . . . Neither of these extremes can stand up to a rigorous analysis of the actual film and of the reactions it provokes in the spectator; the fact that the second is much the easier to defend is no doubt what has forced many of the film's admirers into the false position of defending the first. In fact, the morality of the film is far subtler and more profound than either suggests.

The chief objection to the second view is that we are made to feel far too uneasy, in the course of the film, about the morality of prying, to find it really pleasurable: by explicit discussion in the dialogue (Jefferies and Lisa, hence the audience, are "the most frightening ghoul . . . plunged into despair because we find a man *didn't* kill his wife"), by placing Lisa in grave danger, by our discovery that the murderer is as pitiable as monstrous. The chief objection to the first is that the final effects of Jefferies' voyeurism are almost entirely admirable. If he hadn't spied on his neighbors, a murderer would have gone free (and whatever our views on capital punishment, most of us will agree that it is undesir-

able that a man capable of murdering a helpless, if maddening, woman, cutting her up in little bits and distributing them round the country, should retain his liberty), a woman would have committed suicide, [14] and the hero would have remained in the spiritual deadlock he had reached at the beginning of the film. If I say at once that I regard *Rear Window* as the clearest statement in Hitchcock of what I have called the therapeutic theme, it will be guessed that I attach great importance to this last point.

First, however, I want to consider another aspect of the film: that suggested by Paul Meyersberg in *Movie 3* when he described it as Hitchcock's "testament," and expounded in a somewhat different form by Jean Douchet in the last of his series "La Troisième Clé d'Hitchcock" in *Cahiers du Cinéma* (no. 113). Douchet's interpretation of the film roughly equates Jefferies (James Stewart) with the spectator in the cinema, the flats across the court with the screen: what Jefferies sees is a projection of his own desires. The parallel is, up to a point, rewarding. Jefferies is presented as a man who has never come to terms with himself; his lack of self-knowledge and consequent tendency to lapse into compulsive behavior make him an archetypal Hitchcock protagonist. A news photographer, he has frequently courted death; he refuses all commitment, all personal involvement, escaping from responsibilities by pursuing danger and hectic action recklessly. As Lisa (Grace Kelly) says, he is like "a tourist on an endless vacation." Before the film begins, his leg has been smashed and he is restricted to a wheelchair in his apartment: in other words, he is thrown upon himself, all his usual escape routes cut off. Lisa, who wants to marry him, is becoming very pressing. He, consequently, is trying to break with her: whenever the question of marriage crops up, his leg itches under the plaster, he feels an uncontrollable urge to scratch. Stella, his visiting nurse (Thelma Ritter), tries to make him see the dangers of his condition, his need for self-knowledge: "We've become a race of Peeping Toms. People ought to get outside and look in at themselves." Jefferies's only means of escaping from examining his own condition is by spying on other people—the people in the flats across the courtyard. Stella tells him she can "smell trouble right in this apartment . . . Look out of the window, see things you shouldn't see." He is "like a father": in fact, we realize that his gazing gives him a sense of power over those he watches, but without any accompanying responsibility. He tells Stella in reply that "there is

going to be trouble . . . Lisa Freemont": from the first, a clear link is established between his relationship with Lisa and his spying on the neighbors. He watches the occupants of the flats opposite as a means of escape from his problems, just as the average cinemagoer goes to the movies to escape his; but the people he chooses to watch (the element of choice is made clear: Hitchcock shows us one happy, seemingly united family in whom Jefferies shows no interest whatever: Stella calls him a "window-shopper") all in some way reflect his own problems, so that his problems are worked out through his gradually growing involvement with them. This is very much how a Hitchcock film works on the lowest level—the level, that is, of the least aware spectator. Jefferies regards Lisa as an encumbrance, and their relationship as a threat to his freedom, to his irresponsibility; he sees a man opposite plagued with a nagging, invalid wife. He would like to get rid of Lisa; he deduces (rightly, as it turns out, though the deduction involves a considerable amount of guesswork) that the man has murdered his wife and is disposing of the body.

Jefferies himself (the resemblance to the hero of *Strangers on a Train* will be clear) never becomes conscious of the connection between what he sees and his personal life, though what is in effect a substitute for that consciousness is forced on him when the murderer invades his apartment. Connections with the other tenants are less obvious but still demonstrably there. Each apartment offers a variation on the man-woman relationship or the intolerable loneliness resulting from its absence, and only the one contented couple is passed over and forgotten. The sterile couple who have made a dog their chief object of affection; the newlyweds stifling (metaphorically) behind closed shutters; "Miss Lonelyhearts," forever enacting romantic situations: all can be taken as representing possibilities before Jefferies and Lisa. The difficulties of human relationships, the horror that marriage can be and the comparable horror of frustrated singleness, are much stressed; and the fact that Jefferies morbidly concentrates—while preserving an apparent ironic detachment—on failed relationships and failed lives, taken in conjunction with his recklessness with his own life, reveals to us the essential features of his spiritual condition.

All this offers clear parallels with the spectator watching the screen. We tend to select from a film and stress, quite unconsciously, those aspects that are most relevant to us, to our own problems and our own

attitude to life, and ignore or minimize the rest; and we tend to use such identification—again, usually unconsciously—as a means of working out our problems in fantasy form: often, as it proves with Jefferies, a dangerous tendency but sometimes—again, as with Jefferies—a valuable one. There is an obvious point at which the parallel breaks down: Jefferies sees what, within given limits, he chooses to see; the spectator sees what Hitchcock chooses to show him. And this is especially true, it must be emphasized, of a *Hitchcock* film. When watching, let us say, a Preminger movie—*Exodus* or *The Cardinal*—we are left unusually free to select, to reflect upon the action and reach our own decisions; but in late Hitchcock our responses are themselves very carefully controlled and organized. But despite this objection the parallel largely works because we are led from the outset to identify ourselves with Jefferies, to such an extent that the discrepancy between what *he* sees and what *we* see is considerably narrowed: if the whole film is his enactment of a therapeutic experience, it becomes, by extension, a therapeutic experience for the spectator too.

*Rear Window* is Hitchcock's most uncompromising attempt to imprison us, not only within a limited space, but within a single consciousness. From the beginning of the film to the end, we are enclosed in the protagonist's apartment, leaving it only when he leaves it (precipitately, through the window!). With one brief exception (when Jefferies is asleep, we see Thorvald, the murderer, leave his apartment with a woman), we are allowed to see only what he sees, know only what he knows. The exception is very important, in fact: the woman *could* be Mrs. Thorvald, and this brings home to us the fact that Jefferies *could* be wrong: by making the identification of the spectator with Jefferies' consciousness not *quite* complete, Hitchcock enables us to feel just that small amount of uneasiness necessary for us to question the morality of what he is doing—our own morality since we are spying with him, sharing his fascinated, compulsive "Peeping-Tom-ism." I have already hinted at the other limitation on identification: the fact that, in the course of the film, we become more consciously aware of the nature of Jefferies' involvement with what he watches than he is himself. But these points apart, identification is forced on us to an unprecedented extent, and preserved throughout the film, as it is not in *Vertigo* or *Psycho*.

The difficulty of the Lisa-Jefferies relationship lies in the refusal of either to compromise. The lack of any give-and-take makes it essentially

artificial, sterile, incapable of development. Its essence, and its relationship to Jefferies' spying, is given us, with characteristic economy, on Lisa's first entry. We see Jefferies asleep; then a shadow falls over his face: it is Lisa. She bends over him, kisses him tenderly, and he wakes up. Instantly the relationship becomes an act, Lisa is forced into giving a performance: she could be natural only when he was asleep. "Who are you?", Jefferies asks; and at once she moves back from him, then swirls round the room switching on lamps: "Reading from top to bottom: Lisa"—first lamp—"Carol"—second—"Freemont"—third. We watch a woman become a mannequin, or even a magazine illustration: it is all Jefferies can accept. She turns herself into a public performance, a spectacle to be watched from the other side of the footlights. It is a splendid example of the ability of Hitchcock, or a happy conjunction of director and scriptwriter, to find a means of crystallizing a whole situation or relationship or idea in a single image, when he is working at full pressure: the difference between this film and most of *Stage Fright*, or much of the second half of *The Wrong Man*. Soon, over wine, Lisa tries to "sell" Jefferies a new identity ("I could see you looking very handsome and successful in a dark blue suit") which he resolutely rejects. And of course rightly: the issues in Hitchcock are seldom simple. She goes out to fetch the dinner, and Jefferies immediately turns to spy on the neighbors. He sees first Mrs. Thorvald, the nagging, invalid wife, then "Miss Lonelyhearts," the pathetic spinster, welcoming an imaginary guest, pouring out wine for two. Clearly what he is seeing are two grotesquely distorted images of Lisa: two possible Lisa-identities.

What happens in the Thorvald apartment represents, in an extreme and hideous form, the fulfillment of Jefferies' desire to be rid of Lisa. Because of its extremeness, he reacts against it with horror; and his overcoming of Thorvald (the victory is equivocal) corresponds to the casting out (also, therefore, equivocal) of this desire. Two climactic scenes carry particular significance. The first is where Lisa explores Thorvald's flat and is trapped by him: we watch with Jefferies, sharing his sense of anguish and impotence. It is the turning point in their relationship. He comes to respect her for the courage and initiative (virtues he can appreciate) which he didn't know she possessed (and she does it, obviously, to demonstrate these to him, to make him see, not from any abstract desire for justice). But more than that, and simultaneously with it, his desire to be rid of her is abruptly given a form so

direct as to be unacceptable: dream has become nightmare. It is this, as much as his new respect for Lisa's pluck, that brings about a recoil in him, allowing the deeper but suppressed need for a permanent relationship to rise to the surface.

In the second climactic scene, Thorvald bursts into Jefferies' apartment. Because of the relationship established between Jefferies and what he watches, the scene carries overtones of a confrontation with a *doppelgänger*; or of the eruption of a monstrous force from the underworld of the subconscious, demanding recognition. The effect is made more, not less, frightening by the fact that Thorvald is presented, not as a monster, but as a human being, half terrible, half perplexed, and pitiable. If he were merely a monster we could reject him quite comfortably; because our reaction to him is mixed, we have to accept him as representative of potentialities in Jefferies and, by extension, in all of us. In him is adumbrated one of the leading themes of *Psycho*, more clearly here than in any previous Hitchcock film. We watched him, earlier, with Jefferies, through the telephoto objective, washing the axe, wrapping up the saw and carving knife, then lying down to sleep: our common humanity involves us all in his actions, he is not *only* a brutal murderer, but also a man who has to sleep sometimes. We are left to speculate, to feel about, the state of his mind, as we are to be later about the mind of Norman Bates. As he bears down upon Jefferies, a great looming, menacing shadow, Jefferies tries to fight him off with his only weapon of defense—his camera, repeatedly loaded with dazzling flashbulbs—and alternately we are placed in the positions of Jefferies and the murderer, emphasizing his significance as a kind of potential alter ego. The flashbulbs become symbolic: Jefferies' camera is his means of keeping life (which includes his knowledge of himself) at a distance, of remaining a spectator, of preserving his detachment. It takes up the image of Lisa and the lamps. But ultimately it cannot save him: the dazzlement is ineffectual, Thorvald bears down upon him and pushes him headlong over his balcony. Jefferies's victory is, I have said, equivocal: it looks very much like defeat; and with him we hurtle groundward, terrifyingly, helplessly plunging toward darkness.

But the confrontation is in itself a kind of victory: a clarification—on one level the murderer is exposed and caught, on another Jefferies is ready to accept marriage. He has been confronted by the darkness that Hitchcock sees as underlying—or as surrounding—all human existence:

the chaos of our unknown, unrecognized "Under-nature" (a term A. P. Rossiter uses when discussing Shakespeare's tragedies in *Angel with Horns*) which is also the unknownness of the universe. This may strike the reader as an absurdly inflated and pretentious way of talking about a film which is, on the surface, a light comedy thriller; but I think anyone willing to expose himself to the disturbing undercurrents of the film (as a "light comedy thriller" it is often found vaguely unsatisfactory because it "leaves a nasty taste") will find it justified. When we emancipate ourselves from a response exclusively on the "comedy thriller" level, the images—light flashes against the murderer's shadowy bulk—take on great power; moreover, it is impossible not to associate them with Tippi Hedren's struggle to ward off the attacking birds in the attic by waving her torch at them, at the end of *The Birds*, where, whether one likes the film or not, at least a gesture toward metaphysical significance will be allowed. The flashbulbs (and the torch) sum up for us the inadequacy of human knowledge against this "under-nature." The Hitchcock hero typically lives in a small, enclosed world of his own fabrication, at once a protection and a prison, artificial and unrealistic, into which the "real" chaos erupts, demanding to be faced: consider Henry Fonda's descent into Hell in *The Wrong Man*, or Gary Grant deprived of the security of office and cocktail bar in *North by Northwest*.

The ending of *Rear Window* shows us the achievement of an uneasy equilibrium. Jefferies' development has been made possible through his submitting to a process, the indulging of morbid curiosity and the consequences of that indulgence: a process which in itself is a manifestation of his sickness. Only by following it through does progress become possible for him. At the end, with both legs in plaster, he is seated with his back to the window, while Lisa, ostensibly engrossed in a news magazine, surreptitiously reads *Harper's Bazaar*. None of the problems between them has been solved; but the fact of their engagement, and Jefferies' symbolic back-to-window position, tells us that they have been at least in a sense accepted. Parallel to this, and on one level expressing it, is the resolution of the problems of the various tenants opposite: we see "Miss Torso's" true love coming home, "Miss Lonelyhearts" receiving a nice young man, [15] and so on: to cap it all comes the songwriter's new, saccharine-sweet inspiration, "Lisa." The very neatness of all this tying up of loose ends emphasizes its superficiality, and we are left with the feeling of the precariousness of it all. The ending is by no means

permitted to obliterate for us the memory of the woman's denunciation of the "society" the apartments epitomize, when she finds her dog poisoned: "Was it because he liked you?" Nor does the happy ending offset the sense the film, with its stylized presentation of flats and occupants, has established, of semi-live puppets enclosed in little boxes: yet puppets whose frustrations and desperations can drive them to murder or suicide. Order is restored, within and without—in the microcosm of Jefferies' personality, and in the external world which is on one level an extension or reflection of it; but we are left with the feeling that the sweetness-and-light merely covers up that chaos world that underlies the superficial order.