

'rear window' as a
snapshot of its era



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Directed by the master of suspense, Alfred Hitchcock, *Rear Window* is a striking portrayal of the social and political issues facing citizens of the time. Set in Greenwich Village of 1954, *Rear Window* displays a dense apartment block, a microcosm of New York City, where the audience is confined down to the space of one window, seen through the eyes of protagonist, J. B Jefferies. Throughout his film, Hitchcock makes reference to the different gender roles, isolation, privacy and voyeuristic tendencies that are highly present in the post-war society, both inviting and challenging these views through his directorial intent. As the audience comes to learn, these views are displayed by Hitchcock in the film as support of the historical context, as well as a way of defying the behavioural norms of the time period.

Displayed in *Rear Window*, Hitchcock makes reference to the gender roles that are made standard in the 1950s American society. The post-war community of 1954 objectifies women and belittles their abilities in order to make themselves more comfortable with what they have to offer. As shown by Hitchcock, many of the women depicted in the film are materialized by what can only be seen through a glass lens. Lisa is presented as a woman whose career depends heavily on her femininity and ability to be present as 'too perfect' to others. Whereas Ms. Lonelyhearts is shown as a woman who doesn't fit into society well as she is not normalised into a category of either married or divorced. Hitchcock uses Ms. Torso as a way of representing what many men believed women to be in 1950s society. Placed directly across from Jeff's apartment, Hitchcock cleverly displays Ms Torso as someone whom Jeff cannot ignore and must have an opinion about, resulting in him to suggest she is a 'queen bee' with her 'pick of the drones'. Through the

women portrayed in the film as their own externalised image, Hitchcock is able to use these characters as a way of replicating the gender norms of women in the 1954 American society.

As well as gender norms, Hitchcock successfully presents the idea of isolation being mirrored to fit that of the 1950s American society. There is a sense of physical isolation that is shown through the setting of the apartment block in the film. Hitchcock uses the setting as a prison-like confinement where people are in view of each other, with only a small look into the outside world through the alley-way on the side. The inclusion of this allows the viewer to believe that they are part of the apartment complex, inviting them into the situation and suspense. Isolation is also shown through the arrangement of the complex windows by Hitchcock. Although married, Mr and Mrs Thorwald are nearly always seen in separate rooms with separate windows. Hitchcock uses this constant division of people in relationships to array an awareness that some couples are not tightly bonded in marriage. The songwriter is also portrayed as isolated in his apartment despite having multiple parties over the course of the film. With the use of a long shot to show the image from Jeff's perspective, the viewer is able to see that the songwriter is not happy while being surrounded by many people that one might assume are his friends. This suggests again that someone can feel isolated while being in a relationship. Through these, Hitchcock proposes that isolation can be present in many forms, both physically and mentally, in the post-war society.

The idea that privacy is sacred and voyeurism is existent is widely explored through the film. Hitchcock utilises the paranoia of the McCarthy era to

display the non-consensual, 'diseased' watching that takes place constantly in Jeff's apartment, and the disapproval that some characters have towards it. Jeff's profession as a photographer legitimises the voyeurism that takes place, and therefore, can make him feel somewhat invincible that he can't be caught in his act of watching and making 'wild opinions' behind his binoculars. Like in the 50's society, the watching is then disapproved by the inclusion of Thorwald breaking the 4th wall of the film and entering Jeff's apartment. The high camera angle of this scene between Thorwald and Jefferies suggests that their roles of power have been reversed by Hitchcock as Jeff is seen as vulnerable and weak and Thorwald is now superior to him at this moment. The ethics of watching are again specified by Hitchcock in the ending scene where Jeff is left with two broken legs as a result of his actions, leaving his viewers to think if watching others is ultimately worth it. Through this, the viewers are able to see the beliefs on privacy and voyeurism of the 1950s society echoed through the film.

Despite Hitchcock portraying the views of society in his film, he also alludes against them, challenging the beliefs of many. Through the included idealisation of gender roles, Hitchcock also makes reference to challenge these social norms, particularly those of Jeff and Lisa. Jeff is emasculated and powerless as a result of his injury in comparison to Lisa being a strong, financially independent woman. Hitchcock shows this gender imbalance through including Lisa as the dominant frame in the picture, suggesting that not all women are required to be stay at home wives, tending to their partner like the media of 1950 has implied. Hitchcock also challenges the idea that all living must occur in a suburban home, rather than a city.

Through having the film occur in an apartment block in New York with married couples and families living in the complex, Hitchcock breaks the stereotype of the American dream living idea that was highly desired across many Americans during that time. He also challenges what was expected of males during this time. Through the songwriter being trapped with his creativity, Jeff being physically trapped in his cast, and Lars being emotionally trapped in his marriage, Hitchcock suggests that not all men are obligated to be physically and emotionally strong, again refusing to obey the norms of American society. These inclusions allow Hitchcock to challenge what was regularly prescribed as the only way of living in the 1954 community.

Through *Rear Window*, Alfred Hitchcock provides his commentary on what was believed to be requirements of 1950s American society, both enforcing and challenging these ideas throughout his film. Despite supporting some of the evidence of gender norms, isolation, privacy and voyeurism of the time, he also alludes to how these concepts can be defied, including idealistic living and role of men and women in society. These ideas presented by Hitchcock allow him to give his perception in regards to the time period of 1954.