

Realism in "rear window" essay sample

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One of the most crucial elements of *Rear Window*, and a very clever tactic used by Hitchcock, is realism. In other words, most if not all things that happen in this film, and everything that every character feels and emotes, is entirely plausible in real life – perhaps not witnessing a murder, but something equally shocking, such as spousal abuse is entirely possible. Because of this there is at least one thing or person that everybody can identify with, either with Jeff, Lisa, the neighbours, or any of the events that take place over the course of the film (i. e. a date gone bad, a pet run over, love, heartbreak, etc.). However, the audience identifies most with Jefferies, played by Jimmy Stewart. This was achieved through a wealth of POV and reaction shots.

The audience is with Jefferies for the entire film; he persuades us to think what he thinks, and allowing us to see what he sees brings us that much closer to his world; we are enveloped by him. By allowing us to see what Jeff sees and to see how he reacts with what he is seeing, the audience gets a clear understanding of how he feels, and we are led to feel the same way. The theme of voyeurism plays one of the biggest parts in the film, and is the key to having an audience identify with what they see in this film. Because of this voyeurism, we are not only privy to Jefferies' life, but also the lives of his neighbours.

Each of these neighbours has yet another life that we pry into using Jefferies' as our instrument, and each fit into a separate group of people with which any corresponding member of the audience can relate to (i. e. the young

girls can identify with Miss Torso, the single middle-aged women with Miss Lonelyhearts, etc.). Rear Window is a film with a plethora of characters with which the audience can identify with, connecting with either their personalities or their experiences; we ‘play the part’ of all of the main characters, and practically every one of the neighbours in the complex, through the ingenious voyeurism throughout the film.

The voyeurism is apparent even in the first few minutes of the film. As it is revealed, Jefferies is a photographer for a magazine. A photographer is the essence of a voyeur, as in the course of the job it is routine to peer into the life of something, whether it is a plant, an animal, or a person. However, since Jefferies’ boss refuses to let him go back to work, he applies his work to his home-life, using his binoculars and camera to look in on the lives of his neighbours. It appears harmless at first, but soon devolves into a primal urge to see exactly what is going on in these people’s houses. Thus is the basis for the film, and how we are kept by Jefferies’ side the whole time. “One of the major, irresolvable issues that Hitchcock dramatizes in the film is the audience’s innate voyeurism. We are implicated in Jeff’s voyeurism because we, too, cannot refrain from spying on his neighbours; that is, we cannot distinguish whether we are watching the neighbours because Jeff does so or because we are voyeuristic ourselves. This breaking down of the distinction between our actual behaviour and our movie-going behaviour is analogous” (Weis, 110)

The setup of the film itself is genius: a crippled man watches a courtyard in which he can view inside nearly every apartment...and we can be viewing

with him! Close quarters with the entire neighbourhood at all times. The set consists only of these couple buildings, specific rooms in neighbouring apartments, a courtyard, Jeff's apartment, and a street which we can barely see. We are with the same people for the full length of the film. We grow to know them at the same time that Jeff does. When he watches them, we see what he watches, and we sympathize with them, believing everything Jeff thinks, says or accuses about them.

Not once in the film do we ever suspect that his spying on the neighbours is unethical, because eventually it turns out to be a good thing to have happened: "The final effects of Jefferies' voyeurism are admirable." (Wood, 100) Another ingenious technique used throughout the film, and also very helpful to enveloping us in Jeff's world, is the very long takes. Without having too many cuts and switches between shots the audience has time to absorb exactly what it is they are looking at – almost like watching a lightning bolt without blinking halfway through. The only switches that are paramount for the audience to become more engrossed are the reaction shots, in which we see how Jefferies and the others react when looking out at the courtyard.

Which brings me to Jefferies, the protagonist. There is nothing fake about Jeff, remaining true to Hitchcock's realism: he hates being incapacitated, he worries, he gets frustrated, he loves, he feels guilt, he sweats, he itches, he likes the female anatomy, he gets scared, and he laughs. He is nothing but entirely human. Whenever he witnesses the courtyard through the window, we get taken to a POV shot, and we witness what he witnesses, moving with his eyes. When he has glimpsed something that stirs a particular emotion,

the camera cuts to a reaction shot of his face, allowing us to see exactly how he feels on the particular subject, influencing us, i. e. smiling at the newlyweds, raising his glass to Miss Lonelyhearts as a sign of delicate affection, curiously looking at the many different things going on, lustfully looking at Miss Torso, etc.

The entire film revolves around him, so we get to know him best, and the audience, as mentioned before, ' plays his part' very soon in the film: he is the protagonist, the story is from his perspective, and we are witness to what he thinks, sees and feels, effectively becoming him. On top of his presence, the audience around 1954 surely consisted of some war veterans, which is very helpful to this film as its star is also a war vet. The audience of 1954 was most likely a rather specific audience, considering this was just after the war; young to middle aged, veterans, single females, single males, couples with perhaps a newborn at home (this was around the baby-boom), and few other categories I imagine. Which brings me to my next point: although the audience identifies mostly with Jeff, it would be wrong to say that the audience didn't identify with nearly every person in this film in 1954.

Women have a lot of choices of who to identify most with in this film. There's Stella, Lisa, Miss Torso, Miss Lonelyhearts, Mrs. Thorwald, the newlywed bride, the wife who sleeps on the balcony, and the artist; no matter how small the role is, there is something a female audience member of 1954 could relate to. Stella is your typical working woman. She is not highly educated, but not unintelligent. She's intuitive, claiming she can foresee future events (such as the stock market crash). She is also moral, knowing

right from wrong. She's also married, and humourous. Any female who lived through the war could relate to Stella, as she embodies the strong, independent woman which those women surely were when they were at work, volunteering during the war, or at home when the men were away.

Then there's Miss Torso: this is the girl that the young females can relate to, and possibly the older ones who had similar experiences around the time of the war. Here is a young, fit, beautiful dancer, whom we believe to be single for the majority of the film. She dances during the day seemingly without a care in the world, half naked, and by night she entertains male guests, all of which lust after her. As Lisa states (after observing a party at Miss Torso's flat) " She's doing a woman's hardest job: juggling wolves." Any girl who has ever had a single guy or more ogling her could identify with this.

We are then witness to her struggling with a man who apparently doesn't understand the meaning of the word ' no,' and she forces her way out of his reach, not unlike Miss Lonelyhearts did with her intrusive date. By the end of the film we see that she wasn't without a man at all, as one walks in, fresh from service in the army. This is definitely something that the audience of 1954 could relate to, as having such an experience was common after the war. The men of the audience could also strongly identify with how Jeff and Doyle felt about her, as their reaction shots immediately after the POV shot of her behind show what every man in the audience is thinking (which Lisa doesn't like at all).

Lisa seems to be the polar opposite of Stella up until the very end when she chooses to be adventurous. She's rich, high class, feminine, beautiful, but

also somewhat whiny and needy (which comes plainly into view during her argument with Jeff). She is the stereotypical woman of 1954, but still no less human than Jeff. She loves him and is stubborn to get to be with him, which I'm sure most of the female audience could identify with. This is another major theme in *Rear Window*: Love. Two characters in particular dominate this theme: Lisa and Miss Lonelyhearts. Other supporting characters contribute to the theme as well, like Miss Torso and her man in the army, or the wife and her dog, but nothing with the same calibre.

In an act of incredible originality, Hitchcock has all of the music in the film take place in somebody's apartment, never without reason for playing, both in the specific part of the film, and also not simply "music from nowhere" (Belton, 57). The music becomes very strong when Lisa and Jeff are together, and when Miss Lonelyhearts is having an emotional moment, playing songs like "Mona Lisa" (with lyrics like "is it only, 'cos you're lonely.." for Miss Lonelyhearts) or "To See You is To Love You," coinciding with the moods. The audience is witness to all of this love for much of the film, and in both cases the audience falls in love with the characters before a significant other does.

Almost anybody can identify with a relationship problem, and what happened between Jeff and Lisa is surely something that your average couples have been through before: marriage.

Lisa desperately wants to marry Jeff, but Jeff isn't all too keen on the idea because he thinks they're mismatched. We only begin to identify with Jeff's feelings towards Lisa when she surprises him by being adventurous and

dangerous. Through a series of reaction shots we are privy to his facial expressions, which clearly show that he likes what he sees. The audience loves Lisa for several reasons: she's Grace Kelly so she must be good, she's gorgeous, she's perfect, does everything for Jeff, and all around wonderful. One would assume that this kind of situation isn't something which happens all too often in your average relationship, however Hitchcock used a few devices throughout the film to ensure that everything was identifiable. In the arguments between Jeff and Lisa he employed realism so that it wasn't an uncommon (and stereotypical) argument: the woman claims she knows better, the man knows she's wrong, the woman nags and gets the last word in, the man gets tired of trying to reason and resorts to 'shut up.'

This is a brilliant tactic used by Hitchcock because the two are conversing about something which is probably rarely discussed between couples. They could be arguing over whether the Moon is larger than Mars and the audience would still identify with the situation. A similar technique which creates the same end through different means is the inaudibility of the arguments in neighbouring apartments. With the Thorwalds in particular, every argument they have is barely audible, allowing the audience to use their imaginations and identify more with said arguments. The body language is loud and clear; it acts as proof that they are fighting, among the indistinct chatter, and the audience can relate to this. If we were to know what they were arguing about it could create an entirely different response.

The last majorly identifiable female character is Miss Lonelyhearts. She is so lonely that she goes so far as to set up a fake dinner date with an imaginary

guest. She dresses up, puts on makeup, answers the door, and then welcomes her invisible guest in to dinner, at which point she breaks down into tears. Although older in age, her character is surely relatable to any woman or man of any age, both back in 1954 and in the present. Love, heartbreak, and loneliness are things that most if not all people experience at least once in their lives. We are brought even closer into her life as Jeff watches her come home with an apparent date, who, even though things looked as if they were going very well, forces himself upon her, at which point she kicks him out of the apartment and breaks down into tears again.

The audience can completely empathize with her at this moment; whether or not you've experienced heartbreak or loneliness, witnessing it happening to someone who desperately wants love is just as tragic, thus the theme of voyeurism shows its face again. She gets so lonely that she considers taking her own life, only to be stopped by the sound of the pianist's music. At the end of the film, we see that the two of them are together, perhaps, as the audience is to assume, to become very close and probably be the missing link they were both looking for. Again, finding happiness is something anybody can relate to, and a woman who has found love like this would also be able to relate with finding the perfect man, who in this case turns out to be the frustrated pianist; another entirely different character for an entirely different audience member to identify with.

The pianist is the socialite, the womanizer, the bachelor who lives alone, due to a supposed unhappy marriage, has friends over all the time and a probable facade of happiness, when in truth he is a very frustrated musician,

constantly trying to figure out his ' new hit on the radio.' He is also the portrait of an alcoholic (alcohol is a constant image throughout the film, as well as smoking), the audience can relate to him stumbling home and acting like a fool, making a mess, and falling into his chair. The average target audience member has most likely experienced an incident similar to that. Also, the audience can easily relate to not letting others know how you feel; another similarity to the relationship that Jefferies and Lisa have, whereby he neglects to tell her how he truly feels about marrying her for so long. Lastly the audience can identify with the happiness which the pianist experiences at the end of the film, when he and Miss Lonelyhearts are eventually brought together by his music. He then showcases for her his finished ' hopeful hit' on a record, which definitely pleases the two of them. This could be what he was searching for. We've all been there; at some point in life things do go right for a change, and happiness can be found, sometimes where you least expect it.

Hitchcock employed some of the most compelling, effective, and artistic styles in *Rear Window*. In truth, one could carry on forever about how the audience would identify with most anything in the film. Interestingly, there is only one instance where a parent could relate to the film, and that is when we see (for less than 10 seconds), a shot of a man dressing his young daughter. This happens in the last shot of the film. Despite this, the film can be enjoyed by mostly anybody because it is so easy to identify yourself with it, thanks to Hitchcock's acute direction.

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