

A critique of escapism
in "it had to be
murder" and "rear
window"



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Both "It Had to Be Murder", written by Cornell Woolrich, and Rear Window, the film directed by Alfred Hitchcock based on the book, tell a strange tale of a nosy protagonist in a story about the occasionally blurred line between fantasy and reality. The protagonists' lives appear to revolve around voyeuristic behaviors that seem to make up the majority of their personalities as they seek to immerse themselves in the lives of their neighbors, observing the individual inhabitants and noting their activities. Both Woolrich and Hitchcock use the voyeurism of the protagonist to criticize society for their eagerness to accept a false reality.

"I didn't know their names." This statement immediately introduces the protagonist of "It Had to Be Murder" with a hook that draws readers in from the start. The first person voice that the story is written in is perfect for luring readers deeper into the mind of the solitary Hal Jefferies, a man with apparently no purpose in life, other than to invade the privacy of his neighbors with his gaze. The transitions from scene to scene are vague and littered with Jefferies' personal thoughts and feelings, in a form akin to stream of consciousness. Rear Window is filmed in a manner similar to what could be described as the cinematic universe's version of a first person voice. This creates an effect much like that of the story's, but with more "intellectual and emotional resources" (McFarlane 16) needed from the audience to bring the narrative to life, as they are forced to try to adopt the viewpoint of L. B. Jefferies. To do this, Hitchcock employs clever filmmaking that gives the audience the impression of seeing through Jefferies gaze, like when Lisa is introduced. In that scene, she appears ethereal, almost floating in front of Jefferies as he wakes up, still clearly a bit bleary from sleep.

One notable difference between "It Has to Be Murder" and Rear Window is the portrayal of the protagonist, Hal or L. B. Jefferies, and how it affects his constant observations of his neighborhood. In the short story, Jefferies is virtually alone. Boyne is the one person that he contacts with his information, though Boyne's statement "Where've you been the last sixty-two years?" (Woolrich 5) implies that they have not had much, if any, contact recently. His only other ally is Sam, who he treats as more of a servant than a confidant. In contrast, the movie Jefferies has the support system of Lisa and Stella, both of whom are both invested in his well-being, but admonish his addition to voyeurism. What is interesting to note is that Lisa, a symbol of the perfection of reality, seems to be drawn into Jefferies' world as she learns more and more about the possible murder. Her demeanor transforms as she chooses to involve herself with the narrative. She becomes more adventurous, sneaking into Thorwald's, the murderer, apartment, and discusses more than her work or her relationship. She even changes her style, wearing jeans in the final scene. However, it is important to note that, as Jefferies sleeps, Lisa takes out one of her fashion magazines and happily begins to read it, showing that she has not completely sacrificed her identity in order to become someone who fits within the narrative that she has experienced.

Most importantly, these two works both are pointing out their perspective audiences and accusing them of being a form of voyeur. The acts of reading and watching a movies both provide an intimate connection between the characters and those invested in the storyline, without them having a real connection besides the fascinations the consumers have with engrossing

themselves in another reality. This is form of escapism, similar to Jefferies with his constant observations of people he never seems to interact with, used as a substitute for the dullness of reality. What both Hitchcock and Woolrich are telling their respective audiences is that they themselves are voyeurs, wasting their time with what could potentially be an interesting story, but ultimately has not effect on their lives. Like in Rear Window, they could be in a relationship with a perfect woman like Lisa but are ignoring her in favor of immersing themselves in what they see as a more exciting reality than their own.

It seems to be no coincidence that these works were done when they were. The original text was written in 1942, just after the Great Depression had ended and World War II had begun. Both eras marked important moments in entertainment history. The 1930s was when movies became a popular pastime as people yearned to escape the harsh realities of unemployment, starvation, homelessness, or even just the helpless feeling that life would never return to the glory of the Roaring 20s. A trip to the cinema provided a brief respite from the troubles of reality during the Depression, while World War II presented something entirely different: wartime propaganda. Frequently shown on posters, in newspapers, or even before a movie, wartime propaganda was used to rally support for the war effort was positive messages about patriotism or depicting the Axis Powers as little more than monsters. All of this media hid from the public the true horrors of war behind simple messages. While Woolrich could have been referencing either one of these eras as he described the immersion of a man into a life that was not

his own, they both are very prominent parts of social culture at the time that involved a form of escapism from reality.

However, *Rear Window* was released twelve years later in a different climate to a new audience, so a new way to deliver the original message had to be developed. Brian McFarlane discusses this topic of making a film relevant to a younger audience, saying that the directors' focus "seemed to lie primarily in how works of earlier centuries might be made to seem relevant to later generations"(17). Though the film did not come centuries after "It Had to Be Murder" was written, a slight update had to be made, so Jefferies was given a nice camera, a form of modern technology that did not exist for public consumption a decade earlier. This camera can be seen as a symbol for of new inventions that exploded out of the post-war era. One of these inventions was a widely accessible and affordable television that soon became a centerpiece of the average American home, bringing immediate entertainment to families and providing an alternative to going outside or talking with others in a similar way that Jefferies uses his camera to entertain himself. Stella even makes the comment "What people ought to do is get outside their own house and look in for a change" (Hitchcock) in regards to Jefferies inclination to voyeurism and her noticing it as a trend.

The only danger in "It Had to Be Murder" and *Rear Window* presents itself when Jefferies begins to interact with Thorwald. This changes the balance of the early part of the story as Jefferies is forced to face the gravity of the situation that he has allowed to become his reality. Though, in this moment, all of the morally dubious voyeurism seems to have righted itself, the fact remains that Jefferies would not be in any danger if he had ignored the <https://assignbuster.com/a-critique-of-escapism-in-it-had-to-be-murder-and-rear-window/>

happenings of his neighbors. This is a notable moment because it seems to provide justification for accepting a false reality, as now Jefferies has an exciting life, though it almost comes at the cost of his life.

The point of irony in the film comes when Jefferies and Lisa believe that they may have witnessed evidence of a murder, but they only begin to doubt themselves when they watch as Miss Lonelyhearts, one of the neighbors, is attacked by one of her many suitors. Bearing witness to her heartbreak after another failed conquest, Lisa goes as far as to say, " I'm not much on rear-window ethics" (Hitchcock) even though she, like Jefferies, had been staring eagerly out the window. This great emotion about one failed relationship that neither Jefferies nor Lisa was invested in echoes the tone of the soap opera, a genre of television that rose to popularity in the 50s. This relates back to Hitchcock's theme of demonstrating the hard of modern media on reality, as no person should act more upset about an attack than a murder- a double murder if the dog is included in the count.

" It Had to Be Murder" and Rear Window are both used by their respective creators to criticize the fantasy-addicted nature of society by comparing it to nothing more than a form of voyeurism. Though Hitchcock modernized his rendition of the tale in order to make it more relevant to his audience, it continues to carry the same message of looking to the real world for meaning in life.

Rear Window. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Paramount, 1954. Film.

Woolrich, Cornell. " It Had to Be Murder". 1950. Print.

McFarlane, Brian. "Reading Film and Literature." Review. 15-28. Print.