BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Rear Window

Rear Window
Directed by: Alfred Hitchcock
©: Patron Inc.
a Paramount *release*
Assistant Director: Herbert Coleman
Screenplay by: John Michael Hayes
Based on the short story by: Cornell Woolrich
Director of Photography: Robert Burks
Technicolor Colour Consultant: Richard Mueller
Special Photographic Effects: John P. Fulton
Edited by: George Tomasini
Art Direction: Hal Pereira,
Joseph MacMillan Johnson
Set Decoration: Sam Comer, Ray Moyer
Costumes: Edith Head
Make-up Supervision: Wally Westmore
Music Score by: Franz Waxman
Sound Recording by: Harry Lindgren, John Cope
Sound System: Western Electric Recording
Technical Adviser: Bob Landry

uncredited
Producer: Alfred Hitchcock
Production Manager: C.O. Erickson
Camera Operator: William Schurr
Camera Assistant: Leonard South
Special Cinematography: Irmin Roberts
Stunt Detectives: Fred Graham, Eddie Parker

Cast:
James Stewart *(L.B. 'Jeff' Jefferies)*
Grace Kelly *(Lisa Carol Fremont)*
Wendell Corey *(Detective Thomas J. Doyle)*
Thelma Ritter *(Stella)*
Raymond Burr *(Lars Thorwald)*
Judith Evelyn *(Miss Lonely Hearts)*
Ross Bagdasarian *(song writer)*
Georgine Darcy *(Miss Torso)*
Sara Berner *(woman on fire escape)*
Frank Cady *(man on fire escape)*
Jesslyn Fax *(sculptress)*
Rand Harper *(Harry, honeymooner)*
Irene Winston *(Mrs Anna Thorwald)*
Havis Davenport *(honeymooner)*

uncredited
Alan Lee *(landlord)*
Ralph Smiley *(Carl, the waiter)*
Alfred Hitchcock
(man winding clock at song writer's)
Jack Stoney *(iceman)*
Marla English, Kathryn Grant *(party girls)*
Jerry Antes *(dancer)*
Barbara Bailey *(choreographer)*
Len Hendry, Mike Mahoney *(policemen)*
Anthony Warde *(detective)*
Bennie Bartlett *(Stanley, Miss Torso's friend)*
Bess Flowers *(woman with poodle)*
Harry Landers *(young man)*
Dick Simmons, James A. Cornell, Nick Borgani *(men)*
Jenni Paris, Sue Casey *(sunbathers)*
Iphigenie Castiglioni *(bird woman)*

USA 1954©
114 mins
Digital 4K

Refocusing the Spectator: a comparison of the critical response to 'Rear Window' in 1954 and on its re-release in 1983

When *Rear Window* was first released in 1954, Hitchcock's authorial mark was seen primarily as a matter of space and 'technique'. Penelope Houston, in the September 1954 *Monthly Film Bulletin*, remarked that, *pace* David Robinson, 'the director is now less interested in the story he has to tell than in the various stylistic and technical problems that he can set himself, and solve, during the telling of it.' The result of restricting the action to Jefferies' apartment and point of view was 'an ingenious, heartless, intermittently entertaining exercise in technique.' A similar conclusion was reached by Arthur Knight (*Saturday Review*, 21.8.54): ' ... his enthusiasm for sheer technique seems to impose such synthetic restrictions upon the action of his films that the plot is all but swamped by the pyrotechnics. *Rear Window* is a good case in point.' The critical question was simply whether or not the 'technical problem' prevented Hitchcock from delivering the requisite generic goods, what Knight called 'a proper thriller'. The amount of time spent by Jefferies gazing into the windows opposite was similarly set against the generic demands of plotting: 'From a lazy beginning the film is galvanised into a thriller' (Virginia Graham, *Spectator*, 8.10.54). What is missing here, obviously, is any sense of what the film's concern with voyeurism and point of view might signify outside the questions of 'technique' and *Rear Window*'s effectiveness as a thriller.

This wonderfully fitting blindness was not, however, total: an awareness of the problem did surface, to varying degrees, across the reviews. Penelope Houston noted that 'the spectator, like the hero, is placed in the position of a spy', while William Whitebait (*New Statesman*, 16.10.54) got quite over-excited with his role as voyeur: ' ... it worked with me. One gets to share this mania of window-gazing.' But in very few cases were the critics prepared to consider the possible implications of all this looking, that it might be somewhat 'unhealthy'. C. A. Lejeune (*Observer*, 10.10. 54) was brief and to the point: '*Rear Window* strikes me as a rather horrid film.' T. Spencer (*Daily Worker*, 9.10. 54) offered a more developed view which, set in opposition to the general critical consensus and despite its moralising, now seems a quite perceptive and progressive reading: 'Granted that Alfred Hitchcock is the master of suspense ... this quality alone cannot make palatable a story with so unpleasant a central figure as this ... James Stewart gets a morbid satisfaction from spying on his neighbours ... When not thus engaged, he boasts of the toughness of his job and resists the efforts of his rich society girlfriend to interest him in something normal and healthy like marriage or at least sex ... We're compelled to become Peeping Toms ourselves. At first we succumb to the fascination of peeping, but in the end we're revolted by it.'

What is particularly interesting about this review is the link made, effectively in terms of an opposition, between voyeurism and the question of sexual difference (tough men resisting demanding women). It is not far from there to the crucial point that, as Robin Wood puts it, 'the spectatorship inscribed in the film is by no means neutral. It is unambiguously male.' This has massive significance, not only for the film's internal dynamics (from its jokey phallic symbolism to the idea that it is as much about the projection of male anxieties as it is about spying), but also for the relation between this text, 'Hitchcock' generally, the cinematic apparatus to which the film clearly refers, and 'the central question that haunts contemporary Hitchcock criticism in article after article: "Can Hitchcock be saved for feminism?"' (Wood). And, perhaps predictably, turning to reviews written 30 years after these originals, this issue is happily ignored, a classic case of a structuring absence which prompts the feeling that very little has changed.

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The Draughtsman's Contract
Sun 1 Sep 18:40; Tue 10 Sep 20:30
The Piano
Mon 2 Sep 18:10; Wed 4 Sep 18:00 + intro by Rosie Taylor, Curator, BFI National Archive; Sat 5 Oct 15:45
Les Demoiselles de Rochefort The Young Ladies of Rochefort
Tue 3 Sep 20:30; Sun 15 Sep 12:10; Wed 25 Sep 18:05
Rear Window
Wed 4 Sep 20:45; Sat 7 Sep 12:20; Mon 16 Sep 14:30; Thu 19 Sep 20:45; Wed 2 Oct 18:00 + intro by film and talks programmer & writer Nadia M. Oliva
Do the Right Thing
Thu 5 Sep 18:00; Fri 20 Sep 20:40
12 Angry Men
Fri 6 Sep 20:45; Sat 21 Sep 12:30; Sun 29 Sep 12:30
Le Trou The Hole
Sat 7 Sep 15:15; Mon 9 Sep 18:00; Sat 5 Oct 20:30
Rio Bravo
Sun 8 Sep 17:45; Sat 28 Sep 14:50
UK Premiere of restoration: The Exterminating Angel El angel exterminador
Tue 10 Sep 18:20; Wed 25 Sep 18:10 + intro; Tue 8 Oct 20:50
The Miracle Worker
Wed 11 Sep 18:10 + intro by Clare Baines, BFI Inclusion Partner and Founder, Crip Club; Mon 23 Sep 14:30; Fri 27 Sep 18:15; Tue 1 Oct 20:50
Hunger
Thu 12 Sep 20:30; Thu 26 Sep 20:40
Black Narcissus
Fri 13 Sep 14:30; Sun 22 Sep 11:45
Barton Fink
Sat 14 Sep 20:45; Thu 3 Oct 20:45
King of the Hill
Tue 17 Sep 20:45; Fri 4 Oct 18:10
The Servant
Wed 18 Sep 18:15 + intro by Ruby McGuigan, BFI Programme and Acquisitions; Wed 25 Sep 20:45; Sun 6 Oct 12:30
The Incredible Shrinking Man
Tue 24 Sep 20:40; Mon 7 Oct 18:40

Appropriately, the worst offender is *The Spectator* (3.12.83), where Peter Ackroyd attempts to turn the clock back to 1954 by dismissing any attempts by what he calls 'theoretical critics' to read any significance into the film: 'I suspect that *Rear Window* ought to be taken at face value (and what more enduring value is there in the cinema?) as a "thriller" in which Hitchcock has taken his own delight in suspense and puzzle one stage further.' In fact, Ackroyd unwittingly acknowledges the importance of the sexual difference issue when he suggests how one might cope with the film's supposed longueurs: 'There are so many rumours about Hitchcock's behaviour towards his actresses that one can while away the time speculating on the horrors he perpetrated on her [Grace Kelly].' Several of the critics are similarly eager to deflect attention away from 'Hitchcock' and towards Hitchcock. Thus Alexander Walker (*The Standard*, 1.12.83) claims that 'Hitchcock is so clearly in love with Grace Kelly that she is almost like an apparition ... Beauty and bitch, that's how Hitchcock saw women'; while Philip French (*Observer*, 4.12.83) suggests that 'What we now know about Hitchcock's life leads us to think of the central character, an inhibited class-conscious voyeur ... as being a portrait of the director himself.'

Interestingly, this displacement of the voyeurism on to a fantasy figure outside the film goes hand-in-hand with the desire of both critics to shift the concern with looking on to an equivalent historicised plane. French states that 'the meaning of *Rear Window* is in the point-of-view' but proposes that it 'reflected the tensions of the early Eisenhower era (by being) about suspicion, paranoia, surveillance, the breakdown of community.' If this seems, given the film's intense self-reflexiveness, a rather arbitrary observation, Walker's suggestion that it cosily 'takes us back in time as well as perspective (because) a body in the back garden is so much easier to contemplate than a Bomb on the conscience' is merely rather puzzling.

These extra-textual references are actually symptomatic of how the question of voyeurism is dealt with even when the critics do refer to the role of the spectator. The tendency, because of a refusal to consider the sexual implications, is to construct a sexless viewer who is subject to an instinctive, universal desire: 'All cinemagoers, after all, are Peeping Toms of a kind' (Geoff Brown, *The Times*, 2.12.83); 'Is it a moralistic condemnation of the voyeur's instinct in us all, or a shamelessly virtuoso exploitation of it?' (Derek Malcolm, *Guardian*, 1.12.83); '*Rear Window* unmasks the Peeping Tom in all of us and is some of the most charmingly disarming face-slaps an audience ever received' (Nigel Andrews, *Financial Times*, 2.12.83); 'But the essence of the movie and its central and forbidden joy is the voyeurism. What a treat to stare into the lives of other people through uncurtained windows' (Iain Johnstone, *Sunday Times*, 4.12.83).

The problem is how to relate this imaginary, impossible 'us' to what is going on inside James Stewart's apartment between him and Grace Kelly. Given that the film so overtly encourages us to identify with the disabled photographer, how does this relate to, for example, an observation made, but not developed, by Philip French: 'The first moment of terror, connecting fear and desire, love and death, comes when a sinister shadow falls on the face of Jeff ... A subjective shot ... reveals that the shadow is cast by the beautiful Kelly.' In order to make sense of the moment, and the film as a whole, it is clearly necessary to think the question of voyeurism through these sexually defined characters and our relation to their images. This rather than turning the issue outwards into general analogies between the action of the film and the act of watching films, while ruminating over the moral issues involved.

Steve Jenkins, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, February 1984