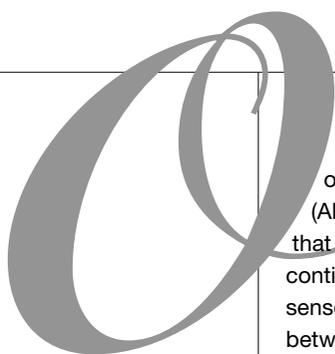




# Seeing is Believing: Detective and Romance in *Rear Window*



1931-2008

**FILM  
& TEXT**

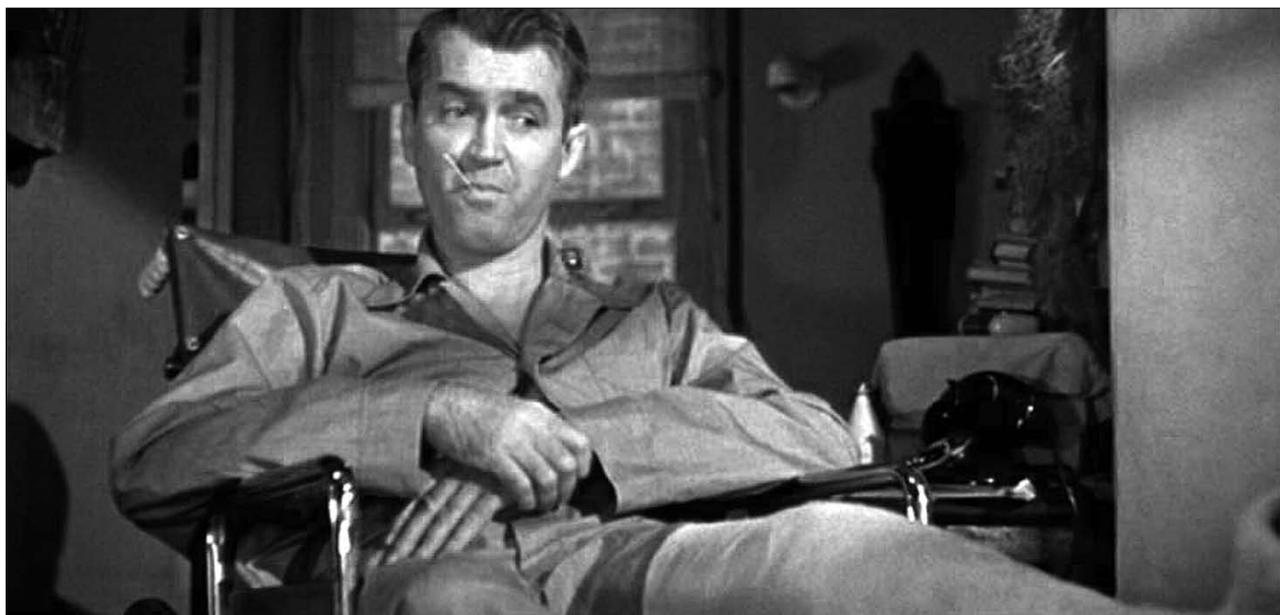
**DAVID  
BAKER**

One of the many pleasures of watching *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954) is that the viewer is required to continually readjust his or her sense of the relationship between what gendered characters say, what those characters see and how they react to what they've just seen. In this discussion I will consider this correlation between saying, seeing and reacting, focusing specifically on the way in which the relationship between Jeff (James Stewart) and Lisa (Grace Kelly) develops –

through a conflict between a detective narrative and a romance narrative – as a kind of battle of the sexes which reaches, if not resolution, at least a certain stability.

At the beginning of *Rear Window*, after Hitchcock's camera has swept around the courtyard from its station inside Jeff's apartment, it carefully analyses the various contents of the apartment: Jeff's leg in a cast; a smashed-up camera; an extraordinary photograph of a racing car crash complete

with a flying loose wheel prominently in the foreground just prior to the moment of its impact with camera and photographer; various other action photographs (such as an explosion); and more photographic equipment. Hitchcock's roving camera comes to rest on a framed photographic negative of a model, probably but not necessarily Lisa, and then a pile of magazines, the top one of which features a front cover with a positive image of the same photograph.



This set of items builds up a picture of Jeff. Two central thematic points are established. First, he is the photographer – a professional voyeur – who was hit by the loose wheel; his camera was smashed and he is now laid up with a broken leg. The dynamic photograph of the car wheel flying towards the camera

photographer, but it also makes him extremely vulnerable. The situation caught in the photograph closely resembles the narrative situation of *Rear Window* itself: just as the loose wheel literally flies out of the photograph to injure Jeff, suspected killer Lars Thorwald (Raymond Burr) will, at the climax of the film,

out only one aspect of this very complex image: the photograph signifies that which Lisa represents to Jeff, a cluster of emotions we might name the ‘monstrous feminine’. Lisa’s ‘too perfect’ femininity both attracts *and* repulses Jeff. Lisa’s femininity represents a threat to Jeff’s conception of his own

The photographs of the car crash, combined with the other action photographs, signify that Jeff is a man’s man, a man of action. In terms quite routine in 1954, Jeff’s masculinity is marked as active, while Lisa’s femininity is marked as passive. Lisa is a creature of Madison Avenue: long lunches, elegant coiffure, designer clothing. Jeff is a man who marks his indelible difference from Lisa in terms of his capacity to endure extremes of privation: in relation to food and cold; to being shot at, run over and so on.

**There is a very close connection between the frustratingly passive situation the injured Jeff finds himself in and the sense of encroaching feminization which Lisa represents.**

The central conflict between Jeff and Lisa is played out in these active/passive terms. In his early conversation with physical therapist Stella (Thelma Ritter), Jeff describes Lisa as ‘too sophisticated’. He requires ‘a woman who’s willing to go anywhere and do anything and love it’. By contrast, Lisa attempts to talk Jeff into leaving the magazine he works for and become a fashion photographer. Lisa fails to convince Jeff because fashion

tells us that in order to get his pictures, Jeff works extremely close to the action. His accident was a result of his getting *too* close to what he was photographing, so close he has become, in effect, part of the action. This propensity for danger undoubtedly makes him an excellent

‘fly out’ of the picture Jeff has carefully built using binoculars and a telephoto lens, causing Jeff further injury.

The second thematic point is that the framed photographic negative of the model is a rather unusual memento for Jeff to keep. I want to draw

masculinity, which is predicated upon his virility, his capacity for freedom and movement. There is a very close connection between the frustratingly *passive* situation the injured Jeff finds himself in and the sense of encroaching feminization which Lisa represents.



photography, from his point of view, is a form of emasculation. The first day of the narrative (Wednesday) concludes with an unsatisfactory stalemate between the two parties.

### Fantasy doublings

The conflict between Jeff and Lisa is developed partly through dialogue – the argument and disagreement between them – but even more so by a series of fantasy doublings each engages in when looking across to the other apartments in the block. It is not simply other characters they see: Jeff and Lisa both project various fears onto these other characters.

Jeff's fantasy doubling relates to Lars Thorwald and his wife, Anna Thorwald (Irene Winston), as well as the newlyweds (Rand Harper and Havis Davenport). Lars Thorwald represents in particularly graphic terms Jeff's fears about marriage: he is the epitome of the

henpecked emasculated married man. Jeff witnesses Thorwald – already emasculated due to his occupation as a jewellery salesman – ineptly looking after his bedridden wife, being scolded for undercooking food, and, in perhaps the biggest blow to his masculinity, being laughed at by her.

The bedridden and dependent Mrs Thorwald provides a complex double for Jeff. In his current state he both identifies with her constricted situation and fears a situation in which he might have to look after a dependent female.

Meanwhile, through the course of the narrative, the story of the newlyweds provides an ironic commentary on Jeff's fears and desires concerning marriage. Their story begins with the husband carrying the wife over the threshold. For much of the film we don't see the newlyweds, only a closed blind, with the husband on one occasion 'coming up for

air' before being dragged back to bed by his wife. As *Rear Window* concludes we hear problems already arising: the wife says, 'If you'd told me you'd quit your job, we wouldn't have gotten married.'

Lisa's primary identification is with both Miss Torso (Georgine Darcy) and Miss Lonelyheart (Judith Evelyn). For Lisa, Miss Torso represents firstly a woman who is *objectified* by men, and secondly the balancing of roles she herself often plays as the good hostess who must also ward off suitors while her heart belongs to someone else. Miss Lonelyheart, by contrast, represents Lisa's fear of *not* being loved. We can note, for example, the way in which Lisa's bringing dinner for Jeff on the first night coincides with Miss Lonelyheart's preparation for her 'imaginary' date. Lisa's food and wine for the unenthusiastic Jeff is explicitly mirrored by Miss Lonelyheart's meal made for no one.

### Gender and genre conflict: the detective story versus the romance narrative

Given that the relationship between Jeff and Lisa is established in terms of a conflict between different, perhaps irreconcilable expectations around dating and marriage, we can see that by the end of the film this conflict has been more or less resolved. In the film's denouement, Jeff, now with *two* broken legs, is in his wheelchair with an enormous grin on his face. Lisa, for the first time in the film dressed in casual clothes rather than a designer outfit, sits reading an appropriately 'Jeff-centric' book entitled *Beyond the High Himalayas*. When she notices Jeff has fallen asleep she pulls out a copy of *Bazaar* and happily reads it, to the strains of the tune 'Lisa', which the songwriter (Ross Bagdasarian) has been composing throughout the film and is now complete.



How has the film's narrative transformed the situation of conflict between Jeff and Lisa into one of relative resolution?

In order to answer this we need to consider the manner in which *Rear Window* invokes two different genres in order to do its narrative work. On the one hand there is a romance story, marked as belonging to a feminine, passive domain, and on the other a detective story, which is marked as masculine and active.

The detective story begins on the first night, after Lisa has departed. Jeff is awoken by rain and notices Thorwald's various comings and goings. The introduction of the detective narrative at night is significant because Jeff is basically drifting in and out of consciousness. As a result there is always a certain doubt about the detective narrative – is it merely something Jeff's unconscious mind conjured up to relieve his boredom?

By the second night (Thursday), the romance narrative is already clashing with the detective narrative. Lisa's attempts at romance – 'How far does a girl have to go before you'll notice her?' – are constantly thwarted by Jeff's obsession with the detective narrative.

*Jeff: Why would a man leave his apartment three times on a rainy night with a suitcase, and come back three times?*  
*Lisa: He likes the way his wife welcomes him home.*

Although Lisa's comment attempts to bring the subject back to the relationship between man and woman, its effect is to bring about in Jeff a disturbing connection between eroticism and violence:

*Jeff (looking at Miss Torso): That would be a terrible job to tackle ... Just how would you start to cut up a human body?*  
*Lisa: Jeff, I'll be honest with you. You're beginning to scare me.*

Although at this point both the detective and the romance narratives appear to rapidly be moving towards dead ends, Lisa sees something (Thorwald with the rolled-up mattress and the trunk) which radically changes her. Lisa becomes a sudden convert to the detective story and immediately forms a kind of amateur 'detective agency' with Jeff, finding Thorwald's name and address and then asking Jeff 'OK chief, what's my next assignment?' before Jeff sends her home for the night.

### Feminine intuition

Jeff and Lisa are both now convinced there was a murder. The key point at issue is the identity of the woman who left with Thorwald in the early hours of Thursday morning. Jeff's detective friend Tom Doyle (Wendell Corey) believes, given there is no body, the most logical explanation is that the woman must be Mrs Thorwald. Lisa, for intuitive reasons, believes Doyle is

mistaken. On the third night (Friday), Lisa utilizes her explicitly feminine knowledge *about* women in order to develop the case against Thorwald:

*Women aren't that predictable ... A woman has a favourite handbag, and it always hangs on her bedpost where she can get at it easily. Then, all of a sudden, she goes away on a trip and leaves it behind. Why? ... Because she didn't know she was going on a trip, and where she's going, she wouldn't need the handbag. And that jewellery – women don't keep their jewellery in a purse getting all twisted and scratched and tangled up ... and they don't leave it behind either. A woman going anywhere but the hospital would always take make-up, perfume and jewellery. That couldn't have been Mrs Thorwald or I don't know women.*

Jeff, who prior to this point was extremely suspicious of the feminine, is now prepared



to embrace it, solely, I suspect, on the grounds that Lisa's feminine knowledge is furthering his detective narrative. It would be a mistake, however, to think Lisa is simply effacing herself in order to 'go along' with Jeff's detective narrative. She makes a very precise contract with him: 'I'll trade you: my feminine intuition for a bed for the night.'

Although both the detective and the romance narratives are kept alive by this contract, a certain instability remains between Jeff and Lisa. Jeff continues to make sarcastic barbs about the feminine and he undercuts her romantic aspirations:

*Lisa: There's that song again ... where does a man get the inspiration to write a song like that?*  
*Jeff: Well, he gets it from the landlady once a month.*

And referring to the amateur detective agency they have formed:

*Lisa: When they're in trouble it's always their Girl Friday that gets them out of it ...*  
*Jeff: ... It's funny. He never ends up marrying her, does he?*

However, from this point in the story the principal conflict is no longer between Jeff and Lisa, but between Jeff and Lisa on one side and Doyle on the other.

Jeff by not accepting that Lisa's feminine knowledge is helpful in a detective narrative:

*Doyle: Look Miss Freemont, that feminine intuition stuff sells women's magazines, but in real life it's still a fairy-tale. I don't know how many years I've wasted tracking down leads based*

a lot of things in private that they couldn't possibly explain in public'), reinforced when Jeff and Lisa watch Miss Lonelyheart bring a man home (which ends badly) – creates considerable doubt for them:

*Jeff: You know much as I hate to give Thomas J. Doyle too much credit, he might*

**O**n the one hand there is a romance story, marked as belonging to a feminine, passive domain, and on the other a detective story, which is marked as masculine and active.

Doyle is prepared to look into the case, but is appropriately cautious: 'You didn't see the killing or the body. How do you know there was a murder?' Upon meeting Doyle, Lisa marks the newfound allegiance between her and Jeff by saying, 'We think Thorwald's guilty' (emphasis added). Doyle marks his distinction from

*on female intuition.*

Doyle's position has the effect of producing further unity between Jeff and Lisa. Jeff and Lisa literally turn their backs on him, hastening his departure. However, Doyle's explanation of events – coupled with his unwavering commitment to individuals' rights to privacy ('people do

*have gotten a hold of something when he said that was pretty private stuff going on out there. I wonder if it's ethical to watch a man with binoculars and a long-focus lens. Do you suppose it's ethical, even if you prove that he didn't commit a crime?*

*Lisa: I'm not much on rear window ethics ... Jeff, you*



*know if someone came in here, they wouldn't believe what they'd see ... You and me with long faces, plunged into despair because we find out a man didn't kill his wife. We're two of the most frightening ghouls I've ever known. You'd think we could be a bit happy that the poor woman is alive and well.*

This produces yet another seeming dead end for the detective narrative. Lisa forcefully reintroduces the romance narrative by displaying her nightgown for Jeff, but any romantic possibilities are immediately interrupted by the scream of the wife living above the Thorwalds (Sarah Berner) as she discovers that her dog has been killed. Once again the detective narrative overrides the romance. Jeff, this time employing 'intuitive'

knowledge himself, notices that Thorwald is the only person who didn't come out to see the dead dog: he's sitting in his apartment in the dark, smoking a cigarette.

By the fourth night (Saturday), Jeff and Lisa, along with Stella, are working together utilizing both 'male' and 'female' knowledge on the detective case. They've been waiting all day, staking out Thorwald's apartment. First they employ a 'feminine, domestic' logic: Thorwald is washing down the bathroom walls, therefore he must have killed his wife in there. Then they employ a 'masculine, mathematical logic': Jeff notices the change of height of the flowers in the flowerbed.

In this act of working together, Lisa assumes an

active role, partly because Jeff, confined to his wheelchair, is unable to do so himself. He does, however, become more than simply an observer: he now becomes, with Lisa's help, an actor. He writes a note to Thorwald ('What have you done with her?') which Lisa takes over to Thorwald's apartment. This shift to activity on her part elicits Jeff's admiring look. Lisa goes on to actively take control of the situation, climbing up into Thorwald's apartment and, although Thorwald returns to find her there, she finds the wedding ring and signals it to Jeff.

By the conclusion of the film, the precise distinction between Jeff as masculine and active and Lisa as feminine and passive has been broken down, establishing the conditions for a

relationship between man and woman based upon Jeff's belated recognition of Lisa's capacities, if not on absolute equality. The film's denouement neatly articulates this new balance of power between them.

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#### Further Reading

John Belton (ed.), *Alfred Hitchcock's Rear Window*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000.

John Fawell, *Hitchcock's Rear Window: The Well-Made Film*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale and Edwardsville, 2001.

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