

REAR WINDOW

Voyeurism is presented as both entertaining and dangerous. Discuss.

Alfred Hitchcock's film *Rear Window*, first released in 1954, explores how voyeurism can not only pose as a huge risk to an individual's life but can also be a form of entertainment for an individual. Through the invalid protagonist L.B. Jefferies (Jeff) and his complicated relationship with Lisa, Hitchcock reveals the themes of voyeurism, ethics and a sense of morality in his film. He is essentially encouraging the audience to reflect upon their morals while simultaneously implying that all humans are natural voyeurs.

Rear Window examines how voyeurism can be a possible form of entertainment for an individual. Jeff is an active voyeur by profession, a photographer, making him naturally inclined towards watching people. Wheelchair-bound and confined in his small apartment, Jeff resorts to looking "out the rear window at [his] neighbours" to satisfy him through the days he is physically restricted. Hitchcock invites viewers to see a parallel here with how people visit theatres to escape reality and for their own pleasure: Jeff watches his neighbours from his rear window to avoid his problems and to pass time. In the opening scene, the camera pans over Jeff's blinds as they open slowly to reveal his neighbourhood courtyard, similar to how the curtains open in a cinema to show the screen the film will be projected on. By employing this technique, Hitchcock alludes to the theme of voyeurism that is presented in the film and emphasises the tendency for human beings to watch others for their own amusement. Hitchcock's use of the obscured and limited vision of the camera lens further mimics what Jeff sees through his camera, allowing the audience to participate in this voyeurism. The employment of vignette-like scenes makes viewers, like Jeff, never seeing "enough" of what goes on in the courtyard, making the film even more engaging and suspenseful. Furthermore, during the climax of the film, Thorwald looks straight into the camera, frightening both Jeff and the audience. By breaking the fourth wall, Hitchcock attempts to make viewers question their morals and ethics as he seeks to make the audience realise that their involvement in voyeurism is equal to Jeff's. Thus, Hitchcock suggests that humans often watch others and set reservations aside if something interesting is to be seen if they find it enjoyable.

Hitchcock also demonstrates that voyeurism is often dangerous and has a cost. Jeff starts by watching his neighbours through his bare eyes; however, this quickly turns into scrutinising his neighbourhood through his big, powerful camera lens. Upon entrance, Stella tells Jeff that "the New York State sentence for a peeping Tom is six months in the workhouse", warning him that voyeurism comes with a price. Jeff ultimately involves Lisa in his voyeuristic activities, making her transition from naysayer to accomplice. This change within Lisa leads to her being attacked by Thorwald when she takes matters into her own hands by entering the murderer's apartment. Through the use of diegetic sound, Hitchcock positions Jeff to be emotionally vulnerable as Lisa screams out his name for help. The camera cuts to Jeff's face to show his reaction to the incident, a solemn and fearful looking expression plastered on his face. The use of the Kuleshov effect here essentially dramatises the scene, as Jeff knows he cannot do anything to help Lisa in the dangerous situation she is in. Furthermore, Hitchcock foreshadows the implications of voyeurism through the character of Stella, who quips that she "smells trouble in this [Jeff's] apartment". This is Hitchcock's most explicit warning that an individual must be careful of what they look at, or they can become more involved than what they bargained for. At the end of the film, Jeff is shown to pay the price for his voyeuristic behaviours as he is left with two broken legs. Hence, Hitchcock aims to pressurise the audience to recognise the risks of scopophilia, while illustrating that voyeurism has the capability to jeopardise someone.

Additionally, the relationship between Jeff and Lisa is profoundly affected, negatively and positively as a consequence of voyeurism. Initially, Jeff uses looking out of his rear window as a method to avoid introspection and discussing the genuine love Lisa has for him, destroying their relationship. However, Lisa finds this as a way to manipulate Jeff to get her way and to prove to him that she can be the wife Jeff wants. When Lisa enters the neighbourhood courtyard that Jeff is so obsessed looking at, Jeff, for the first time, sees her in a different light and position through his camera. Lisa presents herself not to be “too perfect, too sophisticated” as Jeff thinks, risking her life to go beyond voyeuristic acts and instead intrudes into Thorwald’s apartment. After delivering a threatening letter to Thorwald, she returns back to Jeff’s apartment, where the camera cuts to his face, showing his eyes glistening in admiration as Jeff realises Lisa is truly not what he thought she was. Voyeuristically viewing his neighbours with Lisa in order to “solve” a murder case is shown to also result in a stronger relationship between Jeff and Lisa as they are both so engrossed in the same situation together. Hitchcock also implies how happy Lisa finally is, as she now has what she wanted all along, Jeff’s attention. Thus, Hitchcock demonstrates that Jeff’s relationship with Lisa is impacted and changed through voyeurism.

Ultimately, *Rear Window* presents the act of voyeurism to be amusing on the one hand, but on the other hand, dangerous to an individual’s life. Through using restricted vision, diegetic sound and the Kuleshov effect Hitchcock implies that voyeurism can affect an individual and the relationships they have, while unveiling how it is something that always has strings attached.

Hitchcock criticizes the fear and distrust that gripped post war America during the cold war period. The fear of communist infiltration and its perceived threats to American values led to many being accused communists or communist sympathisers. Hitchcock construction of the Jefferies as an invalid trapped in his wheelchair and voyeuristically looking into the windows of his neighbours, “with binoculars and a long focus lens” is a critique of a society that has become unashamedly “a race of peeping”. Jefferies forms unsubstantiated “wild opinions” about his neighbours claiming that “everything [they’ve] done is suspicious”. Jefferies is quick to pass judgement from Ms Lonelyhearts who “drinks herself to sleep”, the Songwriter, who “lives alone” because he “probably had an unhappy marriage” to Ms torso who he judges as a “real eat, drink and be merry girl”. Hitchcock alludes to the perilous nature of such suspicion suggesting that such attitudes have become a miasmatic contagion in a paranoid and frightened America. This is seen through Lisa and Stella. Initially they are both ethically opposed to Jefferies “diseased” hobby, castigating him for his intrusion “secret, private world”. They quickly “catch the disease” taking an active interest in Jefferies accusations of Mr Thorwald. Lisa enthusiastically participates in the investigation, risking her life to “find out what’s wrong with the salesman’s wife”. With the use of the camera, Hitchcock also invites his audience to share Jefferies suspicions and become personally involved. The camera is often positioned behind Jefferies and the scenes framed with a circular black border to give the impression that we too are looking through his camera or binoculars. The camera moves towards Jefferies window to create the illusion that the audience is a part of the action, moving and peering out the window to pry on the neighbour’s lives. Even though the prying is vindicated with Thorwald’s crime finally exposed, it comes at a great cost to Lisa and Jefferies. Hitchcock therefore encourages his audience to reflect on their own suspicions and paranoia and their part in the hysteria that define the McCarthy era.