

### *Rear Window*: Suspense in a Single Space

Setting a film in a single location is a staple of cinema. While intrinsically restricting, this choice can be used to serve a variety of interesting dramatic goals in a film. Classic films like *12 Angry Men* use it as a method to explore the social dynamics that arise when conflicting personalities must work together to reach consensus. More recent films like *Don't Breathe* use it to create a sense of claustrophobia and suspense, exploiting the fear of being trapped in a place with a dangerous entity. During his career, Alfred Hitchcock was no stranger to the single-location film, making at least 4 of them. Arguably, his most impressive is 1954's *Rear Window*. In it, he creates tension by utilizing an enclosed space that is familiar and emphasizing small details as signs of danger.

*Rear Window* borrows elements from some of Hitchcock's earlier works, while also serving as an evolution of the concepts introduced in others. Many of Hitchcock's films deal with the concept of "seeing bad" or the idea of previously unknown dangers being revealed to the protagonist. As Jeffries' spying begins to reveal the sinister side of one of his neighbors, the relation to films such as *Shadow of a Doubt* are obvious. *Rear Window* was Hitchcock's fourth attempt at a single-location film, with each of the films using these settings to stress the hopelessness of escape. *Lifeboat*, his first attempt juxtaposed a small, cramped boat with a massive ocean to strain the relationships of those aboard and. His second attempt, *Rope*, coincidentally featuring James Stewart as the man who solves a murder, takes a different approach. A technical marvel for its use of moving sets and long takes, Hitchcock uses the single location to trap the audience and protagonist in a place where guilt festers. *Rear Window* borrows elements from both, creating a space that feels small but densely packed and lacking in useful methods of escape.

Hitchcock uses a variety of techniques to establish the space of this film as a character in and of itself. In the opening shot, the world outside Jeffries' apartment is revealed to us as the shades rise to present the world in an almost theatrical fashion. By exposing us to this first, Hitchcock orients the audience to see this space as an important part of the narrative. From here, the camera dollies forward before panning around the area to give us an idea of the general geography of the place. After a quick glimpse of the protagonist asleep in his apartment, we return to panning around, now to introduce us to the characters that inhabit this world.

The apartments themselves are designed smartly to reflect important aspects of the characters who live in them. Miss Torso and The Songwriter have apartments with large windows that show a great deal of what they're doing inside as a reflection of their nature as performers. The couple who sleeps on the fire escape have an apartment with small windows, reflecting their disdain for being inside. There is a wall between the main room of the antagonist Thorwald's apartment and his wife's room, suggesting the divide between the two of them that eventually becomes a central plot point. These little touches add personality to the environment and humanize it before it becomes a place of murder and danger.

Hitchcock also uses these panning shots to establish some of the restrictions within the space that become pivotal as the film progresses. Only one exit from the courtyard can be seen, which is small and doesn't have much focus put on it. By doing this, Hitchcock deemphasizes it as a method of escape and makes it seem out of the ordinary for this space. He deepens the strangeness of it later in the film as Jeffries focuses on it as Thorwald leaves the complex, as this mention is steeped in the mystery of why Thorwald would be leaving so often with his work equipment.

The most important restriction is revealed as the camera pans through Jeffries' apartment, revealing that he is wheelchair-bound with a broken leg that makes it impossible for him to leave his apartment. This fundamentally changes the expectations of how the film is going to play out. An audience member familiar with Hitchcock's body of work might expect this to be another film featuring a man running around solving a crime, but this film is far from that. It immediately makes the audience wonder how exactly Hitchcock is going to alter his formula to deal with this new constraint.

As the camera continues to move through his apartment, we learn a few more things about him. The numerous cameras and photographs strewn about the place reveal Hitchcock's solution to his impediment. By establishing the protagonist as a photographer, Hitchcock establishes a few solutions to the problem of him being trapped in his apartment. For one, the keen eye for detail necessary in his line of work becomes an indispensable skill in the solving of the murder. Second, it establishes the idea that his cameras will play a role in his work, foreshadowing not only the use of them as a viewing device but also as a weapon in the film's climax.

In line with his desire to establish the space as a character itself, Hitchcock makes significant efforts to ensure that it is an ever-present part of the viewing experience. He uses similar panning shots to those from the intro throughout the film. This keeps the concept of the space fresh in our mind, while also giving us a glimpse into the continuing storylines that play out amongst the residents. Even in scenes where Jeffries is having more personal conversations, the windows will often be in frame. This ties in with the pseudo-obsession that he has with looking out these windows at his neighbors. Their presence will always make itself known, no matter if those around him want it to or not.

This constant presence of the world outside the window is also highlighted through the way the film uses sound. There's very little score in the film, with it instead opting to use diegetic sound for much of its runtime. Dialogue scenes are underscored with the sound of cars from the barely visible street, the playing and singing of The Songwriter, and the chatter of the other residents. Even though this space is small, Hitchcock's decisions create a sense of grandiosity with it, establishing the space as all-encompassing, but still constrained.

Hitchcock always put a great deal of attention into shaping the experience he wanted audiences to have with his films, and he frequently made choices to involve and implicate the audience with the events happening on screen. This is shown prominently in his film *Strangers on a Train*, where he uses the charisma and charm of the character Bruno to temporarily get the audience to feel like killing someone is fun and exciting, despite the negative repercussions. This deepens the emotional connection the audience has with the film, while also getting them to think more critically about what is happening. He does a similar thing in *Rear Window*, this time trying to get the audience to engage with the concept of voyeurism through point of view.

Hitchcock uses a variety of types of point of view throughout the film, including direct, indirect, and directorial subjectivity. Regardless of the point of view, Hitchcock is attempting to tie us as closely to the subjectivity of Jeffries as possible. Hitchcock is aware that the average viewer might not be totally on board with the concept of voyeurism. With the prevalence it has in the plot, he makes it feel like a necessity to push the action forward. Further, he gives some righteous justification for it through the idea that Jefferies does what he does for the greater good. If you solve a murder in the process, it doesn't matter that you were creeping on a few women on occasion, right?

While he makes the concept of spying on the neighbors appealing to the audience, Hitchcock doesn't want this to be a merely pleasurable experience. Arguably, it would be irresponsible to let the audience get away with ogling scantily clad women and accusing their neighbors of murder. The narrative provides a lot of pushback to Jeffries', and by extension our, willingness and obsession with looking out the window. When first introduced to the character Stella, she informs Jeffries of the legal ramifications of being a peeping tom before noting how she feels that society needs to step outside their homes and look inward for a change. Jeffries remains silent, before cutting back with a remark about how she was just repeating that quote from an old *Reader's Digest* article. That reflects the kind of tension he wants us to feel within ourselves. We're aware of the wrongness of it, but we shrug it off. He uses this tactic again later in the film with Lisa and Doyle who push back against voyeurism, to little avail. Interestingly, all the characters who are originally dismissive of it come around to understand and accept what he's doing as necessary.

Since these characters eventually come to agree with Jeffries, the real pushback comes from the predicament that Jeffries and the audience find themselves in with Thorwald. Hitchcock makes it clear that there is always an innate danger present in this kind of vigilantism. This person assumed to be a murderer is dangerous and could easily lash out for this invasion of privacy. This comes to a head at the film's climax, when Thorwald enters the apartment. We see him approaching from the darkness in a Jeffries' point of view, illustrating that we have both come to the point of reckoning for our voyeuristic pursuits.

Even though Hitchcock ties us very closely to Jeffries' subjectivity, he doesn't restrict us to only gaining information through his eyes. Hitchcock practices a kind of give and take with information, where the audience is sometimes given information before Jeffries and Jeffries is

sometimes given information before the audience. Hitchcock will often piece these sets of information together in order to provide for the audience with information crucial to the plot. An example of this combination comes when the dog belonging to the woman with the hanging basket is introduced. When the camera first shows it, it is revealed that Jeffries is currently facing away from the window and is unable to see it. This plants the seed in the audience's head of the dog's existence, allowing us to begin considering the possibilities that it can have within the plot. When returning to Jeffries' point of view, he sees the dog messing with Thorwald's flower bed and hears a woman telling the dog to head inside as Thorwald won't be happy with his meddling. This sets up several potential plot threads including the existence of the dog, the mystery of the flower bed, and the idea that Thorwald has a fixation on it.

Compared to many of his other films, *Rear Window* has a considerably slower pace than much of Hitchcock's other works. But he's still able to extract a great deal of tension from these scenes where a great deal of time is spent simply observing people through a window. This is due to the way that Hitchcock portrays Jeffries' point of view through much of these scenes.

Much of the viewing of the people around the complex done by Jeffries is through a lens, either from his camera or binoculars. Hitchcock simulates this by shrinking the frame to be focused only on the circular area that Jeffries is looking at in the moment and blacking out the sides. On a basic level, this is a tactic used to create a sense of authenticity within the film. More importantly, it establishes even the most mundane scenes as claustrophobic and suspenseful. One of the benefits of the more deliberate pace of the film is that it allows more time for the audience to process the events that are happening. When you have these extended stretches watching the individuals that Jeffries' observes without having anything else in the frame to look to, it creates a great deal of suspense. This choice echoes the obsession that he has with watching these people

and trains the audience to watch for minute details and forces the audience to approach these situations with the same obsession.

As mentioned before, Hitchcock tends to pan the camera around the space to show us what is happening even when Jeffries isn't the one looking out of the window. Doing this adds an interesting layer of storytelling to the film, as it opens us up to narratives besides the one centralized in the film. The main plot that *Rear Window* follows is that of Jeffries believing that Thorwald is a murderer, and his attempts to gather enough evidence to bring him to justice. But there are many other stories happening around here that Hitchcock brings to our attention. There's the Songwriter's journey to write a new song, Miss Lonelyhearts' romantic troubles, and the trials of the newly married couple. Showing us these enhances the narrative by establishing that there is more to this complex than Jeffries and Thorwald, enhancing the stakes for the murder to be solved. Also, Hitchcock's utilization of directorial subjectivity in these moments prime us for one of the most important reveals of the film.

By continually showing us that the complex is filled with people constantly by their windows who are living their lives, Hitchcock creates an expectation within us and within the mind of the protagonists that normality in this place is when everyone is at their windows. Later in the film when the previously mentioned dog is found dead, the camera cuts around the scene showing views of the various tenants standing in windows and on fire escapes. But there's one aspect of the scene that seems out of the ordinary. Everyone is outside listening to the dog's owner give her speech about how neighbors are supposed to care about each other, except Thorwald, who is revealed to have killed the dog. Had Hitchcock's use of point of view not emphasized the people living around the complex, this detail wouldn't stand out as much to either us or Jeffries, who comments on it after the fact.

Hitchcock's use of point of view is consistent throughout the film, but he takes several departures from his established formula during the finale, using them to astounding effect. The first break from his formula comes during Thorwald and Jeffries' initial confrontation. He maintains his emphasis on keeping making the space feel claustrophobic by keeping it dark, distorting our conception of the space itself. But as Jeffries begins to blind Thorwald with his flashbulbs, we see an interesting change. Up to this point we've seen things from Jeffries' point of view and Hitchcock's directorial point of view. But Hitchcock brings us into Thorwald's subjectivity by showing the visual effect of the flashbulb from his point of view, as well as seeing Jeffries' point of view of Thorwald's reactions. This reflects the complicated nature of how we are supposed to view voyeurism throughout the film. Jeffries' point of view reflects the positive aspects of the voyeurism, as it is meant to serve the greater good by stopping this man who is a danger to the community. Thorwald's point of view is the negative aspects, a punishment for your eyes for the indulgences you've been a part of.

The most jarring change from the stylistic choices of the rest of the film comes when Thorwald attacks Jeffries and holds him outside the window. This is the part of the film most reminiscent of other Hitchcock films, as the tension is brought on through immediacy and dramatic action. As the other residents come out to see what is happening, the footage is artificially sped up to make them move faster than normal. This is a direct contrast to the more measured pace of the rest of the film, showing that the quietly simmering tension of the earlier events has finally come to a dramatic head. The most interesting change in this point is the way that Hitchcock reverses the notion of voyeurism that has been so prevalent through the rest of the film. Jeffries has been the watcher this entire time, observing all of those around him potentially without their awareness. In this moment, the residents are coming out to be voyeurs of Jeffries in

this particularly embarrassing and stressful moment of his life. Hitchcock is showing here that watching is always going to be a two-way street, with the watcher eventually becoming the watched. But Jeffries' being watched ends positively, with him being saved. In this, Hitchcock deigns to give the audience a concrete opinion on what side they should take, rather leaving it up to them to decide.

Interestingly, Hitchcock opts to keep this scene short, with the most action-packed part of the whole confrontation taking less than a minute. He also places it at the very end of the film, where some of his other works would have interspersed moments like this throughout the runtime. I believe this speaks to the inherent concept of why single-location films are made. So much of cinema is reliant on the concept of release, letting the audience off the hook for whatever events have been happening. *Rear Window*, by nature, relies that trapping of emotion to create suspense. Hitchcock's inclusion of this scene feels almost like throwing the moviegoing audience a bone, giving them the release they so desperately desire after almost two hours of slow simmering tension.

There is an inherent difficulty in creating a film that takes place within only one setting. It can limit the story possibilities available to you due to the removal of accessibility to other locations that necessary for cohesive storytelling. But it can also be incredibly liberating, causing a filmmaker to deal with the challenges in a way that creates an exciting and innovative cinematic experience. *Rear Window* shows that for Alfred Hitchcock, setting a film in one setting was most certainly the latter. By exploiting the concept of the contained space, Hitchcock was able to create a film that not only draws tension from its confined nature, but also from the small details that come together in order to effectively bring the audience into the story.