

Set Design and Hitchcock's *Rear Window*



James Stewart, the Man in a Wheelchair

Rating: ** (1954) Running Time: 115 minutes. MPAA Rating - PG**

Credits

Director: Alfred Hitchcock

Producer: Alfred Hitchcock

Editor: George Tomasini

Costumes: Edith Head

Sets: Hal Pereira, Joseph Johnson, Sam Comer, and Ray Mayer

Screenplay: John Michael Hayes (from a novella by Cornell Woolrich)

Assistant Director: Herbert Coleman

Cinematography: Robert Burks

Music: Franz Waxman

Special Effects: John P. Fulton

Cast

L. B. ("Jeff") Jeffries: James Stewart

Stella: Thelma Ritter

Miss Torso: Georgine Darcy

The Composer: Ross Bagdasarian

Lisa Fremont: Grace Kelly

Lars Thorwald: Raymond Burr

Miss Lonelyhearts: Judith Evelyn

Mrs. Thorwald: Irene Winston

by Eric Verburg



James Stewart and Grace Kelly

The sets and those objects that occupy them play a very important role in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*. The movie takes place during four days, from Wednesday to Saturday, and the events are filmed from the window of one apartment and mostly through the eyes of one person—magazine photographer L.B. (“Jeff”) Jeffries (Jimmy Stewart), who is confined to a wheelchair with his leg in a cast.

All action in the movie takes place in a block of apartments in Manhattan, or more precisely, within the buildings surrounding the inner courtyard. In these apartments the people go about their lives unselfconsciously revealing themselves to the eye of the camera (Jeff's camera and the film camera often become one). Most of the buildings surrounding the central courtyard are typical American city brick apartments. On the far right from Jeff's (and the camera's) perspective, is a multi-story plastered building, in front a four-story brick house, directly in front a small, two story building—to the left of which is an alley leading to the street (which represents freedom of movement and perhaps *escape*).

On the extreme left, another red brick building rises that is so high that its upper story never appears in the film. The landscaped courtyard is partly paved and built on different levels, and at the rear to the right a section juts out with a roof terrace joined to a glass-fronted studio flat—the domicile of Miss “Torso.” This then is the world of the film.

Jeff's home is a two-room apartment. The film takes place either from the vantage point or inside his living room, which has a kitchenette separated by cupboards. The apartment contains a large bay window that overlooks the inner courtyard, a fireplace, a door to the single bedroom, and a front door three steps up from the hallway floor.



James Stewart Trades His Camera for Binoculars

The bedroom door is opened only once in the film, when Jeff's fiancée, Lisa (Grace Kelly), goes in to change into her nightgown. Because of Jeff's broken leg, his bed has been moved near the bay window, and the other furnishings have been moved to compensate for his immobility and to enhance his medical treatment. (The familiar objects of Jeff's apartment become important in the movie's last scenes, when Thorwald intrudes Jeff's world.)

For the most part, the entire film is seen from Jeff's perspective, and all action takes place within one huge set. We, the audience, watch Jeff as he in turn, camera-in hand, watches the various apartment dwellers go about their lives. The spatial restrictions provide for a very cinematic film because it consists of three basic things: Jeff looking out at his neighbors, what he actually sees, and his reaction to what he sees. (Apparently no one uses curtains in this particular apartment building, and so the apartment dwellers become exhibitionists to be savored by Jeff's voyeuristic impulses.)

The language of objects plays a central role in *Rear Window*. The objects and their locations give many important clues about Jeff and Lisa (and the other protagonists) to the audience. The photographer's camera, of central importance literally and figuratively to the movie, compliments the running theme of voyeurism in the movie.



What Shall They Do?

The objects in Jeff's apartment give hints as to why he is in a wheelchair with his leg in a full cast. In the apartment are smashed 8-x 10-camera equipment, a wonderful photograph of a racecar accident, other photos of fiery blazes and accidents, and a war scene. Also, there is a framed negative of a blonde woman's face, and the same photograph of the woman on the cover of a large stack of *LIFE* Magazines, labeled "Paris Fashions."



Thorwald Is Trapped

These objects represent Jeff's love of danger and excitement, and reveal that he was injured while taking a photograph. Here we have Jeff's masculine world of risk-taking and danger contrasted sharply with Lisa's feminine world of beauty and fashion. Although the camera is Jeff's tool of the trade, during the film it acts as a means for observing, investigating, and warning; and in the end it becomes a weapon of self-defense.



As Usual, the Police Are No Help

The murderer's apartment contains the knife, saw, and the aluminum jewelry sample case that all hint at the possibility that Thorwald (Raymond Burr) has killed his wife and dismembered her body. The apartment also contains the rope-bound trunk with the wife's belongings. All of the evidence points to murder, and the audience joins Jeff and Lisa in their quest to unravel this murder mystery. At one point, Jeff and his assistants, as well as the audience, are actually temporarily led to believe that the rope-bound trunk contains bits of the body. "He better get that trunk out of there before it starts to leak," says Stella.



*Jeff and Stella Contemplate
The Next Move*

The murdered woman's ring also plays an important role in the story. At one point, Lisa slips the ring onto her own finger. This action has a double meaning. It signifies at once Lisa's desire to marry Jeff and the fact that she will become an object of perverted desire to the murderer. Lisa's fashionable clothes, and her beauty and sexuality, symbolized by her provocative nightgown, all highlight her fetish for the expensive things in life. It is these very objects of her desire that create a distance between herself and Jeff—or so he thinks. Jeff can't believe that if he marries Lisa, he will still be able to live his life of freedom. To Jeff, Lisa, with her beauty and femininity, represents an emasculating force—one that will deny him both freedom and bachelor pleasures.



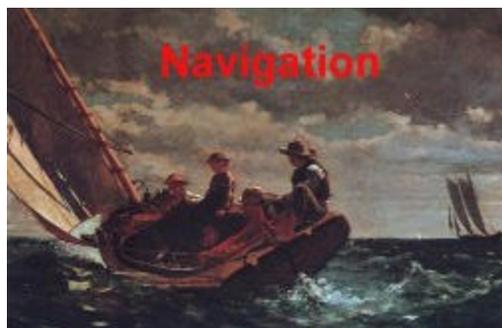
The Trap Is Set

Jeff certainly doesn't want his future marriage with Lisa to end up like that of Thorwald's. It is significant that our lasting images of Thorwald are of him being berated by his nagging wife. In the end, the horrible murderer loses some of his vileness when he is revealed as the pitiful product of a cruel fate he only tried to escape from. The movie ends significantly with Jeff facing away from the window and in the same company as Lisa. She is reading a magazine of the type Jeff would much prefer her to read. But this idyllic image of the happy couple is undercut in a typically Hitchcockian way. When she knows he is asleep, Lisa pulls out her own preferred reading material—Harper's Bazaar.



*Raymond Burr Caught
In His Own Web*

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