

## Rear Window (1954)

“Tell me what you think you saw and what you think it means.”

--Lisa in *Rear Window*

### Credits:

Producer and Director: Alfred Hitchcock for Paramount

Screenplay: John Michael Hayes, from a novella by Cornell Woolrich

Cinematographer: Robert Burks

Music: Franz Waxman

Costumes: Edith Head

Cast: James Stewart (L.B. Jefferies), Grace Kelly (Lisa Fremont), Thelma Ritter (Stella), Raymond Burr (Lars Thorwald)

### Background:

After a long career that had begun in England (*The Thirty-Nine Steps*, *Secret Agent*, *Sabotage*, *The Lady Vanishes*) and following a succession of Hollywood hits (*Rebecca*, *Suspicion*, *Shadow of a Doubt*, *Spellbound*, *Notorious*, *Strangers on a Train*, *Dial M for Murder* [with Grace Kelly]), Hitchcock was at the height of his commercial and artistic power. (Note the use of his signature cartoon self-portrait during the closing credits.) “I was feeling very creative at the time,” he has said. The challenge of making a film with a single set and confining nearly every shot to the perspective of his incapacitated protagonist obviously appealed to him. Hitchcock became one of the first directors to be celebrated by the *auteur* theory in the early 1960s, and he remains today probably the most written about filmmaker in the history of the cinema.

A critical debate persists over whether Hitchcock should be regarded as a talented entertainer (“master of suspense,” as he came to be known) or a thoughtful artist, however unwilling to acknowledge his own deeper concerns. As with *Rear Window*, David Thomson has noted, “Hitchcock’s best films all grow out of his instinctive employment of our impulses and fantasy life in the cinema. And his moral seriousness consists of showing us the violent, psychotic fruits of some of those impulses and shyly asking us to claim them as our own.” Whatever his ultimate place in the pantheon of great directors, it is difficult to think of another filmmaker who has created so many—at least a dozen—enduring movies.

### Stylistic Qualities:

During his apprenticeship in the 1920s, Hitchcock was influenced by both German Expressionism (e.g., the dream sequence in *Suspicion*) and Soviet montage theory (e.g., the shower sequence in *Psycho*). Although thoroughly immersed in the classical Hollywood style by the time of *Rear Window*, Hitchcock reflects this early training in his elaborate construction of point-of-view shots and in the editing of brief scenes of the various neighbors in the courtyard. One unusual feature of this film is the elaborate use of fade-outs, which are otherwise used sparingly by Hitchcock. Why are they so prominent here?

Here are some other noteworthy instances of the director’s mastery of cinematic technique:

1. the obsessive *panning shots*, which reflect Jeff's point of view in his search for entertainment and, later, meaningful clues;
2. the *superimpositions* that express Jeff's subconscious associations during the dream sequence;
3. the *high angle shots* that express Jeff's sudden vulnerability as he awaits Thorwald's menacing approach to the apartment;
4. the *low angle* shots of Thorwald, *lit from below*, as he confronts Jeff;
5. the *color saturation* following the bright flashbulbs, corresponding to Thorwald's temporary blindness.

Topics for Discussion:

1. Most discussions of *Rear Window* have responded to the film's self-reflexivity: Jefferies's immobilized position gazing out at the "framed" and "edited" lives of his neighbors, his gradual involvement in their lives and his impotence to intercede, all reflect in a calculated way the conditions of movie spectatorship. Robert Stam and Roberta Pearson argue that "*Rear Window* is both indictment and defense of the cinema." What are the responsibilities and dangers of Jeff's life as a picture-taker?

2. While the gender relationships, fashions, and visual style of the film may now seem dated, the issue of what Lisa calls "rear window ethics" remains surprisingly relevant. Jeff's unauthorized investigation certainly violates the privacy rights of his neighbors, but it also uncovers a murder that might have gone unrecognized. Does the film ultimately comment on the question that goes unresolved when Lisa first raises it?

3. *Rear Window* has been a favorite—and controversial—topic of feminist film criticism, which emphasizes Jeff's compulsive voyeurism and Lisa's compliant exhibitionism, the willing object of the male gaze. Defenders of the film have stressed both its critique of Jeff's detached position and, by contrast, Lisa's freedom, mobility, and power. Critics have noted how Lisa's behavior is motivated entirely by her desire to become the permanent object of Jeff's visual attention. With this conflict in mind, what is the significance of the movie's epilogue, which returns Jeff to where he began, sleeping, and gives the last "look" to Lisa?