14

Rear Window: Hitchcock's Allegory of the Cave

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Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) opens with a long panning shot that takes us on a tour of an apartment courtyard. As the view focuses on the studio apartment of the film's protagonist, we see smashed 8 × 10 camera equipment, a striking photo of a race car accident, other photos of war and disaster, and additional photographic paraphernalia. Eventually we see the resident, L.B. Jefferies (James Stewart), in a full leg cast, fast asleep. When he awakens, he turns his wheelchair to spend his day as he has spent each day for the last five weeks: watching the lives of his courtyard neighbors through his large rear window. With this visual information as background, the opening lines from his recently arrived home care nurse Stella (Thelma Ritter) telegraphs the themes that Hitchcock will explore in *Rear Window*:

> The New York state sentence for a Peeping Tom is six months in the work house. They got no windows in the work house. You know, in the old days, they used to put your eyes out with a red-hot poker. Any of those bikini bombshells you're always watchin' worth a red-hot poker?

The concerns that Hitchcock raises about the dangers of voyeurism (the coveting of and obsession with the lives of others) and the role of popular art (film in his case) in magnifying those dangers are not new. In Plato's Allegory of the Cave (*The Republic*) he likens human existence, prior to philosophical examination by the light of reason, to being perennially chained

inside a cave. Imprisoned people mistake shadows projected on the cave wall (sense experience) for the true reality in the world outside the cave (the world of forms). In Plato's allegory, the philosophically unenlightened are captives bound to mistake shadows for reality until they embrace reason. Consider the analogies between the projection of movies on the wall of darkened theaters and the shadows on the cave wall, and that between the bound captives and the film audience. These are analogies that Plato himself would have appreciated, as he held that tragedy (drama) and poetry were mimesis or imitation. If sensory experiences are but shadows of the forms, then films are imitations of the shadows, copies of copies.

Plato criticized all imitations as failing to reveal the forms or eternal realities. Among other things, Plato worried about the seductive power of tragedy to trump reason with emotion. He thought that tragedy pandered to people's base desire for violent spectacle and was in general a poor teacher of virtue, as the good were often punished and the wicked rewarded. He worried that people would confuse poetry with reality. For this reason, in Book X of *The Republic,* he famously excludes tragedy and poetry from the ideal state. Plato's ethical and aesthetic decision to banish this kind of art from the Republic follows from his metaphysical commitment to forms; his epistemological view that reason, not the senses or emotion, provides true knowledge; and his aesthetic view that art is imitation. Plato believed his philosophical view about the corrupting nature of this kind of art was well supported by his observations of its effects.

Aristotle defends art against Plato's attacks in *The Poetics,* arguing that imitation (art) is natural from an early age and is educational and cathartic by appealing to people's minds, feelings, and senses. Aristotle rejected a transcendent world of forms and was more open to sensory experience as an aid to knowledge. Heavy-duty metaphysical and epistemological commitments aside, philosophical debates about the moral and social value of art have continued to rage since the time of Plato and Aristotle.[1]

[1] For more on Plato's theory of forms and Aristotle's rejection of the theory, see Anthony Gottlieb, *The Dream of Reason: A History of Western Philosophy from the Greeks to the Renaissance.* (New York: Norton, 2002).

Hitchcock's *Rear Window* is a film about the nature and value of film, and the act of watching film.[2] In *Rear Window,* L.B. Jefferies is the bound captive or film viewer, and his movie is the scene outside the large Rear Window of his New York apartment. *Rear Window* carries on the conversation between Plato and Aristotle and, it will be argued, arrives at the correct conclusion, which is that both Plato and Aristotle are right in a sense. Watching films is neither inherently stupefying nor enlightening; it depends on both the film and the viewer. This is one of the principal messages of *Rear Window.* While some films, such as *Rear Window,* help to awaken the viewer to reality and themselves, other films merely entertain us or numb us into oblivion. *Rear Window* is a film about the great potential for film to do both good and evil. As is so often the case, Hitchcock manages to construct a film in which the philosophical depth, narrative, and other cinematic virtues do not get in each other's way. Instead they complement one another perfectly.

Judging Art: Plato versus Aristotle

While both Plato's and Aristotle's grand philosophical theories may have driven their views about the moral worth of poetry and tragedy, we can still appreciate the basic issues and their differences of opinion. This is especially true in this dark media age of reality TV, journalism as partisan entertainment, and formulaic Hollywood films filled with mindless sex and violence.[3] Plato claims that tragedy is "a harm to the mind of its audience" and its effect on society is that "pleasure and pain will rule as monarchs . . . instead of the law and that rational principle which is always and by all thought to be the best."[4] Plato says the dramatist arouses, rather than checks, emotions. Plato forbids imitativeness, which he defines as the desire and ability to

[2] This is a well-worn view of the film; see, for example, John Fawell, *Hitchcock's Rear Window: The Well Made Film.* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001).

[3] For an excellent defense of Plato's seemingly reactionary views on poetry and tragedy in *The Republic,* a defense grounded in the modern entertainment state and its soul-killing effects, see Alexander Nehamas, "Plato and the Mass Media," in David Goldblatt and Lee B. Brown, eds., *Aesthetics: A Reader in Philosophy of the Arts,* second edition (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 2001), pp. 417–425.

[4] Plato, 1989. *The Republic, Book X* in George Dickie, Richard Sclafani, and Ronald Roblin, eds., *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology,* second edition (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), pp. 20–31.

imitate anything independently of its moral quality and without proper blame or praise toward its object. So for Plato, not only are tragedy and poetry a shadow of a shadow, they imitate for the sake of imitation rather than maximize virtue and provide moral instruction.

According to Plato, "the artist knows appearance and not reality," and "the work of the artist is at the third remove from the essential nature of things." This is not only because tragedy and poetry distract us from the forms, but because "poetry, however skillfully executed, is no evidence that the poet really possessed the knowledge required for the right conduct of actual life."[5] Plato's assumption here is that in order to teach virtue, right conduct, or any skill, the teacher must himself possess this virtue or skill. Plato's question, reformulated for the age of video and film, is what the profession of filmmaker or photographer makes of the practitioner, other than a voyeur or bystander. What virtues does it impart? As we will discuss, several scenes in *Rear Window* suggest that as a photojournalist L.B. Jefferies is himself a fatally detached professional voyeur. Poetry and tragedy (film) are not only harmful to the practitioner but to the patron as well, because they tend to trump reason with unchecked emotion and illusion, and according to Plato, reason is the only hope one has of perceiving the forms.

Because Aristotle rejects the transcendent world of forms, he is much more open to sense experience, emotion, and intuition as means of acquiring knowledge. As well as viewing poetry as providing needed "catharsis, purgation, and purification," Aristotle also sees poetry and tragedy as being more like a science. This is because he holds that, like science, poetry and drama impart "universal, essential, and necessary truths." With their focus on character and action, poetry and drama have greater moral significance than history because they are virtual simulations of ethical conundrums and real-life situations, and can thereby transform us morally. Poetry and drama cultivate and refine our moral sensibilities because "feeling pleasure or pain at mere representations is not far removed from reactions to reality." For Aristotle, imitation is not only

[5] For more on Plato's views about poetry in particular, see *Ion* in *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology*, pp. 10–19.

natural, psychologically cleansing, and stress relieving, it is also highly instructive.[6]

There is much regarding the nature of poetry and drama about which Plato and Aristotle do agree: 1) that they are imitative arts; 2) that they rouse the emotions; and 3) that the rousing of emotions by imitative means has an effect upon the whole personality and behavior of the audience. Furthermore, "Aristotle like Plato thinks that there is a fundamental distinction between artistic creation and discursive reasoning. He does not doubt that theory and art are distinct, or that giving a reasoned account of something is a very different activity from making a poem or play." The essential difference is that, unlike Plato however, Aristotle does not therefore hold that the non-theoretical must belong to the irrational. "Both theory and art are rational, and amenable to rational investigation. Both can result in knowledge, but two different kinds of knowledge, practical and theoretical."[7]

As we will see, in addition to affirming Platonic worries about the effects of film watching, *Rear Window* also supports Aristotelian claims about the insight and wisdom-generating potential of art. That is, *Rear Window* poignantly raises the same worries about film watching that Plato's *Republic* raises about drama and poetry, and so *Rear Window* itself illustrates Aristotle's claims about the potential wisdom in and virtues of art.

Form and Content Unified: *Rear Window* as a Film about Film

There are several formal and content-oriented features that leave little doubt that *Rear Window* is intentionally a film about film. L.B. Jefferies, wheelchair-bound with a broken leg, is an immobilized spectator watching unseen in the dark. From this voyeuristic perspective, he is isolated from others and unable to act on what he sees. In fact, as a photographer and photojournalist, Jefferies is a professional voyeur. His closest friends are his binoculars and telephoto lens. In short, Jefferies represents

[6] For more on Aristotle's defense of poetry and drama, see his *Poetics* in *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology*, pp. 32–47.

[7] Eric Schaper, "Plato and Aristotle on the Arts: From Prelude to Aesthetics," in *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology*, pp. 48–56.

the quintessential movie spectator alone in the darkened theater. The view framed by his rear window is his movie screen. We become voyeurs along with Jefferies as the film is shot largely from his visual point-of-view.

Among the formal elements that indicate *Rear Window* is intentionally a film about film, the movie begins as the shades on Jefferies's rear window roll up like an old-fashioned movie curtain. In the middle of the film the shades are rolled down and up again like an intermission, and at the end the shades are rolled down into their final resting place.[8] In case the cinematic imagery is lost on the viewer, during the "intermission" when Lisa (Grace Kelly) is rolling the shades down she says, "Show's over, previews of coming attractions."

In addition to the fact that all the action is framed by Jefferies's movie screen-like rear window, his primary view through this window is into other "railroad flats" laid out like individual frames on a filmstrip. The audience cannot escape the fact that they are subjected to "movie-vision" throughout the film. The various occupants of the apartments on which Jefferies spies appear as players on stage or screen. Each apartment is like a different scene from the same movie being played simultaneously instead of serially.

The very staging of *Rear Window* (the picture-box window apartments) suggests the key theme: the viewer as voyeur. As observers of film, we are watching the actions of other people. The form of *Rear Window* is necessarily linked to its content as the story *revolves* around the act of viewing other people "act" in their lives. Indeed, as audience members we are *meta*-voyeurs watching Jefferies watch others.

Rear Window's structure manipulates the very essence of form. The form is like a "mode of presentation" or a way of seeing an object or many objects. The form is the structure within which we "play" with the content, but is bound intimately to the content. How we see things—in movies and in real life—is precisely what's at issue in *Rear Window*. Hitchcock plays on the various structures (the form) of film such that our interpretation of events becomes biased. We are led to believe that Thorwald

[8] For a thorough overview and treatment of the formal features of *Rear Window*, see Stefan Sharff, *The Art of Looking in Hitchcock's Rear Window* (New York: Limelight, 1997).

(Raymond Burr) has murdered his wife by watching his actions through the eyes of Jefferies and the "lens" of the picture-box vision created for us by the stage itself. In this way Hitchcock manipulates the viewer into a particular interpretation of events.

The Unifying and Self-Referential Role of Music in *Rear Window*

There are many other clues that *Rear Window* is consciously and self-reflexively about the potential for art to enlighten as well as delude. Perhaps the most obvious clue is the role of music. The entire soundtrack of the film is nothing but incidental sounds and music from around the courtyard. The characters comment on the music at various points in the film as it is the score of their real lives. For example, throughout the film the composer (Ross Bagdasarian) is struggling to complete the score for a song we ultimately find out is called "Lisa." Early in the film the composer sings Nat King Cole's "Mona Lisa." Hitchcock's cameo in *Rear Window* is in the composer's apartment. Lisa herself admires the composer's song and before she knows its title comments that "it's as though it were written especially for us." Later she says to Jefferies, "Where does a man get the inspiration to write a song like that? I wish I was creative." Jefferies's crass reply implies that the composer's real inspirations (or motivations) are sex and greed. The popular song "Lisa" no doubt symbolizes popular films such as *Rear Window* and raises Hitchcock's concern as to whether popular art can be important as well as commercially driven.

This song and the discussion it engenders between Lisa and Jefferies again call into question the value of art—especially popular art. The composer's music is all that connects the isolated and alienated neighbors in the courtyard, analogous to a film and its watchers in the dark. Perhaps most telling of all, it is the beauty of the song "Lisa" that stops Miss Lonely-Hearts (Judith Evelyn) from committing suicide. At the end of the film we see Miss Lonely-Hearts in the composer's apartment telling him that he will never know how much his song means to her. In addition to the composer's music, Jefferies's photography, and Lisa's fashion, *Rear Window* also features a dancer, a sculptor, and a singer, referencing the central role of art in the film, in the lives of the characters and in the lives of the viewers. The

composer's creative process throughout the film parallels Hitchcock's, reflecting the state of play in the film's unfolding. The song is completed just at the end of the film when balance and harmony are restored to the courtyard and to the relationships of its inhabitants.

Film and Emancipation

Rear Window raises the Platonic aesthetic and ethical question of whether film watching and the obsession with the visual media are good or bad for the soul of society and the individual. *Rear Window* answers "yes" to both. The claim in this chapter is that *Rear Window* itself is a therapeutic experience from which both the audience and L.B. Jefferies emerge wiser at the end. *Rear Window* is Hitchcock's attempt to free his fellow prisoners from the illusion-engendering cave; a function Plato thought only a philosopher wielding reason could perform. Indeed, the lighting of Jefferies's apartment is quite suggestive in this regard, as everything and everyone projects great shadows on the walls. Hitchcock, himself a voyeur, is both self-critical and sympathetic to our plight. He seeks to bring us back into the light through the very thing that binds us to the dark—cinema. Hitchcock appreciates that film and the filmmaker have a far better chance of "freeing the prisoners" without suffering the Socratic fate of unending "hostility and incomprehension." After viewing *Rear Window*, we are wiser about the dangers and thrills of voyeurism, the wastefulness of *ennui*, and the risks of preferring fantasy to reality. *Rear Window* liberates us from the blinding habitual boredom of our own lives.

Film can have either dormitive or awakening powers. *Rear Window* is a self-consciously self-reflexive film designed to dissolve our unthinking dissatisfaction with reality and bring to light our deep-seated need for dangerous fantasies. Hitchcock indulges voyeurism and dark fantasies as he awakens us to the risks they entail. We're given the opportunity to fall back in love with our own everyday lives and transcend our self-imposed boredom with anything we already identify as our own. *Rear Window* raises the same concerns about the voyeuristic and potentially mind-numbing effects of film watching that Plato's *Republic* raises about poetry and tragedy. Indeed, one can view *Rear Window* as a filmic Platonic dialogue about the moral

nature of film, demonstrating that film has the power to teach as well as delude. The very same features of film that make it such a potentially potent pacifier also make it a powerful tool for self-awareness.

Is Film Watching Good for the Soul and Society?

Rear Window is often interpreted as a film about the pitfalls of voyeurism and the theory-dependence of perception, or the precarious nature of interpreting experience and passing judgment on others. At the beginning of the film, Stella, Jefferies's insurance nurse, says, "We have become a race of Peeping Toms. People need to get outside their own house and look in for a change. . . . How's that for home spun philosophy?" and "I can smell trouble right here in this apartment. First you smash your leg, then you get to looking out the window, see things you shouldn't see. Trouble." The following dialogue between Jefferies and his friend, Detective Doyle (Wendell Corey), further sharpens the point:

> **Doyle:** That's a secret, private world you're looking into out there; people do a lot of things in private they couldn't possibly explain in public.
>
> **Jefferies:** Much as I hate to give Doyle credit, he might have got a hold of something when he said that was pretty private stuff out there. I wonder if it's ethical to watch a man with binoculars and long focus lenses. Do you suppose it's ethical even when you prove he didn't commit a crime?

Whereas Doyle probably represents a skeptical "male" brand of reason, Stella represents commonsense and sensible intuition—what Doyle derisively refers to as "woman's intuition." As Stella puts it, "I'm not an educated woman but nothing has caused the human race so much trouble as intelligence." The focus on commonsense intuition over intellect (theoretical interpretation) is anti-Platonic, as is the fact that in *Rear Window* it is the women who exhibit the deepest moral sensibilities and possess the greatest wisdom. Hitchcock suggests that women are much less likely than men to while away their lives as voyeurs, and so live much more in the present moment.

Regarding the state of modern romance, Stella says, "Don't analyze each other to death, just come together. . . . Modern love is over intellectualized. . . . just spread a little commonsense on the bread." What Stella is getting at, and what much of *Rear Window* is about, is the way voyeurism particularly affects our romantic relationships. Stella sees that Jefferies's inability to embrace his own life and his existential boredom are leading him to pass up a great thing in Lisa. Every window that Jefferies peeps into has a romantic or sexual relationship on display for his consideration and comparison. He avoids his own problems and conflicts with Lisa by being a voyeur. Lisa wants Jefferies to settle down in New York and eventually marry her, which to him sounds like torture. Almost all the characters in *Rear Window* are shopping for true love in one way or another. Jefferies's search for ideal love leads him to cruelly reject the real thing, even when it is starring him in the face. Thorwald's search for true love leads to murder, and Miss Lonely-Hearts's search almost ends in her suicide.

Though it may not be obvious at first, Stella is raising the same concerns about voyeurism that Plato was raising about poetry and drama. Since voyeurism *à la* Jefferies represents film watching in *Rear Window*, Stella is taking a Platonic position about our obsession with watching movies. Whereas Plato focuses more on the dangers of emotion trumping reason, *Rear Window* focuses on the anti-social detachment engendered by our voyeuristic obsession. For example, Jefferies is a "window shopper," bored with every aspect of his life except the dangerous assignments abroad and the dark fantasies he envisions spying out his rear window. He cannot take his eyes off other people's lives and other women such as Miss Torso (Georgine Darcy). Jefferies ignores his own day-to-day life and even ignores the beautiful and smart Lisa. He is more interested in Miss Torso than the "too perfect" woman sitting in his own lap. He has more compassion for Miss Lonely-Hearts than he does for Lisa. Jefferies is more interested in everyone else's life than his own, hence his choice of profession, and his total inability to settle down and commit to Lisa, his real life, or anything else.

Jefferies is bored with anything that smacks of the domestic, everyday, or mundane, and is only truly interested in those experiences that bring great risk, excitement, and titillation. Not unlike many of today's entertainment addicts, Jefferies is a peak

experience junky. Here we can see that Plato's and Hitchcock's concerns are really one and the same. Voyeurism and unjustified boredom with one's own life are two sides of the same coin. Just as with the overwrought Greek audiences described by Plato, Jefferies's inability to appreciate and embody his own real life leads to voyeurism. This in turn heightens the boredom with everyday life by fueling his dark fantasies, which then drives him to seek out increasingly risky thrills. We learn that Jefferies broke his leg and almost died because he was in the middle of a race track trying to get a shot that was "something dramatically different" when a car flipped over. Jefferies is a tourist in his own life on an endless vacation. In illustration of his dark fantasies, Lisa calls his voyeuristic behavior "diseased" and she comments on their disappointment at discovering that Thorwald might be innocent: "We are frightening ghouls, despairing that the man didn't kill his wife! We should be happy the woman is alive and well. What happened to love thy neighbor?"

In a central piece of dialogue, a neighbor woman (Bess Flowers) says to the entire courtyard when she finds her murdered poodle, "Neighbors speak to each other, like each other, care if we live or die. Did you [Thorwald, as we later learn] kill him [the dog] because he liked you, just because he liked you?" Dogs are good neighbors and "man's best friend," so to harm one is most certainly an act of self-loathing. This scene emphasizes the modern or postmodern themes of isolation, alienation, and self-loathing in *Rear Window*. Unlike sitting around a camp fire telling stories to one another, sitting alone in a dark theater watching a movie can isolate us from our fellow citizens. Cinema and other such entertainment can make us increasingly alienated, apolitical, antisocial, self-centered, and can further erode self-reflection, introspection, and self-awareness. None of the people in the courtyard (including Jefferies) are "neighbors." Instead, they are more like moviegoers sitting next to one another alone in the dark.

Judgment, Voyeurism, and Happiness

The warnings about: 1) hasty interpretation of experience and the rash judgment of others; 2) the dangers of voyeurism; and 3) the promises and pitfalls of film watching, are all inextricably related in *Rear Window*. As we have seen, the primary focus is

on how these three elements play out with respect to love and romantic relationships. Voyeurism often leads us to unjustifiably interpret other people's lives and souls as happier or darker than our own. Since our expectations and desires shape what we perceive, we often misinterpret or crudely interpret our experience. Desires and expectations are part of the reason we often perceive shadows rather than reality itself. Hitchcock appreciates that the vehicle of film represents and magnifies our inherently voyeuristic tendencies, and he sees that watching films can either provide us with therapy or deepen our delusions.

In *Rear Window*, perhaps we can even say that each relationship Jefferies spies on represents a part of his psyche. For example, Thorwald and his crime represent Jefferies's dark desire to be rid of Lisa, and Miss Lonely-Hearts represents his deep loneliness brought on by his inability to truly connect with anyone in his own life. Thorwald and the others he sees through his rear window hold up an exaggerated mirror to Jefferies and represent various commonsense lessons such as: "be careful what you wish for," "things are not always what they seem," and "the grass is not always greener." These are the very "necessary and universal truths" Aristotle was lauding poetry and drama for illustrating. The various relationships (or lack thereof) spied on also provide different models of romantic situations for Jefferies to consider for himself. However, as we discover at the film's end, many of his judgments about the people he is watching turn out to be wrong.

Interpreting Film and Experience

Much of *Rear Window* is about the interpretation of experience and the judgment of others. Jefferies, Lisa, Stella, and Doyle provide us with competing interpretations of Thorwald's behavior and the events that transpire in his apartment. Are the knife and saw in Thorwald's apartment household implements or murder weapons? Is the roped-up trunk a piece of luggage or a coffin? Did Thorwald's wife (Irene Winston) disappear because he killed her for being an insufferable "nag" or because she took a train back home? The complexities of interpreting Thorwald's actions and the surrounding events are a perfect analogy with the complexities of interpreting our daily experience and the

actions of those around us. *Rear Window* leaves little doubt that Hitchcock intended this analogy, as Lisa says to Jefferies when she finally becomes suspicious of Thorwald, "Tell me everything you saw and what you think it means."

Rear Window illustrates that, just like real-life experience, any good film or work of art will come with its own interpretative mysteries. But *Rear Window* also echoes Aristotle's claim about poetry and drama. Great films will not only raise philosophical or interpretative questions, they will actually simulate, "game," or test various possible answers against one another without forcing conclusions. In art generally, and in literature and film in particular, we often value ambiguity, indefiniteness, and even contradiction. These features can add interest and intensify engagement. In philosophy, however, to call writing ambiguous, indefinite, or contradictory is normally a serious criticism. Similarly, literature and film with a clear, starkly articulated, unambiguous "message" is usually berated as being pedantic or preachy.

Because of their ambiguity and their closeness to real-life experiences, the philosophical interpretation of films is great practice for "real life" philosophical interpretation. Since the film world is fictional, it is much easier to get past the audience's natural defense mechanisms. As Adam Morton puts it:

> What is the special affinity of film and philosophy? The affinity clearly goes deeper than the common concern with illusion. I suggest that one source of the affinity is the ability of film to present very large amounts of information in a way that combines both pictorial and narrative presentation. As a result a film can present many of the beliefs and preferences that would make up a coherent alternative account of the physical or moral universe. We can get into the workings of a proposed set of values, a metaphysics, or an account of human motivation. It is just conceivable that this could be done with words alone, but words alone will not summon the sensory and emotional correlates that in actual human life glue large bodies of belief and value into workable unities. If this is so it can explain why a film can be such an eloquent example to support, illustrate, or rebut a philosophical claim.[9]

[9] From his review of Christopher Falzon's *Philosophy Goes to the Movies: An Introduction to Philosophy* (Routledge, 2002) in *British Journal of Aesthetics* 43:3 (2003), pp. 332–34.

The self-reflexive nature of *Rear Window* is such that the riddle of Thorwald's actions and the disappearance of his wife give us a major clue about how to interpret the film. Hitchcock clearly appreciated the potential pedagogical and philosophical value of film and sought to exploit it in *Rear Window* with respect to some central concerns in aesthetics.

Judgment and Interpretation

Jefferies is wrong about so many of his neighbors but right about Thorwald. He judges Lisa to be a soft, pampered snob who is spoiled by wealth and creature comforts. He thinks of her as a lightweight socialite, more concerned with fashion and appearances than anything else. Lisa is "too perfect" in all the wrong ways. By the end of the film we learn that Lisa is more than capable of action and adventure. She is a strong woman, strong enough to face Thorwald and ultimately help save Jefferies from him. He judges Miss Torso to be an opportunistic tease, "a queen bee with her pick of the drones." Yet, at the film's end we discover that she is married to a nerdy nebbish in the military whom she is faithful to and loves very much. Lisa's judgment of Miss Torso, on the other hand, turns out to be the truth: "She's doing a woman's hardest job, juggling wolves. She's not in love with any of them [the drones]." He judges the newlyweds (Frank Cady and Sarah Berner) to be blissfully happy in their constant state of arousal with their marathon sexual escapades. Eventually, we find out that the groom is unemployed and the couple is struggling. He judges the composer to be a drunken letch cavorting "with his landlady for free rent." But in the final scenes of the film we discover that he is a struggling artist trying to birth a song called "Lisa" and that he is a soft-hearted romantic who may have fallen for Miss Lonely-Hearts. Again, Jefferies misjudges all these people through the lens of his own desires and expectations, with too little information at his disposal.

The Moral of Hitchcock's Allegory

In contrast, Jefferies's judgment that Thorwald murdered his wife turns out to be correct. Perhaps part of the reason he got this one right is that he used his journalistic training and the

method of eliminative induction, but the primary reason Jefferies is right about Thorwald is a teleological one. Hitchcock needs Jefferies to be right in this case in order to teach him, and by extension, us the viewers, a lesson. If Hitchcock really wanted only to punish us for voyeurism—film watching—he would have made Thorwald innocent. While *Rear Window* is often interpreted as a film about the dangers of voyeurism (film watching as a way of life), Jefferies gains at least as much as he loses as the result of his voyeurism. In other words, voyeurism is not all bad.

Jefferies pays a heavy price for his voyeurism, as he and Lisa are nearly murdered by Thorwald and his other leg is broken in the fall. The message is clear: the film world bites back. There are serious consequences for voyeurism—it is not a passive act, nor an act of innocence. Voyeurism can release us from the mundane and feed our dark fantasies, but at quite a price. Thorwald's attacks and Jefferies's impotent paralysis are our punishment for voyeurism and empty escapism.

Jefferies's voyeurism also leads to many good things. Order and balance are restored to Jefferies's soul and his courtyard-world. A murderer is brought to justice as a result of Jefferies's spying. Jefferies comes to appreciate the depth and strength of Lisa, and their relationship is saved by the events leading to Thorwald's arrest. In the end Lisa becomes the action hero he wants, leading him to intone, "I'm so proud of you." Lisa shows Jefferies "what she is made of" and it has the desired effect of changing his myopic misjudgment of her. As well as the apparent resolution of the conflicts in their relationship, Jefferies becomes a wiser man about Lisa and more generally about the pitfalls of voyeurism. Jefferies no longer views his domestic life as a "swamp of boredom." He is more content and appreciative of his own life. Jefferies realizes that in the end what really saved him from Thorwald (and himself) were not his flashbulbs, but his community and friendships with Lisa, Stella, and Doyle—these three behaved as good "neighbors" and good Samaritans. As we the viewers of *Rear Window* are identified with Jefferies, watching this film makes us potentially wiser, learning all that Jefferies himself did. *Rear Window* is a piece of cinema that has the power to save us from mindless voyeurism and performs the exact functions that Aristotle attributes to good drama and poetry.

Curtain Down

At one point in the film Lisa says to Jefferies, "I'm not much on Rear Window ethics." But fortunately for us, Hitchcock himself is quite sophisticated about "Rear Window ethics," and we are the wiser for it. Unlike standard Hollywood fare, Hitchcock's cautionary tales never have unrealistically happy endings. At the end of the film, we find Jefferies as he was in the beginning, asleep in his wheelchair and carefully turned away from the rear window. Seated next to him, we find Lisa dressed in Safari clothes pretending to read *Beyond the High Himalayas,* when she is in fact reading *Harpers' Bazaar.* Lisa has clearly retained her selfhood and values, and we know that Jefferies will again have to struggle with voyeurism and the essential differences between him and Lisa.

Philosophers no doubt will continue to debate whether or not film in particular and art in general are intrinsically stupefying. Hostility toward the arts has been endemic to some quarters of philosophy ever since Plato banished poets from his ideal city in *The Republic.* This is in large part because the fine arts are perceived by some Platonically-influenced philosophers to be pretenders to knowledge, which they believe to be acquired exclusively by the toil of reason. Though it may have surprised Plato, *Rear Window* is every bit as thoughtful and philosophically engaging as one of his dialogues. Hitchcock allows us to see that art and film are not intrinsically harmful. *Rear Window* illustrates that Plato and Aristotle are both right about the potential vices and virtues of art in general and film in particular.

15

Rear Window: Looking at Things Ethically

AEON J. SKOBLE

> I'm not much on rear window ethics.
>
> —LISA FREMONT (Grace Kelly)

Alfred Hitchcock's 1954 film *Rear Window* presents us with the following scenario: a photographer, one L.B. "Jeff" Jeffries (James Stewart), housebound with a broken leg, takes to snooping on his neighbors out of boredom, and discovers what may be evidence of a horrible murder.

Besides being a compelling thriller, this film raises a variety of interesting ethical questions. The film prompts philosophical questions of responsibility—for instance, Jeff seems to acquire responsibilities he ordinarily wouldn't have as a result of activity he shouldn't have been engaged in. How can this be the case? *Does* he have these responsibilities? Is he *obligated* to intervene? Lastly, just why *do* we think it's wrong to snoop as Jeff does? Is it merely an aesthetically distasteful pursuit, as his nurse Stella (Thelma Ritter) seems to indicate? Or is it intrinsically wrong, from a privacy-rights perspective? Or is it only conditionally wrong, depending on the result, which in this case is positive? Can justice be served by doing something otherwise (or generally) wrong? Do the ends justify the means?

Here's Looking at You

To begin with, it's been noted by practically every student of Hitchcock that Jeff's voyeurism parallels the "voyeurism" of the viewer in the cinema. This seems correct, but it's not clear just