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Formative Essay

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### Analysis on *Rear Window*: A Triple-Dimensioned Voyeuristic Hierarchy

Hitchcock's *Rear Window* tells a story about a temporarily crippled photojournalist Jeffries kills time by peeping at his neighbours' daily life through rear windows, which leads him to observe and solve a neighbourhood marital homicide. Many scholars and critics have analysed and argued about the ideology and implication of this remarkable work. Laura Mulvey (Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*) uses the element of voyeurism in *Rear Window* to illustrate how films can become unconscious products of patriarchal social norm. Whereas Tania Modleski disproves Mulvey's argument by pointing out the film's reversed gender role conveyed through *mise en scene* (Modleski, *The Master's Dollhouse*). This essay focuses on the scene in which Lars Thorwald, the salesman who murders his wife, found out about Jeff's position and knowledge about his crime. Occurring at 1:42:08 of the film's total duration of 1:52:20, this scene serves as a turning point between the previous nine-tenths methodical construction of visual-power hierarchy and the latter one-tenth turbulent destruction.

As Jeff and Lisa's investigation progresses, they have already confirmed Lars's murder of his wife, followed by Lisa sneaking into his apartment to get the wedding ring as evidence. The scene that Lars finally realizes being peeped is due to his accidental discovery of Lisa signaling to Jeff through the window. After a short close-up of Jeff observing the police inquiry holding his long lens, the scene quickly cut to an extreme close-up of Lisa's hands signaling to Jeff that she has got the ring. The frame is confined by black circular background, suggesting it is from

Jeff's point of view through the lens. Then the camera quickly pans from Lisa's hands to up-right direction, stops at a close-up of Lars's face. Through Jeff's POV, Lars suspiciously looks down at Lisa's hand gesture, slowly looks up while tracing the direction, and suddenly locates his look straight at Jeff. Lars's eye muscles twitch with shock and malice as he becomes aware of the existence and position of Jeff. The scene then cuts back to Jeff, dollying out as he hurriedly hiding the lens and urging Stella to turn off the light.

To illustrate the scene of Lars's realization as an important turning point, first we need to review the construction of visual-power hierarchy during the previous one hour and forty-two minutes of the film. There are three dimensions exist in relation to the universe of the film, namely the dimension of Lars, the dimension of Jeff, and the dimension of audience. Lars's dimension is composed of all the residents living on his side of the street, exposed themselves under Jeff's secret observation, such as 'Miss Torso', the pianist, 'Miss Lonelyhearts', etc. Jeff's dimension locates at his apartment on the other side of the street, including other characters such as Lisa, Stella, and Tom. The third dimension contains the audience who are watching the film, existing independently from the plot of *Rear Window*.

The film endows the act of looking with a sense of power and control. Before Lars's realization, the film has gradually built up an organic visual-power hierarchy, from bottom to top, the dimension of Lars, the dimension of Jeff, and the dimension of audience. Without awareness, the characters living in the dimension of Lars have been put under strict yet harmless scrutiny and judgement from both Jeff's dimension and the audience's dimension, making it the very bottom of the hierarchy. Through peeping at his neighbour's life, Jeff gains voyeuristic pleasure, and most importantly, a sense of control out of his confined and incapable physical situation. However, the characters in Jeff's dimension, his interactions with Lisa, Stella and Tom, and his

reaction to Lars's dimension are also watched by the audience sitting behind the screen. Thus, it locates in the middle between Lars and the audience. Although the superiority of audience's dimension is secured by absolute unidirectional visual accesses to the lower two, the boundary between the audience and Jeff appears blurry through Hitchcock ingenious design of mise-en-scene, which induces the audience to identify themselves with Jeff. That is, through the use of POV shot, the audience in the top dimension align themselves temporarily with Jeff, the middle dimension, to enjoy the visual power over the bottom dimension. Moreover, the audience gain a double voyeuristic pleasure by watching Jeff's reaction to the scenes he is peeping at -- first the audience see Jeff's attempt of looking, then it cut to what he is looking at, and then his reaction to what he just saw. For instance, we feel amused when watching Jeff stretching his neck out from the wheelchair to get a better view of 'Miss Torso's' provocative dance practice.

However, the establishment of the triple-dimensioned hierarchy built over the previous nine-tenths of the film is suddenly overthrown during a few seconds-- when Lars looks up and stares straight at Jeff in the lens. Through his realization, the dimension of Lars evolves from a passive object of Jeff's gaze to an active and later dominant counterpart. The top dimension of audience even gasp watching this scene because Lars's vicious gaze seems to penetrate throughout the intermediate dimension and sting them with tangible threat. From that moment the power dynamic starts to shift and reverse. For example, after Jeff finishes calling Tom to bail Lisa out, he is struck by panic to find that he could no longer see Lars's apartment since it is pitch dark. Lars are doing the same thing as Jeff: he cuts off the visual access to his dimension. Shortly afterwards Lars's investigative phone call to Jeff's apartment indicates that he starts taking initiative in the battle between the two dimensions. His following savage invasion and violence toward Jeff furthermore destroy the Jeff-on-Lars dimension hierarchy. During their intense

wrestle, the frame quickly cut to the neighbours' reaction as they come out and watch, including the old couple living on the balcony, 'Miss Lonelyheart', and the newlywed couple. At this point the hierarchy is completely reversed within which Jeff becomes the object of the gazes from characters of Lars's dimension.

In conclusion, the scene that Lars realizes Jeff's existence and position is a watershed in the story of *Rear Window*. Before the scene, nine-tenths of the film has dedicated to the construction of audience-Jeff-Lars dimensional hierarchy. Yet Hitchcock manages to destroy it within a few twitches of Lars's eyes muscle, and then completely reverses it in the following last ten minutes. The scene is a perfect example of Hitchcock's insightful understanding of psychology and ingenious manipulation of mise-en-scene.

## Bibliography

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