The Best Things Happen in the Dark

Lighting in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954)

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the use of lighting in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) to illustrate how the creation of suspense is achieved through carefully created shadows. The use of light and dark call attention to different aspects of *Rear Window*'s character psychology, particularly with regard to their outlook on romantic relationships. This essay contends that *Rear Window* (1954) warrants classification as a horror film rather than its typical thriller label due to its depiction of material psychology that is filtered through Hitchcockian suspense. Through mise-en-scene analysis of a specific scene in the first half of the film, careful attention to the use of lighting and deliberately placed shadows reveal the horror concealed under the façade of domesticity and the mundane.

Alfred Hitchcock's 1954 thriller *Rear Window* encapsulates his masterful use of controlling information to create deep-seated suspense in the audience, as the film is a commanding display of slow-building suspense to a heart-pounding finale. Renowned film theorist Robin Wood describes the technical structure of *Rear Window* as a horror film in which the audience sees "everything from the point of view from the central character, who, as clearly defined as he was, remained an everyman with whom we had no trouble identifying [. . .] his discoveries were ours" (*Horror Film* 20). The film utilizes a wide variety of cinematic techniques to inspire a reaction from its spectators, most recognizably through its use of lighting. Light and dark, brightness and shadows have often been used to signify good and evil, however *Rear Window* blurs these conventions, inviting us to question the morality of most characters. *Rear Window*'s timelessness rests within Hitchcock's command of visual storytelling with its creation of suspense using carefully created shadows. The horror of *Rear Window* manifests not in its overt themes of voyeurism and scopophilia, but rather in its presentation of material psychology and isolation in its creation of a macabre atmosphere.

Hitchcockian films are meticulously designed to elicit suspense and terror, but the creation of these feelings is dependent not on the presence of mutilation, gore, or the supernatural but via more human devices. These boundaries between the genres of thriller and horror, however, can be ambiguous. Dennis White argues that

> The force at work in a horror film might be defined as the triggering of our basic fear of the unknown, our fear of being unable to deal with our environment. The most obvious embodiments of this fear are monsters and nightmarish situations beyond our comprehension and control." (8)

The fundamental fear at the heart of *Rear Window* lies in the protagonist's L.B. "Jeff" Jefferies' (James Stewart) helplessness. He believes a man has murdered his wife and dismembered her body. Additionally, the tension between knowing and not knowing the veracity of the crime, witnessed in sporadic

Fig. 1 | Lisa exits the apartment, half lit by a lamp in *Rear Window*, 00:31:07. Paramount Pictures, 1954.

vignettes framed through windows, remains seen only by Jefferies. White proposes that the sensation of fear itself might be self-rewarding—the act of watching a display of horror provides us with a thrill regardless of the resolution, and we enjoy the film for this reason. *Rear Window* displays the horror concealed under the façade of domesticity and the mundane, and thus reveals the malleability of the genre itself, capable of encapsulating different experiences of fear, both somatic and psychological.

The unease surrounding the nature of the murder in *Rear Window* lies in how much is essentially left in shadows. Specifically, Hitchcock utilizes low-key lighting that presents most of the background as dark, only leaving a portion of the actors visible, rendering them mysterious and suspicious. Looking through the windows of Jefferies's neighbours requires a necessary amount of light to be certain of what actions occur and how. When the rooms are dark or the curtains are drawn, either viewers can barely make out what happens, or they have no idea at all. The number of apparent light sources are limited throughout the film, given the film's setting. Since the story takes place almost entirely indoors, light comes from the lamps around Jefferies's apartment or from the one window in his apartment from which the rest of the film's action is viewed. Furthermore, the lighting outside of Jefferies's apartment comes from within the other apartments or from the use of daylight.

Jefferies spends his days intensely watching the neighbours of his Greenwich Village apartment block while recuperating from a broken leg. Hitchcock presents a cynical outlook of romantic relationships through the interaction of Jefferies's neighbours as framed by light, reflecting the various stages of romance. For example, the Newlyweds (Havis Davenport and Rand Harper) enjoy the honeymoon phase of their relationship behind closed blinds. Indeed, each apartment window reflects different relationship possibilities, including the absence of a relationship in the case of his neighbour Miss Lonelyhearts (Judith Evelyn). Her lovelorn situation contrasts with Jefferies's apparent fear of commitment. This contrast is most evident in the light framing the exchange between Jefferies and his girlfriend Lisa Fremont (Grace Kelly) near the beginning of the film. As Lisa leaves his apartment, she is covered in shadows, the only light making her visible coming from a lamp (Fig. 1). This shot places Lisa in a negative light, literally, as if she were a negative image on a slide viewer, and it symbolizes the conflicting feelings Jefferies has about the state of matrimony, as embodied by Lisa. On one hand, he frames Lisa as the perfect girlfriend—beautiful, intelligent, wealthy—but too perfect, he insists, for marriage. Meanwhile, Lisa remains strong in her position that love will find a way to overcome their differences in lifestyle. She wants to get Jeff into a more structured lifestyle, one that involves his being in one place with regular work—in short, marriage. Her optimism and hope in the relationship are seen in even her frustrated exit (Fig. 1) where she remains half lit—not realizing that this mindset may scare him off.

As Jefferies reflects on Lisa's intentions, he turns towards the window, again only illuminated by a singular lamp. From this light source, the contours of Jefferies's regret resonate with the audience. His isolation from the outside world, limited by his broken leg and his ability to connect within his relationship, hits close to home for viewers, especially amid the COVID-19

Fig. 2 | A view of the neighbouring building, lit from within, in *Rear Window*, 00:31:40. Paramount Pictures, 1954.

Fig. 3 | Jeff awakes in darkness in *Rear Window*, 00:33:27. Paramount Pictures, 1954.

pandemic. He turns to the window to glance outside, not only in an attempt to observe but also to connect. The light of a streetlamp illuminates a car passing on the street below. The camera pans to the right, revealing an exterior view of sparsely lit apartment windows (Fig. 2).

The windows draw our attention so that we, like the unseen residents of each apartment, are limited by the frame of the window and camera through which we gaze. The contrast of lit and darkened windows highlights the spectrum of possibilities for Jefferies, ranging from a life of loneliness to one that would forgo his active lifestyle as a photojournalist.

In the scene after Lisa leaves the apartment, Jefferies turns to the window to observe the street below. The camera shifts to focus on the neighbouring block of apartments. As the camera scans a floor of windows, it suddenly pans in response to an unseen woman's scream. We hear shattering glass and a woman yelling "Don't!," but Jefferies is unable to pinpoint from which window and apartment the noises have come, his confusion and curiosity symbolized in his half-lit visage. He drifts to sleep, the camera fading to black until he wakes up to the same lull of car traffic down below (Fig. 3).

Jefferies's intuition and, by extension, our intuition, is heightened precisely because of the lack of visual evidence. The lighting makes the scene's specific circumstances unclear. We do not immediately see clearly, and what we do see shortly after is extremely worrisome. The absence of sufficient lighting and visibility creates what Christopher Morris contends is a subjective experience of suspense. This subjective tension, in which Hitchcock filters the force of suspense through the characters' points-of-view, creates a distinct restrictiveness in the narrative, suppresses the most important details, and leaves us with only one perspective (7). With intentionally limited lighting, perspective adds to both suspense and Hitchcock's ingenuity.

This scene makes particular use of light—ranging from grey to black—as a literary device, demonstrating how within the shadow, characters engage in "the indulging of morbid curiosity and the consequences of that indulgence" (Wood, *Hitchcock's Films Revisited* 100). As Jefferies hides in shadows and low light, covertly watching his neighbours, an activity approved of by both Lisa and his nurse (Thelma Ritter), it raises doubts about whether he is merely an observer in the wrong place at the wrong time or whether he will simply ignore what he encounters. Other characters also utilize this duality of light and darkness. Thorwald (Raymond Burr), the murderer, is typically seen in a darkened apartment with only the glow of a cigarette to reveal his whereabouts, consequently relatively hidden and safe. For example, after killing his wife (Irene Winston), Thorwald sits in his pitch-black apartment smoking a cigar. Later, he disposes of his wife's body during the darkest point of the night. In addition, numerous characters turn off lights when they need to be hidden, such as the couple sleeping on the fire escape. Of course, it is ultimately light, in the form of a camera flash, that Jefferies uses as a weapon at the film's climax, effectively blinding Thorwald into submission as Hitchcock skillfully cuts short, repetitious shots and utilizes both low-key and high-contrast lighting to manipulate his audience's fears.

Hitchcock's framing through lighting in *Rear Window* turns the notion and responsibility of viewing and knowing towards the audience, reflecting our own desires for something potentially dangerous. As audience members, we are likely to project a piece of ourselves into the narrative, contributing to an inner dialogue concerning both ourselves and our fears. ▪

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