

# House of the Living Dolls

Set Design, the Gaze, and Miniaturization in Hitchcock's *Rear Window*

BY CAROLINA MESQUITA ROCHA  
Kwantlen Polytechnic University

## ABSTRACT

Perhaps no film has allegorized the filmgoing experience as succinctly—or as perversely—as Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*; at least in the eyes of film critics and Hitchcockian scholars, for whom the 1954 film synthesizes the director's enduring fascination with voyeurism by turning windows into movie screens and forcing us, the moviegoers, to see ourselves reflected in James Stewart's less-than-flattering portrayal of a Peeping Tom. And yet, while it has become the most common interpretation of the gaze and set design in *Rear Window*, prompting the creation of a rich body of scholarship since the film's release, the movie screen analogy offers only a fragmentary understanding of Hitchcock's mise-en-scène and fails to account for the dehumanizing miniaturization that befalls the objects of Jeff's (and our) gaze. A new reading—one which considers the single-set world of *Rear Window* as dollhouse-like—serves to resolve said critical gaps.

Joining *Lifeboat* (1944), *Rope* (1948), and *Dial M for Murder* (1954) in the tradition of single-set Alfred Hitchcock films, *Rear Window* (1954) cannot be separated from its setting: an elaborate, \$100,000 set piece of a Greenwich Village apartment block, constructed at Paramount Studios under the art direction of Hal Pereira and Joseph MacMillan Johnson. A former art director himself, Hitchcock frequently spoke of the pre-eminent role of set design in his films, stating he would often “pick [his] backgrounds first and then think about the action of the story.” Rather than “use a setting simply as a background,” he made it a rule to “make [it] work dramatically” (Gottlieb 247; 313). In this regard, *Rear Window* is certainly a triumph—the apartment block is a character in itself with its purposeful construction and centrality to the plot, thus acting as a memorable vessel for a host of eccentric but largely unknowable inhabitants. Even before we meet our protagonist, from whose subjective perspective nearly all of the movie is told, a combination of dolly and

crane shots, pans, and tilts sweep across his neighbours' open windows (Fig. 1), capturing their apartments as parallel microcosms. It is easy to see, then, why *Rear Window* is most often discussed in terms of its reflexivity, in that it captures the director's fascination with voyeurism through L. B. “Jeff” Jefferies (James Stewart), a wheelchair-bound photojournalist whose newfound role as a Peeping Tom analogizes the film-viewing experience. But said analogy, however incisive an interpretation of the gaze in *Rear Window*, is rather fragmentary in its understanding of the set piece, failing to explain Jeff's relative emotional detachment from the objects of his gaze or the dehumanizing miniaturization encoded in the film's visual language—these are critical gaps that a dollhouse metaphor more readily resolves.

In *The Wrong House: The Architecture of Alfred Hitchcock*, art historian Steven Jacobs asserts that, when coupled with the “theme of voyeurism,” the unified “architectural construction



Fig. 1 | View of the apartment block from Jeff's window in *Rear Window*, 00:01:45. Paramount Pictures, 1954.

of *Rear Window*” becomes “an instrument of the gaze, a kind of *camera obscura* on an urban scale” (Jacobs 286). The open windows that dot the brownstones, while uncommonly large for such buildings, “match perfectly the aspect ratio (1.66:1) of the film,” leading countless scholars to interpret them as metaphorical movie screens before which Jeff’s neighbours parade as if conscious of themselves as performers, each enacting their own genre and storyline. Film scholar John Belton summarizes the resulting audience identification in “Dexterity in a Void: The Formalist Esthetics of Alfred Hitchcock,” noting that “[w]hen Hitchcock’s voyeuristic heroes and heroines look and react, they function as audience surrogates, as spectators within the text” (11); to the same effect, Belton has observed *Rear Window*’s set in terms of its “theatrical constraints,” approximating it to the stage as well as the screen (“The Space of” 1124). Both metaphors, however, imply that by gazing into the neighbours’ windows, the observer is privy to a complete, self-contained narrative—and yet, what we get instead are mere fragments; “snatched moments of observation” that emphasize Jeff’s “complete inability to see all of the picture” (Pomerance 78). As a result, Jeff is left to “strain” for the full truth beyond the borders of their windows, the so-called movie screens, leaving him—and the viewer—awash with the frustration of “partial perception” (81). The brickwork surrounding the windows, which act as obstacles to Jeff’s intrusive gaze, is thus as significant to an analysis of set design as the frames themselves, prompting a reading that takes the whole set piece into account. This is where the dollhouse comes in.

While we now think of dollhouses as objects of child’s play, their original purpose lays in exhibition. The German word *dockenhaus*, collector Faith Eaton notes in *The Ultimate Doll’s House Book*, meant “miniature house” (14), and a popular iteration of the structure was “a small replica of a house with a realistic façade—one that may have been loosely based on, or even deliberately designed to replicate, their own home” (9-10). As such, the façade across from Jeff acts as a closed dollhouse (Fig. 2a), which Jeff desperately tries, through his voyeuristic investigation, to pry open (Fig. 2b). The dollhouse quality of the building, which also stems from the “flat[ness]” and lack of depth of the neighbouring apartments in relation to Jeff’s fully-realized space (Jacobs 288), is in fact described in Cornell Woolrich’s text, “It Had To Be Murder,” which serves as the source material for Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*: “I [Jeff] could see into it, from the rounded projection of my bay window, as freely as into a *doll house* with its rear wall sliced away. And *scaled down* to about the same size” (Woolrich, emphasis mine). In short, although Jeff is also trapped behind the façade of his own building, rendered immobile by an accident, his physical powerlessness is offset by the miniaturization of the ones he observes, a process enforced by the camera’s fairly constant presence within his apartment—which in turn establishes a clear subject-object dynamic wherein Jeff wields the power of the gaze.

Said miniaturization is also informed by Hitchcock’s precise use of camera angles and shots, through which the physical and social distance between the observers—the characters in Jeff’s apartment, as well as the viewer—and the observed are





**Figs. 2a & 2b** | Open and closed dollhouse façade from *Tate Baby House*, 1760. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

repeatedly asserted. Instrumental in establishing this distance are the introductory shots of Jeff's girlfriend, Lisa Fremont (Grace Kelly), whose close-ups—a rarity in the film, likely to preserve the impact of those few moments of physical closeness Jeff experiences, first romantically with Lisa, and later violently with Thorwald (Raymond Burr)—“provide us with an optical measure against which the views into the courtyard can be appreciated for their challenging remoteness” (Pomerance 78). Once Jeff's dominant POV is established, our approach toward the apartments facing him is gradual and measured, moving from limited, distant shots to “something approximating a close-up,” just as Jeff moves from using his eyes, to the binoculars, to his telephoto lens. In this way, Hitchcock “build[s] up an intimacy with the apartments over the course of the film,” allowing us a closer view of some more than other as “we get to know them better” (Fawell 36). But the intimacy of subsequent medium shots and medium close-ups is paradoxically diluted by their persistent and perverse subjectivity, as we always perceive them literally through the filter of Jeff's lens, creating iris shots that give the scenes a dioramic quality—as if we are looking through a peephole into the details of a three-dimensional yet fabricated miniature world. In these frames, we are placed squarely in Jeff's point of view, wherein what matters are not the neighbours themselves, but Jeff's reaction to what he sees.

Here lies another shortcoming of the movie screen analogy: a well-made film is expected to capture more than our gazes; it must evoke from us an emotional response, seeking to build an attachment between the audience and the characters, so that the outcome of their stories *matters*. But Jeff does not readily display empathy for his neighbours. Critic Lawrence



**Fig. 3** | Jeff and Lisa react to Miss Lonelyhearts in *Rear Window*, 00:23:31. Paramount Pictures, 1954.

Howe identifies his emotional detachment in “Through the Looking Glass: Reflexivity, Reciprocity, and Defenestration in Hitchcock's ‘Rear Window’”:

... [Jeff's] fear of being seen by Thorwald indicates his uneasiness about the reciprocity it entails. The formation of his identity through the direction of his own gaze, while granting him power, obstructs his relationships with others—relationships that reciprocally acknowledge more than just his own desires, interests, and concerns—and entraps him in [an] isolated position ... (18)

Is it that the narratives he observes are incomplete, and so the characters lack the depth necessary to elicit an emotional response from their faithful spectator? Or is it that the spectator



**Figs. 4a, 4b, 4c, & 4d** | The dog is discovered in *Rear Window*, 01:23:27–01:24:09. Paramount Pictures, 1954.

himself, accustomed to the psychological distance afforded by his camera, fails to see them as more than entertainment? The latter seems to ring true. Take, for example, Jeff's cold amusement as Miss Lonelyhearts' (Judith Evelyn) pretend-play comes to a tearful end, contrasted against Lisa's evident compassion for the woman's loneliness (Fig. 3). With far less time to observe them, Lisa easily empathizes with Jeff's neighbours—from the pitiful Miss Lonelyhearts to the over-run Miss Torso (Georgine Darcy)—and it is Stella (Thelma Ritter) who urges Jeff to call the police before Miss Lonelyhearts can commit suicide. Meanwhile, while Jeff obsesses over the murder of Mrs. Thorwald (Irene Winston), his primary motivations lie not in a humane need for justice, but in the journalistic thrill of uncovering the truth. Indeed, Lisa herself points to the “ghoul[ish]” nature of their shared disappointment upon discovering Mrs. Thorwald may in fact be “alive and well” (01:21:18–01:21:37).

At the same time, Jeff wonders aloud to Lisa about a moral justification for his actions: “I wonder if it's ethical to watch a man with binoculars and a long-focus lens. Of course, they can do the same thing to me. *Watch me like a bug under a glass, if they want to*” (01:20:55–00:21:17, emphasis mine). This line—Jeff's assessment of his own behaviour toward his neighbours—is frequently linked to the threat of subject-object role reversal which will eventually come to fruition; but it also reveals a more perverse aspect of his viewing: the dehumanizing power of his gaze. Considering how carefully camera angles and movements

are laid out throughout the movie, it is no accident that when we finally break out of Jeff's filtered gaze to move closer to the others, it is prompted by the dog owner chastising her fellow neighbours for their indifference toward each other, after her beloved pet is found strangled. In this sequence, we frantically cut from the extreme and subjective long shots that permeate the film (Fig. 4a), depicting the neighbours in their doll-like minuteness, to objective medium shots of Miss Torso (Fig. 4b) and Miss Lonelyhearts (Fig. 4d), two of the principal victims of Jeff's objectifying gaze and misogynistic jabs, especially in their perceived “reflection (and miniaturization)” of Lisa (Pomerance 78), interspersed by a similarly framed shot of Jeff's apartment (Fig. 4c). The courtyard thus realizes its purpose as a communal space, temporarily forcing Jeff's neighbours out of their parallel existences and bringing their humanity into sharp focus. The voyeur—Jeff, and we with him—are thus forced to consider them as more than distant miniatures.

This narrative and visual switch culminates in Thorwald's invasion of Jeff's apartment, which, by shattering the subject-object dynamic that allowed Jeff a sense of safety and control, “violently resolves the obstacles to Jeff's developing identity, enabling him to move beyond the separation from others that he attempts to maintain” (Howe 18). Instantly, the amount of space each character takes up on-screen communicates a reversal of power; Thorwald (Fig. 5), whom Jeff has thus far observed, deceptively miniaturized, only from the safety of his window, now towers over his impotent form (Fig. 6). Furthermore, as



Fig. 5 | Thorwald enters Jeff's apartment in *Rear Window*, 01:47:31. Paramount Pictures, 1954.

Jeff fails to blind Thorwald and a struggle ensues, we see what Hitchcock's up-to-now restrained use of close-ups has led up to: a "fifty-shot montage" of "sped-up action" in which "glimpses of neighbours" are "intercut with the close-up grappling between Thorwald and Jeff" (30). Ultimately forced onto the courtyard, Jeff now exists in the same space as his neighbours, who cast their own voyeuristic gazes as he lies in Lisa's arms, powerless to stop them.

And where does Lisa fit in this bifurcation? While Thorwald moves out of the miniature to break into Jeff's apartment, Lisa moves in *and* out, inhabiting both sides in *Rear Window's* final act. It is this movement, Howe claims, that allows Jeff's rocky relationship with Lisa to be "renegotiated and ultimately fulfilled by a reciprocal exchange of subject and object positions conceptually and spatially in the film's narrative" (18). Subject to the same superficial, dehumanizing treatment Jeff bestows upon his neighbours, Lisa is conversely reborn in Jeff's eyes *after* placing herself before his lens. In a way, he is unable to cast aside his one-dimensional view of her until he sees her cross into and then emerge from his miniature world.

The dollhouse analogy ultimately speaks to *Rear Window's* subjective cinematography, which maintains a consistent pattern of proxemics and blocking for the majority of the film that miniaturizes Jeff's neighbours and their environments, a visual process compatible with Hitchcock's formalist auteurship. In the early days of his career, Hitchcock's extensive use of miniature effects allowed him to bring extravagant sets and



Fig. 6 | Jeff covers in the shadows in *Rear Window*, 01:47:32. Paramount Pictures, 1954.

action into his movies while adhering to the strict confines of a limited budget: take the mountainous scenery of *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), for example, or the combination of intricate model-work and flat backgrounds in *Young and Innocent* (1937). With *Rear Window*, however, money was hardly an issue. Yet, the constructed set retains an artificial quality while also sustaining realism. In his own words, Hitchcock "deal[t] in *fantasy*," and his suspense demanded verisimilitude to function (Gottlieb 313); at the same time, Jacobs writes, "some commentators" find a level of artificiality to be part of the Hitchcockian "essence" (21). The subtle unreality of *Rear Window's* set is



even built into its fictitious address—125 West 10<sup>th</sup> Street, Greenwich Village, New York City—in adherence with the American law which prevented “a film crime [from being] situated at an existing place”:

... [Jeff's] location can be deduced from the address mentioned of the apartment on the other side of the courtyard: 125 West 9<sup>th</sup> Street. [. . .] [I]n reality, 9<sup>th</sup> Street changes into Christopher Street west from 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue. However, at 125 Christopher Street, the building was situated that inspired Hitchcock, who, according to a Paramount Advance Campaign document, ‘dispatched four photographers . . . with instructions to shoot the Village from all angles, in all weather and under all lighting conditions, from dawn to midnight. (282)

Hitchcock's decision to recreate this environment in a soundstage rather than film on location, which in turn allowed him to maintain his “legendary” control over the production (19), suggests the dollhouse-esque construction of the

set analogy as not only metaphorical, as we consider it when filtered through Jeff's objectifying gaze, but as a physical product of Hitchcock's authorial vision.

Despite holding the dominant gaze for most of the film, Jeff is also a prisoner of *Rear Window*'s dollhouse set piece, forced into the monotony of domesticity and physically unable to escape the narrow confines of his room. Consequently, the miniaturizing of his neighbours that is enacted through his voyeuristic point of view is reactionary, a way to cope with his own impotence and confinement by crafting a false sense of control over the objects of his gaze. To attempt to replace the film-viewing analogy through which this dynamic is most commonly understood in Hitchcockian scholarship would be an impossible feat. However, an alternative—or even complementary—reading of the set design as dollhouse-like, which seeks a new critical approach to Hitchcock as auteur, considers the layered role of gazing and voyeurism in the movie while also considering the unity of setting and narrative that makes *Rear Window* what it is, both as cinematic artifact and as the subject of continuous critical interest. ■

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