

The eyes are a window into the soul: A consideration of point-of-view with reference to *Rear Window*.

Robert Panners

University of Essex

Abstract

This essay is an exploration of the reasons why Alfred Hitchcock relies on the use of the point-of-view shot in his suspense thriller *Rear Window*. The essay suggests that Hitchcock uses this particular shot to mimic our own objectifying gazes. It draws on the views of critics including Mulvey, Sallitt and Modleski and discusses some of their ideas in relation to the point-of-view shot, including ideas to do with the pleasure of looking (scopophilia), and psychological subjectivity. A number of extracts from their works are looked at and analyzed to identify possible explanations for Hitchcock's heavy reliance on the point-of-view shot in the film. The main conclusions of the essay show that the point-of-view shot is often used to obtain maximum emotional impact from the audience and to exploit their fascination with the voyeuristic and the erotic.

Keywords: Hitchcock; point-of-view shot; cinematography; film studies.

Essay

The point-of-view shot is one of the most influential shots a director can use when constructing a film. Its application can skilfully direct and manipulate audiences into experiencing particular thoughts and emotions that perhaps other types of shots would not be able to achieve as effectively. In the film *Rear Window*, Alfred Hitchcock cleverly uses the point-of-view shot to elicit from the audience various feelings, which include the emotions tension, intrigue, humour, and relief. This

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essay will discuss how Hitchcock uses the point-of-view shot to manipulate his audience and what effects this manipulation produces.

We can see many instances within *Rear Window* where the point-of-view shot is used effectively in order to manipulate the audience. A good example of this is when Jeffries (James Stewart) observes a newly wedded couple checking into a hotel room. The sequence starts with a shot of Jeffries looking out of his window and then we cut to a shot from his point-of-view. Through this we see the couple begin to eagerly embrace; they then pull back due to the hotel manager's unwelcome reappearance, but then are able to fully embrace again once the manager departs. This provides the audience with humour and a feeling of contentedness, but these feelings are reinforced when the film then cuts to a reverse shot of Jeffries smiling. With this mirroring effect, Hitchcock also to emphasises the fact that we are observing events from Jeffries' point-of-view, and that by the use of this particular shot in the editing process we are successfully being manipulated to experience particular emotions.

The earlier reverse-shot of Jeffries within this scene, at the moment that the couple kiss, is also worth mentioning. Arguably, this shot of the kissing couple highlights our voyeuristic tendencies as a cinema-going audience and Jeffries' subsequent coy look away, and then sheepish look back, echoes our own inner conflict about what we think is decent and indecent to observe. Indeed Jeffries' nurse Stella (Thelma Ritter) even states that: "we are becoming a race of Peeping Toms". Laura Mulvey talks extensively about the gaze and its use in cinema. She writes:

'The cinema offers a number of possible pleasures. One is scopophilia. There are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure....Freud isolated scopophilia as one of the component instincts of sexuality...he associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze.' (Mulvey, 2004: 839)

The use of the point-of-view shot takes advantage of the audience's pleasure of looking and objectifying the people they see in front of them, which further draws us into the narrative of the film and reinforces our feelings by seeing Jeffries mirroring our reactions in the reverse shots. In this case the feelings of voyeurism, curiosity, and conflict are explored.

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Mulvey also draws on the idea of sexuality being fundamental to our pleasure in gazing, and it could be argued that Hitchcock also uses sexuality in his point-of-view shots in order to further manipulate the audience. For example, Mulvey writes:

‘In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact’ (Mulvey, 2004: 841)

A good example to illustrate this idea in *Rear Window* is at the beginning of the film when we observe, from Jeffries’ point-of-view, one of his young, attractive, female neighbours practicing ballet in skimpy attire who he labels “Miss Torso”. This reinforces Mulvey’s argument that the male gaze is at the root of mainstream cinema and that the film’s point-of-view is essentially derived from the male perspective. The use of point-of-view shot in this instance manipulates the audience by satisfying our pleasure of looking at what we should not. However, it should also be noted that this primarily satisfies the male audience due to the erotic connotations of the sequence.

Mulvey also proposes an example of sexuality being utilized in the film towards its conclusion. She writes:

‘...Douchet takes the film as a metaphor for the cinema. Jeffries is the audience, the events in the apartment block opposite correspond to the screen. As he watches, an erotic dimension is added to his look...His girlfriend Lisa had been of little sexual interest to him...so long as she remained on the spectator side. When she crosses the barrier between his room and the block opposite, their relationship is re-born erotically. He does not merely watch her through his lens, as a distant meaningful image, he also sees her as a guilty intruder exposed by a dangerous man threatening her with punishment, and thus finally saves her.’ (Mulvey, 2004: 845-6)

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Douchet's talk of the film as a metaphor is a very interesting argument and is supported by the points Mulvey puts forward. Indeed, to reinforce and extend the metaphor, one could add that the windows Jeffries peers into symbolize cinema screens. Once Lisa (Grace Kelly) enters the "phantasy" (Mulvey, 2004: 841), world Jeffries has created for himself, she becomes an object of desire for him, and he becomes distraught at the thought of the danger awaiting her. Additionally, it is also worth mentioning, that Hitchcock uses the point-of-view shot admirably in this sequence to create tension within the audience. As we wait for Thorwald (Raymond Burr) to return to his apartment, and while Lisa is sneaking around inside for evidence, the audience experience tension, and this is reflected in Jeffries' facial expression in the reverse shot. Additionally, when Thorwald catches Lisa as he enters his apartment, the point-of-view shot is again used to manipulate the audience into a state of horror, which is again reflected on the facial expression of Jeffries.

A different perspective on the point-of-view shot, of particular interest for a discussion of *Rear Window*, can be seen in Daniel Sallitt's notion of the disembodied point-of-view shot. Susan Smith quotes Daniel Sallitt who suggests that: "...the point-of-view shot is somehow impersonal and remote from the character whose point-of-view is being used..." and that "The point-of-view shot is a means of putting the spectator in some relation, not to the character, but to the film universe" (Sallitt cited in Smith, 2000: 85-6). Smith goes on to elaborate on Sallitt's theory:

'In de-emphasising the importance of point-of-view shooting as an identification device...and in stressing its indicativeness of a 'broader interest in a visual exploration of the film universe' in Hitchcock's cinema, Sallitt challenges the oversimplified assumption...that Hitchcock's films are in some ways dedicated to a notion of psychological subjectivity, that the films examine reality from an individual's viewpoint which we are compelled to share.' Instead the point-of-view shot is seen as a means by which 'to evoke...the sense of a pair of eyes *within* the film universe...' (Smith, 2000: 86)

Sallitt here problematises our typical sense of the point-of-view shot as serving to make the viewer identify with the film's characters. A key point Sallitt is making is that the viewer is often put into Hitchcock's films directly, our experience not always mediated by characters' points-of-view. We

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could argue that this statement can be effectively applied to the use of the disembodied point-of-view shot in *Rear Window*. A good example to illustrate this point would be when Lisa first enters the picture and greets Jeffries. We begin with what seems to be a regular point-of-view shot of Lisa leaning in towards the camera, we then cut to a reverse shot of Jeffries waking up, then another point-of-view shot of Lisa leaning in, and then finally a tight close-up shot of Lisa passionately kissing Jeffries, which shows both Lisa and Jeff in the shot. We could infer that this final shot is a disembodied point-of-view shot. The beginning of this sequence aligns us with the point-of-view of Jeffries, and in correspondence to the “male gaze” (Mulvey, 2004: 841), but then, in the close-up at the end, places us as near to Jeffries’ perspective as possible so that we can still feel the intensity of the moment when Lisa kisses him. Indeed, as well as using the disembodied point-of-view shot, Hitchcock also uses a slower frame speed to manipulate the audience further into feeling arousal during the close-up of the two main characters, and to highlight the sexual connotations that are present throughout the film.

Smith refers to the idea discussed above when she says: “Sallitt coins the term ‘intrarealistic’ to describe this effect [“the sense of a pair of eyes *within* the film universe” (Smith, 2000: 86)] and cites the use of extreme physical proximity of characters and the camera track-in device as two other key strategies used to create it.” (Smith, 2000: 86) It is also worth mentioning that Sallitt’s theory is justified when referring to the regular point-of-view shot as well as the disembodied one. For example, when we see the first point-of-view shot of Lisa leaning in, and then cut to a reverse shot of Jeffries, we see that he still has his eyes closed and is just waking up. Clearly this first shot of Lisa is not Jeffries’ direct point-of-view, and this adds weight to the notion that there is a “pair of eyes *within* the film” (Smith, 2000: 86). This again clearly shows Hitchcock’s skilful use of editing, and shows how he is able to use a subjective and disembodied point-of-view to elicit and enhance the audience’s arousal.

Again, continuing with our central theme of sexuality and voyeurism, it is worth exploring the concept of mirroring that takes place in the film. This is evident when we see Jeffries mirroring our feelings and reactions after being presented with his point-of-view, but it is also present in another way. In order to explore this fully we need to first look at the theory of the mirror stage. Laura Mulvey succinctly describes the mirror stage, which is a psychoanalytic theory developed by Jacques Lacan:

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‘Jacques Lacan has described how the moment when a child recognises its own image in the mirror is crucial for the construction of the ego....The mirror phase occurs at a time when the child’s physical ambitions outstrip his motor capacity, with the result that his recognition of himself is joyous in that he imagines his mirror image to be more complete, more perfect than he experiences his own body.’ (Mulvey, 2004: 840)

This statement can be applied to Jeffries, as he observes the actions occurring outside his window. Jeffries re-experiences the nostalgic effects of the mirror stage, and consequently also experiences the pleasure associated with its creation. Since the actions of the film are an allegory for the act of watching cinema itself, and a reflection of our own behaviours towards watching films, it could be argued that Hitchcock is attempting to make a statement about how we all experience the same sense of ‘ego-reformation’ that Jeffries does when he watches the exciting actions unfolding before him. It is this displacement of our own ego onto the ‘ego-ideal’ of the character, or characters, on screen that makes us really enjoy a particular film. However, the course of the film is arguably more about Jeffries’ projection of his worries and insecurities about marriage onto the content of the narrative, rather than the mirroring of his own circumstances. For example, at the beginning of the film Jeffries is having a telephone conversation and is expressing his attitude towards marriage: “Yeah, can’t you just see me rushing home to a hot apartment to listen to the automatic laundry and the electric dishwasher and the garbage disposal...a nagging wife”. It is not until the end of the film that Jeffries really experiences the mirror stage as expressed by Lacan. He finally develops his ‘ego’ when appreciating the value of Lisa after her altercation with Thorwald. Tania Modleski adds to this when she says: “By the end of the film Jeff has supposedly learnt his lesson and ‘has realized the corollary psychic costs of both voyeurism and solitude’: he is now ready for the marriage he has all along resisted and for the ‘mature’ sexual relation that this implies” (Modleski, 2004: 851). When we take this reading of Jeffries’ psyche into consideration we can see yet another dimension to Hitchcock’s use of point-of-view to manipulate the audience. He causes us to question the virtues and benefits of marriage and arguably does not depict the idea of marriage in the most positive form. Of course the worries and concerns Jeffries has may be entirely justified, but time is the only thing that will show whether this is the case.

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To conclude, we can see that Hitchcock uses point-of-view in a variety of ways throughout *Rear Window* to convey to the audience certain ideas and emotions that he wishes us to experience. He uses both subjective point-of-view and disembodied point-of-view shots to highlight the film's preoccupation with the themes of voyeurism and eroticism, whilst also successfully manipulating the audience into experiencing various different moods, including humour, tension, and relief. The entire film is arguably a metaphor for our own relationship with cinema and the world around us. As human beings we have an unhealthy obsession with unreality. The reality of our own lives is mundane and ordinary and we use fiction in order to escape these doldrums. When we watch cinema we couple this desire with the pleasure of looking, which ultimately provides us with an entertaining and enjoyable experience. Often we care more about the events that unfold on the cinema screen than the events that take place in our own lives, and Jeffries beautifully illustrates this idea in the film. As we have already discussed, it is only when Lisa crosses from the 'real' world of Jeffries' apartment to the "phantasy" (Mulvey, 2004: 841) world of Thorwald's apartment that Jeffries becomes concerned for her safety. It is only when the disassociated world of the rear window becomes entangled with his own world that Jeffries fully understands how unpleasant it is, and what he has to lose. This is a concept, that as cinemagoers we should all be mindful of. All of these effects are aided and achieved by the use of the point-of-view shot, and additionally helps to add a moral component to the overall story as well. It is due to these reasons, the use of tension and suspense, and the exploration of complex psychoanalytic and cultural concepts, that *Rear Window* is one of the greatest films ever made and why Alfred Hitchcock is one of the true masters of his art.

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Filmography

Rear Window, dir. Alfred Hitchcock, feat. James Stewart, Grace Kelly, Thelma Ritter (Universal Pictures, 1954).

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