In what ways can Rear Window be seen as an essay on voyeurism?

In a Cold War affected America, when the public were encouraged to be suspicious of their neighbours, Alfred Hitchcock’s 1954 thriller Rear Window explores the fine line between being a concerned neighbour and a case of ‘curiosity killed the cat’. While on the surface the film is a murder mystery thriller, one of the central characters, Stella, makes reference to the deeper message about voyeurism by saying that America had ‘become a race of Peeping Toms’ (Rear Window). The film can be considered an essay in the ways it explores this issue including inviting the audience into this voyeuristic world, manipulation of character and setting but also by instilling a fear of reciprocity in the main characters and the audience alike. A voyeur can be defined as someone who ‘habitually seeks sexual stimulation by visual means’ or more broadly, a person who seeks ‘the sordid or scandalous’ (Merriam-Webster Dictionary).

From the moment the curtain rises in the opening sequence, the audience is drawn into the same world of voyeurism as the main characters. This can be seen as a sort of ‘introduction’ for the audience to Hitchcock’s essay on voyeurism. This is first achieved through the use of cinematography, or more specifically, framing. The raising of the blind in the opening sequence and the positioning of the camera as if from the central character, L.B Jefferies’ point of view, positions audience members to see exactly what he sees and therefore become voyeurs themselves. As the camera pans to reveal the protagonist, Jefferies, the audience is further positioned as a voyeur by ‘studying his dozing form’ and ‘stealthily’ gazing around the apartment (Toles 236). Sound is also effectively used to draw the audience into Hitchcock’s world of voyeurism. Much of the sound in the film is diegetic, meaning the audience is hearing what Jefferies would hear. The muffled voices and neighbourhood noises can not always be made out clearly and the audience tries to decipher it much like Jefferies would. As the viewer
struggles to listen to the disjointed conversations, they, along with Jefferies, are drawn further into the lives of his neighbours.

Once the audience has been drawn into the voyeuristic world of *Rear Window*, the main body of Hitchcock’s essay is formed through the development of setting and character. The opening sequence and all shots of the apartment block are edited in a way that makes it feel claustrophobic. While there are some continuous shots, panning the entire housing block, it is difficult to establish any spatial relations between the apartments. Throughout the film, between shots of Jefferies’ apartment, the camera often cuts to a frame of other apartment windows. These cuts between the apartments without seeing their spatial relation to one another creates a sense of confusion and claustrophobia, drawing not only the audience’s but Jefferies’ gaze. It gives the impression that there is nothing else to look or focus upon. An article by Seth Blazer (389) also describes these windows as movie screens or ‘different channels on Jeff’s picture-in-picture television.’ The cuts between the apartments can be seen as Jefferies changing channels according to what seems interesting at the time, usually the Thorwald’s apartment where the murder has allegedly occurred. The mise-en-scène also contributes to the ideas of voyeurism within the setting, most noticeably the windows. The windows can represent both looking out and looking in, and are the means by which Jefferies facilitates his voyeurism.

Another means for Jefferies to satisfy his voyeuristic urges is through his cameras. Jefferies’ character is another important aspect of the story to convey the voyeuristic themes. Jefferies’ embodies the definition of a voyeur and this is achieved through mise-en-scène, including the numerous cameras in the apartment. Though he never takes any pictures, cameras are the means by which Jefferies is able to get a closer look into the Thorwald’s apartment. Cameras symbolise looking or capturing moments and are often associated with voyeurs or
‘Peeping Toms’. The photos in his apartment, such as the mushroom cloud and crashing race car, are evidence of his photo-journalistic career which also suggest that he likes to witness dangerous things. This is why he is drawn to the Thorwald’s apartment. The notion of apprehending a murderer, as well as the thrill of not being caught would appeal to someone with his character. Another aspect of mise-en-scène that builds on Jefferies’ voyeuristic character is the way in which he interacts with his girlfriend, Lisa Fremont. He acts very cold towards her, choosing instead to focus on what is happening in his neighbours’ windows. His nurse, Stella, considers him ‘abnormal’ for not wanting to marry Lisa. Instead, Jefferies can be seen as receiving his sexual gratification from his neighbours such as Miss Torso and the Newlyweds. Lisa only becomes an object of his affection when she is endangered in Thorwald’s apartment and Jefferies is now viewing her through his lens (Thompson 104).

Lisa’s venture into Thorwald’s apartment also marks a turning point in the story, or brings a conclusion to Hitchcock’s essay on voyeurism. As Stella warns him throughout the film, while Jefferies is watching his neighbours, he can never be sure of who may catch him watching (Howe 17). This fear of reciprocity is evident in the mise-en-scène and the use of light and dark. When people do not want to be seen, they retreat to darkness. Jefferies and Stella, when fearing that Thorwald has spotted them spying on him, retreat further into the apartment and switch off the lights. Thorwald also does this when attacking Lisa, fearing that people will be able to see him. Other neighbours, such as Miss Torso, want to be seen and therefore leave their lights on and windows open. Editing is also used to incite fear of reciprocity through eye line matches. After Thorwald realises Jefferies is watching him, it is the intense eye contact between the two that creates the feeling of fear and makes Jefferies realise that the voyeur has now become the subject of the gaze.
Though the film concludes with Thorwald having killed his wife, for Jefferies it is almost a case of ‘curiosity killed the cat’. His voyeuristic ways, despite leading to the apprehension of a murderer, prove to be the near death of him. Once the audience has been drawn into Hitchcock’s essay on voyeurism, the character of L.B Jefferies and the claustrophobic setting provide the main subject matter. Hitchcock’s essay is then concluded by exploring the idea of reciprocity of the gaze and the consequences of voyeurism. Whether Jefferies is watching his neighbours out of boredom and his interest in photojournalism or out of true voyeuristic desire, his spiral into obsession takes the audience on the same journey into voyeurism.

(1117 words)
Works Cited


*Rear Window*, Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Universal Studios, 1954
