

## Jimmy Stewart, *Mon Prochain*: a reading of *Rear Window*

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“*Liberté – Égalité – Fraternité, ou la mort!*”—So rang out the rallying cry for the French revolution... ‘Give me freedom, or give me death’... This sentiment could only have germinated within soil warmed by that great sun, the Enlightenment, under which the value of human life came to be measured in terms of freedom, equality, and brotherhood.

From the Enlightenment emerged a new faith in the power of reason, truth, freedom, and ‘man’ as the site at which these values converge. Philosophy, science, and politics all thrived in this epoch... In his reason man was thought to resemble God, and so with reason we might then approximate His powers of omniscience, and perhaps even omnipotence. The Enlightenment bore witness to a seemingly unshakeable confidence in the might and goodness of human being... Yet in the name of Enlightenment values, also reigned ‘the terror,’ by means of which Robespierre and his ‘Committee of Public Safety’ ushered in a new world order by eliminating the old, as well as any opposition within its own ranks.

The Enlightenment also gave birth to one of the republic’s greatest advocates and critics, the Marquis de Sade, notorious for his cool use of reason to justify his own proclivity for crime, debauchery, and torture. Above universal suffrage, Sade supports the right of every man to subject others to his will to dominate and harm them. Thus Sade plays out the conflict he understood to be at the heart of the Enlightenment program: a conflict between a striving for universality, and an individuality that would be incommunicable within the terms of such universality. The ‘community of men’ given by the Enlightenment imagination, is supported by a pleasure in witnessing others cruelly murdered. One cannot separate *fraternité* from the bloody terror.

Enter Jimmy Stewart: or “Jeffries,” the likeable persona that Hitchcock gave to the protagonist of *Rear Window*, but not everyone’s ideal of the perfect neighbour, a man with too much time on his hands, and a zoom-lens camera. Anonymous and hidden beneath the mantle of respectability, like the crowd of the terror—like Sade himself—Jeffries watches with a fascinated and vicarious pleasure the various fates of those living in the building across the way. Jeffries adjoins himself to them by crossing the threshold of their lives, uninvited... witnessing them do things they would never do in the knowledge that they were being watched. As we watch Jeffries watching his neighbours, perhaps we should ask ourselves a question analogous to that which Pierre Klossowski poses to himself in relation to Sade, with the title of his book *Sade, Mon Prochain*. While Klossowski asks ‘as Sade’s reader, how am I related to



him?’—or, ‘how do I share my humanity with Sade, who is also a product of reason?’—we might ask how we, as viewers of the film, are related precisely to whatever makes us most uncomfortable about Jeffries’ voyeurism. In respect of this line of questioning, *Rear Window* might offer a vista of the relation of human beings to their neighbours, as a playing out of our most delicious fantasies, and worst fears.

First, it is a well-known factoid of cinema that Hitchcock favoured James Stewart as a leading man for his films<sup>1</sup> primarily because he appears to be so completely unremarkable. He embodied for Hitchcock the ‘every man,’ with whom the average American ‘guy’ could identify. Such identification is important to the success of *Rear Window*, and in each of the films in which Stewart starred the protagonist finds himself called to a position arbitrarily and, apparently, against his will. Through the identification, the viewer is also implicated by the situation in which Jeffries finds himself: as witness to an apparent crime, we are ambiguously solicited by an obligation either to act, or to look away. But what is the nature of the crime to which he bears witness? Keeping in mind the uncertainty, for most of the film, as to whether a crime has actually been committed at all. It is the (entirely unconvincing) confrontation between Jeffries and Thorwald at the end of the film that confirms that the crime took place... yet, I would like to contend that to a great extent the crime scene takes place in Jeffries’ mind, as the projection of his own fantasies onto his neighbour.



To begin with, Jeffries’ voyeurism is what we might call ‘innocent’: he absent-mindedly witnesses Miss Lonely-heart rehearsing a dinner for two, alone; a couple squabbling over where to place their mattress in the fire-escape; a composer growing more and more frustrated over his composition; Miss Torso dancing while she snacks from her fridge; a newly-wed couple who draw the blinds as soon as they move into their flat; and the unhappily married couple who later become the focal point of Jeffries’ voyeurism, Mr and Mrs Thorwald. Jeffries comes to care for each of these characters—and, in his small way, to be involved in their lives. Jeffries, along with the film’s audience, gains a more intimate knowledge of the limits that structure the lives of others, limits that perhaps produce a sadness in them: for instance, newly-wed husband’s inability to satisfy his wife; or Miss Torso’s need to entertain movie producers in order to secure her career. When Mrs Thorwald suddenly ‘appears absent,’ Jeffries is captured by the emerging mystery of her disappearance, and becomes convinced that her husband has murdered her: Thorwald’s every action from this point forward appears suspicious to the viewer, who then becomes complicit in Jeffries’ role as onlooker.<sup>2</sup> And Jeffries’ “rear window ethics” comes to be questioned by outsiders who enter his flat: the question being not only ‘is it right to watch?’, but also ‘wouldn’t all of us appear guilty were we subjected to the scrutiny of our neighbours?’

A third question might be: ‘what is it that so fascinates Jeffries about the various scenes outside his window?’ A common thread between them might be the heterosexual relationship, and its constitutive imperfection. Each scene plays out a different permutation of the relationship, and a different manner in which it can fail to live up to expectations. The Thorwalds’ scenario represents the ultimate failure of the couple, and captures Jeffries’ entire attention, to the extent that he doesn’t notice, or doesn’t *want* to notice, the attempt at seduction within his own walls. In flight from the relationship, Jeffries fantasises its worst-case scenario by means of the Thorwalds.



Enter Grace Kelly. If James Stewart is the paradigm case of *ordinary* American masculinity, Grace Kelly represents the most sublime and unattainable femininity. She is what every man wants, and every woman wants to be. She is beautiful, successful, and stylish, and yet appears (up until the final scene)<sup>3</sup> perfectly amenable to accommodate his every desire. Lisa is everything a man like Jeffries could want, and as such this couple forms the basis of the viewer’s own fantasy: as is demonstrated by many American sit-coms, the fantasy of the ordinary—even profoundly flawed—man, coupled with the beautiful woman, fuels the popular imagination. Yet, in his own ‘real’ life, Jeffries turns away from this possibility, and instead fantasises the destruction of the relationship (as embodied by the Thorwalds) in order to preclude the possibility of a relationship with Lisa. At bottom he seems not to believe the relationship to be possible: men and women are simply too different, and desire different things in each other.

So when does the relationship with Lisa become viable for Jeffries? It is in fact precisely at the point where—as Zizek puts it—she enters “the frame of his fantasy” (Zizek 1989, 119).<sup>4</sup> That is, the point at which Lisa becomes an active participant in the Thorwalds’ drama, when she secretly enters the apartment to find Mrs Thorwald’s wedding ring... and this is also the point at which Mr Thorwald discovers that he is being watched, and looks through the window-frame of Jeffries’ fantasy, right back at him. Jeffries’ most monstrous apparition, and his most sublime, then appear side by side. Lisa’s vulnerability, and her belongingness to him—wedding ring already on her finger—is heightened by her proximity to the ogre of Jeffries’ fantasy, and the active part she takes in capturing it. This ogre, Thorwald, represents to Jeffries his own darkest possibility, as the man driven to his very limit by the impossible relationship, and for whom the fantastic option of terminating his sexual partner has become a reality. Accordingly, Thorwald plays a role for Jeffries in the preservation of his own *self*-image: as good, just, and responsible to his community of others. As Thorwald’s own situation begins to coincide with Jeffries’ fantasy, they then come to be bound to one another in an ethical relation.

At this point I would like to return to the question of the *viewer’s* proximity to Hitchcock’s ‘voyeur’ and ordinary guy, J. B. Jeffries. Of course, we don’t usually put the designations ‘voyeur’ and ‘ordinary guy’ side by side: the idea of deriving *sexual*

pleasure through the act of watching others is generally considered abject by the ordinary person, and is certainly to be excluded from ordinary pleasure. Yet, the audience identifies with Jeffries, the ordinary guy, and in this case he *is* a voyeur. These seemingly incongruous designations must therefore remain uncomfortably coupled within the viewer's identification with Jeffries. Furthermore, the focus of the film, and what the audience finds so compelling about it, is precisely Jeffries' gaze—the various emotions that flicker across his face as he is caught by the spectacle outside his window—and as such, the viewer is captivated by the question of the voyeur's desire. This is succinctly put by Thorwald himself, the monster of Jeffries' fantasy, during the penultimate scene, where he addresses Jeffries “say something, what do you want?”, and it becomes questionable for a moment which of them is the menace, and which the victim. For, we never actually receive an answer from Jeffries with regard to what he wants from Thorwald—or what he gets out of his quest to find out his guilt. And perhaps there is no ‘reason,’ beyond the concern to uphold the law that Jeffries himself might cite in his own defence. Yet, as the Marquis de Sade teaches us, there is a pleasure to be found in the enactment of law; in the subjugation of others to an arbitrary principle (which is perhaps why, as we are now finding out, so many judges, policemen, teachers, and priests are also perverts).

Like so many ordinary men, from Auschwitz to Abu Ghraib, Jeffries experiences his power—his desire—in the upholding of ‘the law.’ Temporarily helpless and immobile, Jeffries' only agency is through his gaze, by means of which he is able to categorise and pass judgement upon the actors in the world as it appears outside his window. But perhaps this is also the thrill that attracts the viewer to cinema: because the cinematic world—at least as it is given by Hollywood—is presented to the viewer as *he* would like it: with its men ordinary, and its women sublimely beautiful. What is interesting about the view from Jeffries' rear window is that—at least to an extent—it subverts the Hollywood image of romance... the view is fairly grim as far as the heterosexual relationship is concerned, turning up its numerous possibilities of failure; and, as the fire-escape wife so poignantly observes upon finding her dog strangled, the outlook for community itself is also bleak. As with the community given by the French revolution, the community that lives in this Greenwich Village block of apartments is united only by virtue of the gruesome and arbitrary murder of some of its inhabitants, to which they bear witness...



Yet is it any different for we who have come through the Enlightenment, and now stand, bruised by cynicism, in its wake? Perhaps the basis of our own democratic-capitalist community, is also that we watch, and that in seeing we consume the other... (and this is where I get obliquely political)... Whether we view our images through windows, or through television and computer screens, our position in relation to the world is still as voyeur. Some images may provoke us to demand that the law be upheld, and that

particular individuals be brought to justice. But certain questions remain: Which law? What freedom? Whose desire? And, finally, what obligation does the one who sees accrue in relation to the one who is viewed? Especially when the scene is arranged according to our own fantasy.

## Notes

1. James Stewart starred in Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948), *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956), and *Vertigo* (1958), as well as, *Rear Window* (1954).

2. This point is emphasised by Hitchcock when the viewer is given a piece of information regarding Thorwald's comings and goings that is withheld from Jeffries, because he is asleep at that moment. In this way, the audience is given responsibility for 'keeping watch,' and is drawn into the same ethical situation that faces Jeffries.

Sade performs a similar manoeuvre in the introduction to *Justine*, when he disavows ownership of the opinions of his characters, and then actually denies authorship of the book. The effect is to devolve responsibility for the ambiguous pleasure derived within the book to its reader.

3. In the final scene we find Lisa dressed in carefully styled 'action' wear, thus indicating that she is ready to travel rough with Jeffries on his photographic expedition. When she sees that he is asleep, she takes out her fashion magazine, which represents the irreducible remainder of sexual difference that stands between them. This can be read ambiguously by feminists: perhaps a concern for fashion is a trace of her feminine difference, but perhaps it is merely the 'femininity' she is allowed within a patriarchal organization of gender roles.

4. Zizek continues, "When Stewart sees her in the murderer's apartment his gaze is immediately fascinated, greedy, desirous of her: she has found her place in his fantasy-space. This would be Lacan's 'male chauvinist' lesson: man can relate to woman only in so far as she enters the frame of his fantasy." (Zizek 1989, 119)

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