
The Rhetoric Of Gaze : A Critical Study Of Hitchcock's *Rear Window*

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Abstract

This paper endeavours to critically engage with and examine the gazes cast by the photojournalist protagonist Mr. L. B. Jefferies (James Stewart) in Alfred Hitchcock's iconic film Rear Window (1954). It attempts to analyze how Jefferies observes his neighbours' behaviours through the views offered by binocular and zoom lens. Acting like a Peeping Tom, he takes the voyeuristic pleasure of these male gazes. The purpose of the paper is to analyse voyeurism and its role in developing the plot of the movie. The paper situates Hitchcock's Rear window within the theoretical framework of Laura Mulvey's influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". It primarily explores the concept of 'scopophilia', pleasure derived from looking, as a crucial subject of cinematic spectatorship. This paper attempts to critically examine how, in this patriarchal society, women are turned into objects of gaze(s) rather than the possessors because of the controlling presence of camera coming from the assumptions of heterosexual men. John Berger, in his "Selected Essays", argues "you painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting vanity, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own purpose." (507) The plot of the movie, actually, centres round gazing, looking, and watching. The protagonist L. B. Jefferies is in the ethical dilemma of surveillance. Dilemmas, ethical concerns, and the practice of surveillance, therefore, have also been placed under the lens of scrutiny. The paper focuses on the justification of the practice of surveillance, eliciting the idea whether Hitchcock's treatment is sophisticated or not.

Keywords: Male gaze, voyeuristic pleasure, Peeping Tom, surveillance, etc.

Gaze direction is an essential communicative channel through which the surveillant and the surveilled transmit information between themselves. This paper attempts to critically examine the gazes cast by the globe-trotting protagonist L.B. Jefferies (James Stewart), in Alfred Hitchcock's iconic cinema *Rear window* (1954). This paper attempts to explore how Jefferies observes his neighbours' activities through the rear window, taking the assistance of a binocular and a zoom lens. Acting like a Peeping Tom, he derives voyeuristic pleasure from these male gazes. This paper will analyse how voyeurism plays a crucial role in developing the plot of the film. The paper focuses on the ethics of surveillance, eliciting the idea whether Hitchcock's lesson is sophisticated or not. Alfred Hitchcock (1899-1980), in most of his famous works, has been particularly preoccupied with the act of surveillance. Gazing, watching, looking

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always play significant roles in most of his thriller films to tightly weave the plots. Based on Cornell Woolrich's short-story *It Had to Be Murder* (1942), *Rear Window*, actually, concerns itself with the ethics of surveillance. Jeff, armed with a binocular and a paparazzi zoom lens, is actually invading the privacies of his neighbours. Hitchcock, the most productive auteur and a pioneer in the field of visual manipulation, dexterously weaves the plot of *Rear Window* and generates tension little by little until the crucial moment.

Sir Alfred Joseph Hitchcock (1899-1980), widely regarded as the master of suspense, is not only a prominent British-American director but also an influential producer and a film maker. Dealing predominantly with psychological complexity and marvellous suspense, Hitchcock directed more than fifty feature films. The thoughtful regulation of suspense and psychological inspection makes Hitchcock not only the pioneer, but also an influential developer of the thriller genre of cinema. Some significant psychological thriller films directed by Hitchcock are *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), *Strangers on a Train* (1951), *Dial M for Murder* (1954), *Vertigo* (1958), *Psycho* (1960) and *The Birds* (1963). Though he never garnered any award for the Best Director, yet he received five times nomination for such an award. Besides, he is the six-time winner of the Academy Award. The special features of Hitchcock's cinema - voyeurism, moral ambiguity, ethical dilemma, ethics of surveillance, suspenseful story telling, psychological complexity, guilt and obsession, internal conflicts- distinguish him from his contemporary film makers, such as Howard Hawks, Frank Capra, Orson Welles, John Ford and David O. Selznik who predominantly deal with external conflicts, straightforward characters, traditional plot structures and heroic resolutions. Besides, Hitchcock also casts light on how repressed sexuality, gendered issues and suppressed desires are integrally related with each other. His catchy, unresolved and ambiguous ending also makes him absolutely distinct from other film makers. He deconstructs conventional cinema and reconstructs it as an art of psychological tension, spectatorship, visual narrative, ethical dilemma and picturesque presentation.

It has been noticed that over the past few years Hitchcock's *Rear Window* has become a fascinating topic of increasing interest for some academicians and researchers. A few literary articles of scholarly merits have been published from several publication houses. The article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) explores the notion of male gaze. "The Women Who Knew Too Much : Hitchcock and Feminist Theory" by Tania Modleski analyses the film from a feminist perspective and shows how Lisa Fremont is suppressed as a passive character. In "The Obvious and the Code" Raymond Bellor gives a semiotic and structural analysis of Hitchcock's *Rear Window*. In *Overhearing Film Dialogue* Sarah Kozloff notes how dialogue and gender are related to power dynamics. William Rothman in his article "Hitchcock : The Murderous Gaze" (1982), demonstrates meta-cinematic gaze. The article "The Cinema of Isolation : A History of Physical Disability in the Movie" questions and critiques masculinity and its representation. John Fiske in his *Television Culture*, in 1987, applies cultural theory to visual media. This paper, unlike other literary articles, attempts to analyze the gazes critically through the lens of ethical surveillance, digital and reciprocal media context. It endeavours to answer the most crucial question : is Hitchcock's treatment is sophisticated? Whereas Mulvey's application is primarily occupied with voyeurism and visual pleasure, this paper explores the nature of Hitchcock's treatment on the basis of ethical depth, utilising the theoretical framework of male gaze, psychoanalysis and ethical surveillance.

This paper will involve minute observations on the film, highlighting significant themes, symbols and representations related to ethical dilemma and the nature of Hitchcock's treatment. The findings will be analyzed thematically, and a content analysis approach will be used to identify patterns and themes that emerge from the film. This paper will attempt to critically evaluate the gazes and the ethics of surveillance through the lens of gaze theory as exemplified by Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". It will not only analyze the gazes through the Lacanian perspective of mirror stage but also focus on the panopticon views exemplified by Michel Foucault in his

epoch making book Discipline and Punishment. The study will also utilize the ideas and concepts of John Berger . The gaze theory has its way not only in Film Studies or media, but also in literary and cultural studies, critical race theory, psychoanalysis, and feminism.

While the word 'look' refers to a perpetual mode of seeing open to all, the word 'gaze' denotes a more prolonged and acute mode of viewing related to gender dynamics. According to The Chambers Dictionary to gaze is "to look steadily and intently." (619) Originating in the Middle English Period, the word 'gaze' which as a verb means "to look steadily for a long time" (Steel 282) was first used in the 14th century. But, surprisingly, the noun form of the word 'gaze' came to be used two centuries later in 1566. And four centuries later, during the 1970s, the word began to be used as a technical term and came to be related to film theory. Nowadays, the term is broadly used by the theorists of media to demonstrate the gaze in the visual text and the ways a surveillant surveys the images reflected in the optical medium.

Gaze is of different types. Whereas the male gaze visualizes women from a heterosexual male perspective, the female gaze, characterized empathy, emotion and sensitivity, envisages the universe from a feminist point of view. Extra-diegetic gaze allows the character to give straightforward looks towards the audience, while intra-diegetic gazes refer to the gazes of one character on others within the text or refer to the ways in which the characters look at each other. If the spectator gaze implies the viewer's gaze at the image or screen, voyeuristic gaze refers to the unlawful invasion into the people's private world without their consent. Besides these, there are also other type of gazes, such as oppositional gaze, colonial gaze, post-colonial gaze, imperial gaze, surveillance gaze, medical or scientific gaze and so on.

During social interactions, people look each other in the eye repeatedly but for short periods of time. Michael Argyle and Janet Dean are of the view that "if there is EC (Eye Contact between A & B) both may know that A's attitude to B is one of sexual attraction, friendship, hate, dominance or submission." (292)

Jeremy Hawthorn, emphasising the aspects of interpersonal looking, establishes the following prominent characteristics of gazes:

- i. Gaze which is a gender retrieval activity is an interactive, interpersonal process between two individuals and we, generally, reveal a lot about ourselves while looking and searching for information.
- ii. Looking is a cumulative process, each look we give actually displays the fruit of the previous look.
- iii. Looking is far from being a neutral process of gathering information, rather our looking is soaked with the residues of our social and cultural existence which is related to class, sexuality, and economics.

The term 'male gaze' was first introduced by Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). Mulvey uses the key ideas of psychoanalysis to reveal the exercise of patriarchal power in Hollywood cinema. In this patriarchal society women are turned into the object of gaze rather than the possessor because of the controlling presence of the camera coming from the heterosexual man. The subtitle of the article "Political Use of Psychoanalysis" highlights the core idea of the article. Exploring Hitchcock's movie via male gaze, the paper focuses on the psycho-feminist approach, and explores the relationship between men and women in the contemporary society as manifested in the film. In Hollywood cinema the protagonists are usually male and the traditional concept of women as being watched and men as watcher still applies even in the twenty first century. Even in advertisement, women appear to be products for consumption and this is how they are turned into mere commodities. In Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, Miss Torso who is almost naked most of the time is the victim of the male gaze cast by the protagonist through the window to nourish his voyeuristic pleasure.

The English art critic John Berger, while discussing male gaze argues " You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting vanity, thus morally condemning the

woman whose nakedness you depicted for your own pleasure" 51). Another excerpt from Berger's *Ways of Seeing* reveals how women are painstakingly and painfully visualized by heterosexual men :

[M]en act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in himself is male : the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object — and most particularly an object of vision : a sight. (47)

Berger is of the view that gaze is reciprocal in nature. He writes " if we accept that we can see that hill over there, we propose that from that hill we can be seen. The reciprocal nature of vision is more fundamental than that of spoken dialogue" (9). This is evident when Lisa communicates with Jeff showing the ring of the salesman's murdered wife. Thorwald notices his wife's ring on the stranger's finger and this makes him aware of the presence of another eye. Manlove argues " the moment Jeff (and the viewer) sees Thorwald return his gaze from across the courtyard directly into the eye behind the camera lens Jeff knows he has been seen. " (99) As soon as Jeff finds that the salesman is looking around the courtyard intently, he is frightened of being watched and suggests that Stella to get back from the window : " That salesman's looking out of his window, you see. Get back, he will see you " (*Rear Window*). Jeff now realizes that Thorwald's look is not an ordinary one, rather this is a kind of look suited to a person who is afraid of the revelation of his guilt. With his binocular, Jeff not only sees Thorwald's guilty look, but also meticulously observes the little dog digging the flower bed planted by the salesman. Jeff begins to notice the criminal's guilt, and the dog also perceives the real crime. At the crucial moment of the film, Jeff makes a mistake on telephone and accidentally speaks the latest development to Thorwald supposing him to be his detective friend Thomas Doyle. This silence, as silence is stronger or more effective than a thousand words pronounced with authority, makes him aware that Thorwald is physically hunting him. After that Thorwald appears before Jeff and casts a direct gaze by looking into the camera which puts him to the position of the cinematic

audience. Jeff endeavours to dismiss the reversal of the gaze by using the technology of voyeurism, the firing of the flashbulbs. Though Thorwald is temporarily blinded by the firing of flash bulbs, yet mere light does not have the power to transcend the gaze, as the Lacanian gaze always transcends light. Lacan's notion of Mirror Stage culminates this analysis. Mulvey links Lacan's Mirror Stage to film theory. She suggests that cinema taps into viewers narcissistic desire to identify with idealized images. This identification reinforces patriarchal ideals and spectatorial pleasure in cinema. Sohini Chaudhuri argues:

Here, she [Mulvey] refers to Lacan who proposed that human identity or the ego is formed during the Mirror Stage, when an infant first encounters itself as a separate entity, typically through its reflection in mirror. ... Human individuals are haunted by their idealized image of themselves throughout their lives. (34)

In Mirror Stage, the subject achieves the sense of mastery and self recognition as he watches his image reflected in a mirror. Jeff's self-recognition occurs when he receives Thorwald's return gaze. In this stage self is created along with ego and the subject is exposed to culture and language. When the subject appears in the symbolic order, the narcissistic ideal image is maintained in the imaginary stage. Making distinction between eye's look and the gaze, Lacan complicates the notion of narcissism. To Lacan gaze produces some uncanny sense. The sense of being gazed at by the object of our look produces some uncanny feelings which affect us the way "castration anxiety" would affect us . In this particular stage the feeling related to 'scopophilia', as exemplified by Freud, is exterminated by the fact that the real always transcends the structure of ' the symbolic order '. In *Rear Window*, Jeff, like an infant in Lacan's theory, discerns his subjectivity and perceives a traumatic realization of his own impotency and inadequacy. This realization challenges the notion of patriarchy and voyeurism.

Mulvey uses a number of fundamental ideas from psychoanalysts like Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan to build her feminist perspective . In his " Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality " (1905), Freud uses the term 'scopophilia' which means pleasure derived from looking. Mulvey utilizes the notion of 'scopophilia' as a crucial subject of cinematic spectatorship. Mulvey argues :

[I]n a world by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active / male and passive / female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In her traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously to be looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (19)

Voyeurism, having a sexual undertone, actually, refers to the act of observing and watching others without their consent or knowledge. The main motif of the movie is voyeurism and the title itself proclaims it. In Hitchcock's *Rear window*, for instance, a woman, almost naked and visible from the architectural window, is the victim of voyeuristic pleasure. Even the bare legs of a woman sitting on a chair in the garden amplifies his voyeuristic thirst. To justify this, the paper situates Hitchcock's *Rear Window* within the theoretical framework of Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" where 'scopophilia' acts as a crucial subject of cinematic spectatorship. The plot of the cinema gradually develops through the voyeuristic activities of the protagonist. Almost all the time, be it day or night, Jeff is obsessed with the gazes as he is psychologically entangled with them. Acting like a Peeping Tom he is always ready to peep into the privacies of his neighbours. The term Peeping Tom comes from the mythological anecdote surrounding Lady Godiva. Lady Godiva used to ride naked through the town and Peeping Tom cannot help watching her. So he is struck blind. In *Rear Window*, Jeff is quite analogous with Peeping Tom as he peeps into the privacies of his neighbours through the rear window of his compartment with the help of his paparazzi camera and a binocular (see fig.1).



Fig. 1 Jefferies is peeping through his window. Screenshot from Rear Window. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock, Performances by James Stewart and Grace Kelly, Paramount Pictures, 1945

The English philosopher Jeremy Bentham uses the cognate term 'panopticon', meaning 'all-seeing', for a prison in which all the prisoners are kept in individual cells in a ring like building. Michel Foucault also talks about the panoptic concept in a chapter of his book *Surveiller et Punir : naissance de la prison* [in English, *Discipline and Punish : The Birth of the Prison* (1977)]. In this ring like building where the prisoners are kept in isolated cells, all the cells can be seen from the hub of this ring. All the time, the prisoners think that they are being watched by the authority. This constant possibility of surveillance and observation oscillates in the prisoner's mind. The purpose of the panopticism is to make the prisoners absolutely self-disciplined. As Patricia Waugh argues " controversially, Foucault suggests that such an arrangement is more cruel than systems reliant on physical torture." (512)

In Hitchcock's *Rear Window* the relation between the observer and the observed has been demonstrated to some extent as panoptic. Even the panoptic structure of Jeff's architectural window helps him a lot to play the role of a voyeur. But in *Rear Window*, at first, the situation is not congenial to the notion of panopticism as the protagonist here secretly peeps into the privacies of his neighbours. Whereas in the Benthamian panoptic concept the prisoners are well aware of being observed by the authority, the neighbours in *Rear Window* are not at all

aware that they are being watched furtively by someone, as Jeff snoops into the privacies of his neighbours, himself remaining almost invisible. But, towards the end of the film, from the point of time, when Lisa Fremont wiggles the wedding ring of Thorwald's murdered wife to communicate with Jeff, Thorwald becomes well aware of the presence of Jeff's eye and realizes that he is under surveillance. After the realization, Thorwald telephones Jeff and appears before him with a straightforward gaze. The shades of the architectural window are raised in a way that suggests a theatre curtain, and furthermore, behind the curtain appear the neighbours' windows that resemble a number of separate films for Jeff to watch:

They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized, and constantly visible. ... Each individual, in his place, is securely confined to a cell from where he can be seen from the front by the supervisor, but the side walls prevent him from coming into contact with his companion. (134)

Though Jeff's apartment is not the inspection tower, the moment Thorwald gazes at him it turns into a panoptic structure, and after that Jeff transforms from surveillant to surveilled and hunter to prey.

The word 'surveillance' refers to the monitoring of behaviours for gathering information. It can embody the observation through the means of virtual and electronic instruments from a distance. The ethics of surveillance provides guidelines on how observation and monitoring are to be carried out. It concerns itself with public interests and individual rights. The key features of ethics of surveillance are — privacy, accountability, transparency, legitimacy, proportionality, necessity and legality. But in Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, the protagonist L. B. Jefferies violates the ethics of surveillance by acting like a Peeping Tom and for this he receives punishment. At the very onset of the movie, we find that the photo-journalist protagonist Mr L. B. Jefferies has broken his one leg while taking photographs during a car race and is, therefore, confined to a wheelchair. To avoid boredom and to escape his ladylove Lisa Fremont he plays the role of a snooper by secretly watching his neighbours' behaviours including their sexual activities and this is how he actually becomes a cinematic

audience. With his binocular Jeff begins to visualise very minutely the pros and cons of his surroundings. He not only notices Thorwald's guilty look but also meticulously observes the little dog which already smells the criminal activity committed by Thorwald. Jeff's curiosity gets accelerated the moment he visualizes Thorwald's strange activities, such as his departures and arrivals several times late in the night with a suitcase, his cleaning of a large knife and engaging with a rope. The more he discovers the strange behaviours the more he is getting obsessed with the matter. He then uses the paparazzi zoom lens as the professional tool that can serve as an alibi for the watcher. He is so engrossed with the practice of surveillance that his immobility leads him to give instructions to Lisa and Stella (Thelma Ritter) who, actually, act like his surrogate legs for the collection of information and evidence. But the haunting question remains : is suspension of a crime sufficient reason for violating the ethics of surveillance?

The phrase 'the rhetoric of gaze' highlights how looking itself appears to be a powerful tool. It denotes the rhetorical use of vision and visual representation, eliciting the idea that looking is far from being a passive neutral process, and that is rather acts as an apparatus of persuasion, power and control. In *Rear Window* we find the proper application and representation of 'the rhetoric of gaze.' *Rear Window* is a splendidly multi-layered movie that probes the act of gazing from innumerable angles. Utilizing the survey of the male gaze, the mutual gaze, the panoptic gaze, the onlooker's gaze, this study has attempted to unearth unearths the issue of power dynamics, moral dilemmas and gender politics in ocular culture. The aim here has been to raise again the frequently-asked question : is Hitchcock's treatment justified ? Being asked by Truffaut whether L. B. Jefferies is a snooper, he replies "sure, he is a snooper, aren't we all? I'll bet you that nine out of ten people, if they see a woman across the courtyard undressing for bed ... will stay and look" (Albrechtslund 133). At the end, Jeff's voyeurism is rewarded because Thorwald is found guilty and is arrested by the police and this happens only because of Jeff's unethical voyeuristic approach. The crime is solved finally , but for Jeff the movie does

not conclude happily. As a result of his unethical peeping into the privacies of his neighbours, Jeff is symbolically castrated because his other leg is fractured and he is punished with physical immobility. This is an ethical punishment that he suffers because of his unethical act of voyeurism. It shows that Hitchcock's treatment is balanced, adequate and appropriate. Gaze theory has made inroads not only in Film Studies and media, but also in literary and cultural studies, critical race theory, psychoanalysis, and feminism. In the realm of interdisciplinary studies, the prudent analysis of gaze has also its prominence. This research article will provide an essential resource for researchers and scholars interested to probe into the world of ocular culture.

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