

Rear Window and Post-War Gender Dynamics

Many critics have taken a feminist approach to Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, but all have done so through the lens of patriarchy. Such an approach, however, does not fully encapsulate the complexities of either the picture or its characters. When Laura Mulvey calls Lisa Fremont (Grace Kelly) a "passive image of visual perfection" (16) she does so from a flawed vantage point. To fully appreciate the tension within it one must set the film within its historical context, what John Hellmann refers to as "the certitudes and rigidities of the 1950s" (96). The 1950s saw a rise in consumerism, the height of the Beat Generation and the start of the Cold War – all things that, taken together, are representative of this decade's struggle to find a balance between innovation and progress on the one hand, and conformity and tradition on the other. Most policymakers and creators of the popular culture, however, still "pointed to traditional gender roles as the best means for Americans to achieve the happiness and security they desired" (May 90). The 1950s also witnessed another phenomenon in women who did not want a return to the prewar status quo of domesticity. According to James T. Patterson, "by 1950 there were 18 million women working for pay, only a million or so fewer than in 1945" (34). Lisa Fremont is one of these professional women of the 1950s who seem to pose a threat to the patriarchy by refusing to return to her prewar confinement. It is against this backdrop of a changing workforce and changing gender roles that one must view the characters of *Rear Window*.

Additionally, one must also consider the artist when interpreting the work. Throughout his career Hitchcock displayed a marked favoritism for fiercely independent female characters, with the same strong sense of self Lisa Fremont possesses. Consequently, critiquing his films from a patriarchal perspective fails to acknowledge the many ways in which Hitchcock questions, and even undermines, this system. As Lisa Fremont shows, Hitchcock did not see female independence and equality as detrimental to marriage. In fact, he seems to see danger in maintaining the tradition of male domination. As Donald Spoto argues, "in most Hitchcock romances, the woman is courageous precisely because she is willing to risk so much for love – something alien to the manipulative, ungrownup man" (220). It is precisely this aspect of Hitchcock films that seems to undermine the effort of some critics to portray them as misogynistic. Lisa risks her life by climbing from a balcony onto a second story window ledge, risking her life to both enter and escape, just to prove her

mettle to Jeff and win his heart. Contrary to Mulvey's emphasis on female passivity in narrative cinema, Lisa is an undeniably active and powerful character.

Jeff: Can't we just sort of keep things status quo?

Lisa: Without any future?

It is no fluke that Hitchcock's most successful female characters are the ones who challenge traditional gender roles and maintain a strong sense of self that exists outside male definition. Lisa Fremont (*Rear Window*) and Iris Henderson (Margaret Lockwood, *The Lady Vanishes*) are the best example of this quality. Iris resists her father's desire to "have a coat of arms on the jam label" and instead finds love with Gil (Michael Redgrave), someone who seems to appreciate her assertiveness and independence. Eve Kendall (Eva Marie Saint) ranks slightly behind Lisa and Iris in her sense of self. She starts off with a clearly male-slanted view of herself, but evolves over the course of the film to be more assertive about her identity. On the flip side of these strong female characters are the ones with a very patriarchal sense of self who get devoured by the male leads. It should be noted that these weak female characters exist in what Richard Allen refers to as Hitchcock's tales of "ironic inversion and downward descent" (35). In studying this romantic inversion, Allen points to *Vertigo* as the "apotheosis of melancholic romantic irony that borders on tragedy" (37). Here, Allen refers to the scenes where Scottie (Jimmy Stewart) literally forces Judy (Kim Novak) to remake herself using his memories of Madeleine as a template. Judy is so desperate for Scottie's love that she acquiesces to his every demand for change, consequently sacrificing her own identity in the process. For Allen this is the pinnacle of Hitchcock's romantic inversion model. One can also see elements of this model, moments where the story could take a tragic turn, in Jeff's manipulations of Lisa. This is especially true in the riveting scenes where Lisa sneaks into Thorwald's apartment and, later, when Thorwald enters Jeff's apartment. The title character from *Marnie* (Tippi Hedren) finds herself completely possessed and devoured by Mark Rutland (Sean Connery), a wealthy Philadelphia gentleman. Mark strong arms Marnie into marrying him after discovering she is a thief, and strips her of her independence in the process. Another Tippi Hedren character, Melanie Daniels (*The Birds*), also fears losing her identity and independence to marriage. In fact, numerous critics have argued for the birds as an avatar of these inner turmoils. One may argue that both of these characters are guilty of using their sexuality to their advantage, thereby possessing a superficial independence that only exists within the patriarchal model. Any critic who takes this type of approach, however, is being subservient to the very same patriarchal model that Hitchcock so often questions in his films. Another of Hitchcock's characters who is guilty of a male-oriented sense of identity is Alicia (Ingrid Bergman) in *Notorious*. She allows herself to be devoured by Devlin (Cary Grant), submitting to his every request to earn his love. When Devlin rejects her she allows herself to be dominated by Sebastian (Claude Rains). The one thing all of these male-dominated females have in common is that they all end their respective films in a nearly catatonic state. If the last images we have of these characters are

any indication, Hitchcock seems to favor strong, independent women over those who unquestioningly accept traditional gender roles.

Hitchcock intended for his audience to see a “symmetry” between “the Stewart-Kelly couple, with him immobilized by his leg in a cast, while she can move about freely” and the Thorwald couple on the other side of the yard, with “a sick woman who’s confined to her bed, while her husband comes and goes” (Truffaut 216). Thus, the opposing couples can be viewed as an allegory for the gendered tensions in the 1950s. In the Thorwalds one can find the example of traditional gender roles while Lisa represents the postwar independent woman in her relationship with L.B. ‘Jeff’ Jeffries (Jimmy Stewart). Stella (Thelma Ritter) questions the possibility of a return to tradition when she evokes the image of Jeff in a courtroom “surrounded by a bunch of lawyers in double-breasted suits” being sentenced as a Peeping Tom despite pleading that he loves his neighbors “like a father.” In her essay “Voyeurism and the Postwar Crisis of Masculinity” Elise Lemire points to the interaction between Doyle (Wendell Corey) and Lisa where he questions the veracity of her “feminine intuition” to show another aspect of “fifties gender politics: Men want women to stand by them socially but not professionally” (78). According to Lemire this is achieved by having Jeff reference the Policeman’s Ball because the purpose of this event is “ostensibly for the legal profession to dance with women even as Doyle’s speech at the ball serves as an opportunity to show how incompetent women are at upholding the law” (78). Doyle serves as a kind of living manifestation of the “status quo” to which Jeff refers. It is no coincidence that Hitchcock fashions Doyle as a foil to the film’s heroes and characterizes him in a manner that leads the audience to dislike him. Doyle’s adherence to the “status quo” makes him a threat to the “future” Lisa references earlier.

If one accepts that the temperature in the apartment stands as some sort of metaphor for Jeff’s relationship anxiety, then one can assume that the temperature drop is representative of contentment. This is particularly revealing if one considers that the temperature appears to be at 72 degrees, generally accepted as the most comfortable temperature for humans. If the tension that initially exists between Jeff and Lisa is viewed as stemming from some sort of masculine-feminine dichotomy then one should expect the temperature to be above the initial 93 degrees of the opening scene, since he is now more emasculated than when the audience first met him. Logically, one must conclude that the tension is not gender-related at all but stems from some sort of larger systemic issue. Jeff’s contentment should be viewed as an acceptance of the fifties’ idea that “a successful relationship rested on the emotional compatibility of husband and wife, rather than the fulfillment of gender-prescribed duties and roles” (D’Emilio 265). At the beginning of the film one can see Jeff as a typical 1950s male, full of anxiety about women in general, “whose economic and sexual behavior seemed to have changed dramatically” (May 93). Lisa can be seen as the embodiment of this change, a woman who earns her own money and who is not only aware of, but proud of, her own sexuality.

Despite the story being told from Jeff's perspective, Lisa is the de facto hero of *Rear Window* by virtue of being the one who is ultimately able to solve the conflict. Spoto argues this point as well when he references Jeff's cruelty during the lobster dinner scene at the beginning of the film. According to him, "if we attend Grace Kelly's acting toward the end of this sequence with the lobster dinner and observe how Hitchcock photographed her, we see irrefutable proof of where his personal sympathies are and where ours are meant to be" (221). This is yet another indication of Hitchcock's personal disdain for traditional gender roles and their tendency to almost dehumanize women. If one insists on using traditional gender norms to interpret the characters, Jeff seems to take on the more stereotypical feminine role in the film as a result of his invalidity, while Lisa is the sexually aggressive one, a more stereotypical masculine trait. Tania Modleski argues that Lisa is completely "masculinized" over the course of the narrative, culminating for her with Lisa's appearance in "masculine drag" of jeans, loafers and a blouse during the film's final scene (84).

Contrary to this interpretation, Lisa does not lose any of her feminine sexuality from beginning to end. In fact, by labeling Lisa's clothing as "masculine" Modleski is observing the very value system against which she argues. In addition, Lisa's costume changes are, if anything, indicative of her evolution in Jeff's eyes: a lessening of his feelings of inadequacy. With each change, Lisa comes to resemble more and more the stereotypical 1950s middle-class woman rather than an increasingly de-feminized character. Although Modleski is correct in identifying Lisa as "an overwhelmingly powerful presence" even when the audience is first introduced to her, she misses the mark in spending much of her essay discussing how Lisa's power emasculates Jeff and how he subsequently attempts to transform her into his mirror image (84). Jeff's resistance to Lisa is not based on feelings of male inadequacy so much as it is a cinematic representation of larger issues in 1950s marriage ideals. Jeff sees his relationship with Lisa as an either/or proposition: either he can continue his adventurous life in "combat boots and a three day beard" or he can look "handsome and successful in a dark blue flannel suit." He believes that she and her eleven hundred dollar dress cannot be happy in his world of "fish heads and rice" and that he cannot be happy "rushing home to a hot apartment every night to listen to the automatic laundry, the garbage disposal and a nagging wife." In his mind, as in the minds of many others in the 1950s, these are the only two alternatives. Lisa's transformation, then, must not be read as a passive transformation into the male ideal, but rather as affirmation that one must not necessarily choose between adventure and domesticity, between Flash Gordon and I Love Lucy. Lisa shows that not only can the fifties woman survive in Jeff's world of adventure and danger but that she can even find a balance between a traditionally masculine world and a traditionally feminine one, between *Beyond the High Himalayas* and *Harper's Bazaar*. Essentially, Lisa proves that she can "dress for the part without sacrificing her sense of self" (Bertolini 247).

Lemire comes closest to accurately capturing Lisa's essence, but even she argues that, through Lisa, Jeff gains a "feminine intuition that, ironically, remasculinizes him" (86). Such a gendered interpretation of the exchange between Lisa and Jeff devalues Hitchcock's work by gendering certain traits. What Hitchcock wished to portray was the idea that postwar female independence was not a threat to masculinity at all because, as social constructs, ideas like femininity and masculinity could, and indeed should, be altered so as to promote truly healthy and progressive relationships. It is, after all, not until Jeff is at his most "emasculated" that he seems truly content in sleep. The final shot of the film begins by showing a thermometer that reads a full twenty degrees cooler than the one at the beginning of the film. The camera then pans the courtyard to show the neighbors Jeff has presumably been spying on since his injury before tracking back through his window to reveal an apparent smile on his face as he sleeps. It stops with a medium shot of Jeff in his chair before panning down to show both of his legs in casts and continuing its path over to Lisa in bed, demonstrating her ability to juggle traditional gendered stereotypes.

Jeff's attitude seems to change when Lisa becomes interested in the adventure across the courtyard and he is fully invested in her by the time she trades him her "female intuition for a bed for the night." This transformation is evident through Jeff's exchange with Doyle, who sees the shadow of a woman in Jeff's apartment – both literally on the wall and figuratively through the nightgown. In this scene Doyle becomes an agent of the 1950s morality police through his accusatory looks at Lisa's nightgown lying exposed on Jeff's desk. By contrast, Jeff shows that he has discovered that he can accept, even embrace, the independent woman of the 1950s. Doyle, then, serves as a marker of prewar tradition to which the audience can compare Jeff. As further evidence, Jeff reminds Doyle to be "careful" when he looks at Lisa's nightgown and again when Doyle asks him if he tells his landlord everything. This scene is key to understanding Jeff's full acceptance of Lisa's independence; he refuses to sit idly while Doyle questions her chastity and, by extension, her morality.

To accurately interpret the gender dynamics in *Rear Window* one must set the film against the backdrop of postwar gender tension in the 1950s. Each character and couple represents an aspect of the tensions that existed in that decade. Contrary to other interpretations, I posit that Hitchcock's preference for independent women with a strong sense of self is not just evident in *Rear Window* but is actually evident in nearly all of his films. Hitchcock's films of "romantic renewal" all have strong female leads in common while his films of "romantic inversion" all have female leads that tend to embody traditional gender roles (Allen 26, 35). With this in mind, Hitchcock's message becomes clear: there does not need to be an either/or decision between traditional gender roles and assertive, independent postwar females. In fact, there need not even be a connection between professional and private lives at all. Ultimately, Hitchcock's ideal is a woman who can survive without losing her sense of self.

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