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Can I Have a Look?: A Formal Analysis of Hitchcock and the Art of Suspense in "Rear Window"

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Oscar Peterson was a jazz pianist active from the mid 1940s right up to when he died in 2007. He is considered by many to be one of the greatest and most influential pianists of all time. In Clint Eastwood's documentary *Piano Blues* (Eastwood, 2003), produced by Martin Scorsese, Ray Charles is quoted saying "Oscar could play like a motherfucker!" A quick look at any one of a plethora of videos on the internet of him playing will illustrate just what Ray Charles meant in his colorfully insightful commentary on Oscar Peterson's piano playing abilities; the man's fingers truly were legendary. An observation of these famous fingers at work clearly displays the level of control one can have over the piano. This type of control is what famed director Alfred Hitchcock aimed to have over his

Oscar Peterson, circa 2005

audience. He said it himself that he "enjoys playing the audience like a piano" and a viewing of any number of his films shows that he is as good at that as Mr. Peterson is at tickling the ivories. But how does Mr. Hitchcock do it? To find out, one must critically look at his films and dig under layers of plot and social commentary. This particular dig is into one of his most acclaimed works: *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock 1954) starring James Stewart and Grace Kelly about an injured photographer who believes he has witnessed a murder and his struggle to prove it to those around him.

Rear Window, critically rivalled only by his other canonical works *Vertigo* (1958), *North by Northwest* (1959), and *Psycho* (1960), is considered among the greatest films of all time. But why? What does Hitch do in this film that makes it so special? Among other things, the film is set

in an apartment and hardly moves from that apartment for the duration of the film. This forces the viewer to see the story unfold from the perspective of the apartment's occupant, L. B. Jefferies, who is stuck in a wheelchair due to a broken leg, as he looks out his rear window upon his neighbors, one of whom he believes is a murderer. However, the perspective alone is not what makes this a great film. Hitchcock creates effective audience identification by constructing the mise-en-scène for the film as well as other cinematic tools such as sound and music, camera movement and point-of-view, scene structure, writing and acting.

Hitchcock uses music and sound to establish suspense and to subtly manipulate and "play" his audience. The sound in *Rear Window* is a mix of atmospheric city sounds – sirens, children playing, cars bustling, horns of cargo ships – and

The cityscape of Rear Window

music, both diegetic and non-diegetic. Viewers might mistake the non-diegetic music for diegetic music. This choice is intentional, to make everything seem authentic like the viewer is right there in the apartment, and that these sounds are all a part of the soundtrack of the city. Most music seems to be diegetic but lacks a discernable source within the scene, further putting the viewers in the shoes, or rather the chair, of the protagonist. The viewer is unable to see where the music might be coming from even if it is coming from somewhere in the neighborhood due to the restricted field of vision of the rear window. John Belton talks about how sound contributes to the viewer being inside of Jeff's world in his article "The Space of *Rear Window*" by saying:

"…since Jeff cannot leave his apartment, his world is effectively reduced to the immediate visual and aural space around him (except for occasional telephone conversations with off-screen characters, whose voices refer to a source within the scene). Everything else is excluded." (Belton, *Hitchcock's Rereleased Films*)

Everything presented in the film is as Jeff would see it, and as he would hear it, even if it's a non-diegetic sound. So, all of the sounds are, in a way, diegetic. Hitchcock goes beyond sound though. He not only creates a very specific audio environment, he creates one visually as well.

Another tool Hitchcock uses to create suspense the most useful tool a filmmaker has: the camera itself. Hitchcock uses long continuous shots during points of dialogue or non-action to lull the audience into a false sense of security and to make them focus on the dialogue or the significance of the image itself, while in scenes of action, he cuts from shot to shot anxiously trying to squeeze in as many shots as possible, especially at the climax as Jeff struggles for his life against the villainous Thorwald. The cinematography is bound by the apartment as well; there is very little

tracking, making us feel as immobile as Jeff, and any tracking that is done usually follows a character. There is, however, a lot of tilting, panning, and dolly shots These are the motions Jeff is able to accomplish with the aid of his binoculars and long focus lens. This choice means that the viewer does not get every detail of every event happening in the other apartments. Their residents drift in and out of view due to blinds, doors, walls, and the angle of the view from Jeff's apartment. These decisions are all done

to equate Jeff to the viewer, an observation that has led many scholars to conclude that Jeff represents the movie-goer, looking for entertainment wherever he can find it.

In Robert Stam and Roberta Pearson's essay on the film, they point out the use of language in the film:

> The very language of *Rear* Window resonates with the terminology
>
> of entertainment. Lisa speaks of the 'opening night' of Jeff's final week
>
> 'in a cast.' Pulling the drapes, she tells Jeff that the 'show is over' and
>
> promises 'coming attractions.' ("Hitchcock's *Rear Window*:
>
> Reflexivity and the Critique of Voyeurism").

It is an illustration of the relationship between film and viewer. It's so effective because it is so accurate and true that the viewer cannot help but relate to Jeff and his desire for entertainment, which is precisely the intention of the Master of Suspense. Hitchcock trusts the mind of the viewer to fill in the blanks he has put before them. He doesn't spoon feed viewers information, rather he trusts that they will connect the dots, so while Jefferies is trying to solve the murder, so is the viewer. This level of cinematic involvement can only be achieved if the story is good and well-acted.

Hitchcock's favorite tool to play, his cinematic piano, is writing, scene structure, and the actors. Story was the most important thing for Hitchcock; it is the hub round which everything else in the film turns. *Rear Window* was not just the story of a murder witnessed but also of a dancer

who works her way up while trying to fend off admirers and stay faithful to her beau; it is also the story of a woman whose loneliness drives her to drink and almost worse; it is also the story of a songwriter who struggles to write a hit ballad, and more. Hitchcock flows from one story to another effortlessly keeping the viewer locked to the screen waiting to see what happens with each individual storyline. It is also the story of Jeff and his girlfriend, Lisa as he does his best to not talk about marriage. John Belton notes this, "the hero's voyeurism links the two plot lines." The plot of Jeff looking out the window and spying on his potentially murderous neighbor ends up being the thing that brings him and Lisa closer together.

While it may seem that there are many different, unrelated plots happening, Hitchcock brings them all together through the device of the rear window itself. The way Hitch set up scenes is very impressive in this film as well. The set was huge with a lot of moving parts, namely the people in each apartment. He had to communicate by radio with the actors on their cues and where they needed to be standing so that they could be in focus of the camera; it's almost like conducting an orchestra where all of the players are in the balcony seats rather than the stage. The actors were instrumental in Hitchcock's scheme of playing the audience. Dialogue is delivered very naturally; there are points where actors slip up or stumble over lines or interrupt and talk over each other, but this only adds to the realism of the film. This realism is important because it is what keeps the viewer tied down to their seat. Hitch wanted to make his films seem real because real is scary.

Like the songwriter in his apartment plucking away at his keys, Hitchcock plays quite a tune with this film. Through all these formal elements, he is able to create a work that has been discussed, studied, watched and analyzed scrupulously ever since. There is so much to be said about this film: its comments on voyeurism, its analysis of the film-goer, its commentary on Hollywood at the time and much more. However, at the end of all of that is a good movie. One

can strip back the layers of this film to find all of Hitchcock's meanings and intentions, but it is all worth it to see just how well Alfred Hitchcock uses formal elements to play his audience like a piano.

Works Cited

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