The Space of *Rear Window*

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In Book III of the *Republic*, Plato identifies two distinct and opposed modes of representation—imitation (or mimesis) and simple narration (or diegesis). Contemporary literary theory has inherited this distinction in the form of mimetic and diegetic theories of narration, which range in sophistication from the simple opposition of drama, which "shows" a narrative, and the novel, which "tells" it, to the more complex narrative theories of Wayne Booth and Gerard Genette, which view narration as a fusion of mimetic and diegetic techniques. Though the cinema has traditionally been regarded as a dramatic form because it presents itself to its viewers as pure "story" rather than mediated "discourse" (to borrow Emile Benveniste's terms), it clearly mixes narrative modes. Classical narrative cinema tells as it shows; indeed, it can only tell through showing. Dramatic spectacles are staged for and then "read" by the camera, and this reading narrativizes them.

Cinematic narrative techniques clearly rely upon certain codes of representation that were previously developed in the plastic arts, the theater, and literary narratives. Any notion of "pure" cinema—of a mode of expression that is unique to the cinema and that has evolved autonomously out of the singular nature of the medium's raw materials—must be qualified by the essential impurity of the cinema's quasi-theatrical, quasi-novelistic mode of narration. The figure most frequently identified with the notion of "pure cinema" within classical Hollywood filmmaking is Alfred Hitchcock, who often cites *Rear Window* as his "most cinematic" work because it "is told only in visual terms." Yet *Rear Window* is arguably one of Hitchcock's most "theatrical" films. In what
follows, I want to map out the representation of space in *Rear Window* in terms of its quasi-theatrical, quasi-cinematic nature and to suggest that the film, as a limit-text, explores the parameters of theatrical and cinematic modes of narration.

The credit sequence of *Rear Window* is set against three windows whose bamboo blinds rise in succession to reveal a Greenwich Village courtyard and the apartment buildings which enclose it. The film ends (that is, before the current distributor, Universal, replaced Paramount’s original logo and end titles with its own) with a similar theatrical effect—the successive lowering of these same shades. Beyond the curtained windows lies a space that serves as both a stage and a screen, a space controlled by the authorial presence of Alfred Hitchcock, who invisibly raises and lowers the bamboo shades to open and close the film’s narrative. This space is quasi-theatrical in its pro-filnic unity and three-dimensionality and yet also cinematic in the flat, multi-windowed design of the apartment complex across the way, which resembles nothing other than a series of little movie screens. In front of the shades lies another space that, though architecturally segregated from that of the courtyard, is similarly theatrical and cinematic. The apartment interior is not merely a spectatorial space from which the main action beyond the window is seen, but serves as a space for the playing out of another drama. Both spaces invoke notions of the theater and the cinema and use them as metaphors through which spectators are asked to read the action that takes place within these spaces.

The overall organization of the film, whose action is divided into distinct, temporally continuous units by a series of fades, resembles the act structure of the theater, which breaks down the action into discrete “blocks” of time. In this way the structure of the narrative suggests that of a drama built around scene or act divisions. Even the device of the fade is theatrical, resembling the lighting techniques of the curtain-less theater, which raises and dims the lights in lieu of the raising and lowering of a curtain. The fade is clearly a “filinic” device which draws upon theatrical convention; Hitchcock’s use of it here, in the context of other theatricalisms, gives further support to the notion that the film is engaged in a playful acknowledgement of its own constructedness, an acknowledgement which it shares with its audience.

Within the film itself, the shades are once again lowered (and later raised)—this time by a character within the fiction, Lisa, who
first announces “show’s over for tonight,” then picks up an overnight case with her lingerie in it and carries it to an adjoining room to change. Displaying the nightwear to Jeff, she describes it as a “preview of coming attractions.” Lisa’s dramatic gesture with the curtains and her comments about “coming attractions” function, like the credit sequences themselves which acknowledge Hitchcock’s magisterial presence as narrator, to lay bare the film’s devices. Hitchcock playfully uses Lisa to unmask the film’s status as staged spectacle by having her call attention to the narrative’s two central “attractions”—the murder mystery plot that is “playing” across the courtyard (the show that is over) and the love story that is being acted out within Jeff’s apartment (the coming attractions) —and to characterize them as “constructions.” Not only are the film’s two main playing spaces thus metaphorically identified as sites for fictional spectacle, but Lisa consciously identifies herself here (and elsewhere) as a construction similar to that created for the stage or the screen and presents herself as a spectacle for the male gaze. Earlier, her introduction in step-printed close-up as she kisses Jeff in his darkened room presents her as a magical materialization of male erotic fantasy, appearing, as it were, out of the dreams of the still-sleeping Jeffries. Then, wearing an eleven hundred dollar Parisian dress, Lisa introduces herself, dramatically turning on lamp after lamp as she recites each of her three names—Lisa, Carol, Freemont. In both instances, Lisa’s self-spectacularization directs Jeff’s (and our) attention away from the space of the courtyard and toward that of the interior of the apartment, effectively opposing the lure of one space with that of another.

In general, the film’s narrative is built around a pattern of alternation from story-space to story-space, from scenes in Jeff’s apartment which foreground the action taking place there to scenes playing out across the way, from Jeff as “actor” to Jeff as “spectator.” And Lisa herself openly competes for Jeff’s attention with the space across the way. Indeed, as she lowers the shades, she jokingly threatens “to move into an apartment across the way and do the dance of the seven veils every hour” in order to catch Jeff’s eye. By the end of the film, with Lisa’s entry into Thorwald’s space and Thorwald’s into Jeff’s, the film’s spaces have been revealed as continuous rather than segregated and its stories as intertwined rather than opposed. The love story can only find resolution through the solution of the murder mystery by Jeff and Lisa acting
together as a team. Though still object of spectacle for Jeff, Lisa has inserted herself, as spectacle, within the space of the murder plot, i.e., Thorwald's apartment, where she herself is in danger. In a dramatic turnabout, Jeff's space suddenly becomes the object of Thorwald's gaze, and, dangling out of his own rear window, Jeff is himself inserted into this same plot; and, much as he earlier watched helplessly as Thorwald attacked Lisa, so she now watches as Thorwald attacks him, their relationship thus perversely sealed through this exchange of roles and places.

Given this spatial portrait of the film as a whole, what I want to examine in greater detail is how one part of that larger space—that which is seen through Jeff's rear window—relates to the other and to explore that relationship in terms of the film's overall construction and narrativization of space. At the same time, I want to discuss the way in which the film plays with the differences between theatrical and cinematic notions of space and, through this process, calls attention to its own construction of space. In this way, the film explores and lays bare the nature of cinematic space, revealing it to be an amalgam of theatrical and cinematic qualities.

Much as the curtain-effect conjoins notions of theater and cinema (in that both traditional, legitimate theaters and first-run movies houses regularly used curtains to open and close their programs in the 1950s), so are the spaces in *Rear Window* both theatrical and cinematic. I am using the term “theatrical” metaphorically to describe a certain kind of cinematic space, a space that resembles but is not identical to that found in classical theater. Traditional theatrical space is the product of architecture; it is defined by the proscenium, beyond which space does not exist for the viewer. Though, as Andre Bazin and Christian Metz point out, the convention of the footlights may tend to separate the spectacle from the spectator, the two, like Jeff and his courtyard within the film, must necessarily share the same overall space. This unity of space is literalized in *Rear Window* through its single-set construction, which imposes certain theatrical constraints upon the action.

At the other end of the film's spatial spectrum lies what I would call “cinematic” film space, a space that is “other” for the spectator, who is necessarily segregated from it, physically prohibited from entry into it. Not bound by the Aristotelian unities which dominate the traditional theater, cinematic film space is, with the exception of certain single-take films, such as *Rope* (whose space might be
described, using the above distinction, as “theatrically cinematic,”), constructed out of flat, temporally and spatially discontinuous images which the codes of classical narrative cinema have taught spectators to transform into an illusorily continuous space.

*Rear Window* plays with the differences between theatrical and cinematic film space, relying on set design and certain kinds of camera movements to establish a concrete, unified, theatrical space and on editing, framing, and camera movement to construct a more abstract, psychological, cinematic film space. At the same time, the film plays with the psychology of traditional theatrical and cinematic spaces, i.e., with spectators’ attitudes towards and understandings of those spaces. In particular, the film exploits traditional notions of theatrical space as resistant to and cinematic space as conducive to manipulation for purposes of narrativization and then collapses the two, rendering both kinds of space equally manipulatable and narrativizable, though this is achieved in different ways.\(^9\) The theatrical-cinematic distinction is most commonly articulated in terms of the concepts “showing” versus “telling” (see Booth, or Scholes and Kellogg), mimesis versus diegesis (Plato), and/or spectacle versus narrative (Mulvey).\(^10\) This distinction is in need of qualification in that showing and telling, mimesis and diegesis, and spectacle and narrative are discursive modes which differ in degree, not in essential nature; drama is diegetic as well as mimetic, telling as it shows, and cinema involves “both the presentation of actions and their mediation.”\(^11\) But what concerns me here are not so much theories of narration as the psychologies of different kinds of space in terms of their conduciveness to narrativization. In this context, space in the classical theater is, as Boris Eikhenbaum argues, understood as a given, something to-be-filled-in, and resistant (though not entirely invulnerable) to attempts to reshape it.\(^12\) It presents the narrator with an obstacle of sorts which must be overcome by the forceful presence of an authorial voice which directs spectatorial attention within a fixed space. Space in the cinema, in as much as it is flat and, through montage, discontinuous, is seen less as a given than as a construction; it is a transformation of the real, bearing the marks of an intervening discursive presence.

Both of the spaces that I wish to discuss are constructed: theatrical film space is a literal construction, a feature of the pro-filmic set design, while cinematic film space is a more figurative construction, the result of medium-specific techniques such as framing,
camera movement, and editing. And the nature of their construction determines, in large part, the role these spaces play in the film’s production of meaning.

The set on which *Rear Window* was shot consisted of seven apartment buildings, most of which were, at least, five or six storeys in height. The apartment houses were built with a slight forcing of perspective in order to enhance, through changes in scale, the illusion of depth. “At least thirty of the apartments worked—that is, they were lit and furnished to suit the characters of their occupants.” The sets are designed to satisfy narrative demands. Miss Torso, for example, is provided with a fairly open space because she is a dancer and her movements require it; the shape of her windows permit us to see her dance. The space of her apartment is continuous, unlike that of the Thorwalds. The Thorwald set, though apparently identical to that of the couple with the dog (above them) and that of Miss Lonelyhearts (below them), emphasizes the couple’s estrangement; they occupy separate rooms—he, the living room; she, the bedroom; even the color of the paint on the walls of these two rooms differs, which is not the case for walls in any other apartment. The couple with the dog are routinely seen together, on the fire escape for example, while Miss Lonelyhearts, though alone, repeatedly moves from room to room, unifying, to some extent, her space by moving easily through it. Hitchcock’s set design and staging turns the Thorwald’s windows into fixed framing devices which dramatize their isolation from one another and their discordance as a couple.

Each working apartment in the elaborate set was individually wired so that it could be lit separately. The lighting board with its control switches was located in Jeff’s apartment, behind the camera, enabling Hitchcock to direct the lighting from a central location. The unique nature of the set and Hitchcock’s decision to shoot the film primarily from the vantage point of Jeff’s apartment forced the director to take unusual measures in his direction of actors. The movements of those actors across the courtyard were directed by Hitchcock—from behind the camera in Jeff’s apartment—by using short-wave radios and outfitting the actors with flesh-colored receivers, a communication procedure which permitted Hitchcock to co-ordinate background with foreground action more easily. This production information, together with the overall design of the set, reinforces the notion that the film’s space is *centered* around the apartment of its central character.
Contemporary theorists who link cinematic space to the codes of Renaissance perspective would view *Rear Window's* spatial features as a further instance of the “centering” properties of cinematic space in general, which tends to address a subject whose position that space determines.\(^{16}\) Thus Jeff might be said to occupy a point within the space of the film which identifies him, in a purely spatial way, with the traditional film spectator. At any rate, Hitchcock’s art direction here has rendered the “theatrical” quality of the set design “cinematic.” The set has been built for the camera and for the cinema spectator, placing them at its central station point.

The set design reproduces the conditions of spectatorship in the conventional movie theater. In this way, it is possible to see the film, as Jean Douchet and others do, as being about spectatorship.\(^{17}\) Jeff functions in one space as a surrogate spectator, watching events on a giant screen or series of mini-screens across the way.\(^{18}\) The basic desires which spectators bring to the cinema—desires for sex, romance, adventure, comedy, etc.—are realized on these mini-screens. Miss Torso’s window, as screen, recapitulates the subject matter of primitive, pre-1905 peep shows which feature women dressing and/or undressing and erotic dancing.\(^{19}\) Miss Lonelyhearts offers us the woman’s picture—a melodrama of romantic longing and isolation of the sort found in *Now Voyager*. The composer’s window, barred to symbolize his frustration, reveals, as Robert Stam has suggested, the essential scenario of a success musical, in which the struggling artist is finally recognized.\(^{20}\) The couple on the fire escape belong solidly to the world of screwball comedy—that is, until the moment of awful truth when their dog is discovered murdered. And on Thorwald’s screen plays a noirish crime film which reworks the murderous love triangles of James M. Cain.

In considering the film’s set design, one must, of course, remember that Hitchcock, as a former art director and set designer himself, has always paid close attention to matters of design.\(^{21}\) *Rear Window*, as a project, enables Hitchcock to indulge his passion for design. At the same time, the project poses certain challenges to him as a designer, especially the difficulty of working within the restrictions of a single set in a unified space, which are restrictions that he had earlier explored in *Lifeboat* and *Rope*.

More so than these earlier films, *Rear Window* displays a remarkable coincidence of theme and design. The central character’s immobility within the fiction clearly dictates the design of the set as
well as the structure of the narrative. 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 that is actually elsewhere, although the telephone gives them a source within the scene). Everything else is excluded.

The confined space of the courtyard mirrors Jeff’s confinement to his apartment and to his wheelchair.\textsuperscript{22} As in the theater, there is no space beyond the parameters of the set. The exception which proves the rule is the narrow section of the “outside” world which is seen through the alleyway next to the Sculptress’ apartment. Though it suggests access to an “elsewhere,” through which we can see traffic and anonymous pedestrians, it is \textit{as contained} a space as that of the courtyard. Indeed, Miss Lonelyhearts’ entry into that outside space—she goes to a bar across the street where she picks up a young man—reveals its essentially confining nature; it provides no escape for her but returns her to an even more desperate isolation. The young man’s aggressive sexual advances are more than she had bargained for. Though she successfully fights him off, her failure to find “her true love” in this foray into the outside world leads eventually to her decision to attempt to take her own life later in the film.

This spatial restriction and Hitchcock’s reliance upon a single, more or less fixed camera perspective, which is firmly rooted in Jeff’s apartment for the bulk of the film, would normally tend to limit narrative complexity, preventing, for example, cut-aways to other events taking place elsewhere in the city or preventing entry into other spaces or perspectives which might facilitate narrative exposition or broaden point of view. It would also seem to restrict the role of sub-plots, that is, of other characters and stories which might serve as foils for the central characters and their story. What Hitchcock has done is to build his sub-plots into his set design, using the neighbors across the way as foils for his central romantic couple.

At the same time, this fixed camera perspective tends to limit the film’s narrative perspective in general, preventing other points of view or different perspectives on the action, such as we might find in the more spatially open work of Jean Renoir or Robert Altman. In \textit{Rear Window}, all other narrative perspectives, such as those of Stella, Lisa, and Doyle, which initially differ from Jeff’s in their refusal to believe him, ultimately give way to his perceptions, in
large part because these characters are forced to share his spatial position, to see events from the single perspective which is his own. For Jeff, trapped at a fixed station point, there is only one possible way of interpreting what he has heard and seen; his stubborn adherence to his reading of events is partially understood in terms of his immobilization in space, which prohibits him, unlike the other characters, from gaining other perspectives on what is happening. Denied the mobility of others, his position in space forces him to see something that has been, as it were, anamorphically encoded into a larger representation, like the death head in Hans Holbeins' *The Ambassadors* (1533). One might argue, then, that the film presents us with two psycho-spatial systems; by "psycho-spatial," I mean that the spaces exist as perceived from different subjective perspectives, 1) Jeff’s and 2) that of the characters around him. In this way, Jeff, who is figuratively de-centered in his variance from the perspective of other, more mobile (and thus presumably more "objective") characters, attempts to re-center the views of others around his deviant, de-centered view. Thus the more that the other characters come to share his space—such as Lisa who moves in on him and spends the night—the more able they are to share his understanding of what has and is still taking place across the courtyard.

The film not only overcomes the potential restriction imposed on it by the set’s unity of space, but it actually uses that restriction, transforming it into a *productive* limitation, which serves to further reinforce the confined nature of Jeff’s perspective and our forced identification with it—without sacrificing the narrative diversity of more conventional screenplays. In short, Hitchcock’s script makes the film’s spaces and the set design perform double duty: the set both establishes a concrete playing space for the immediate action and, at the same time, functions abstractly, referring to other, unseen spaces. For example, although we never get to see Lisa’s fashionable, uptown apartment, it nonetheless exists for us, metaphorically displaced (and down-graded in status) in the apartments of Miss Torso and Miss Lonelyhearts.

As Lisa prepares dinner from "21" for Jeff, Jeff watches Miss Lonelyhearts welcome and toast an imaginary male guest. She drinks alone by herself, starts to cry, and then buries her head in her arms. Unaware of the implicit similarity between Miss Lonelyhearts and Lisa, who is preparing a dinner for a man (Jeff) who is "not really there" for her, i.e., who has withdrawn from any emo-
tional commitment to her, Jeff comments that “at least that’s some-
thing you’ll never have to worry about.” Lisa, acknowledging her
kinship with Miss Lonelyhearts, replies: “Oh? You can see my
apartment from here, all the way up on 63rd Street?”

Jeff, in turn, likens Lisa to Miss Torso instead, who is ent-
taining three men in her flat: “No, not exactly,” he replies, “but we
have a little apartment here that’s probably about as popular as
yours. You remember, of course, Miss Torso?”

When Jeff cynically comments that Miss Torso has chosen the
most prosperous-looking man for her date, Lisa informs Jeff that
“she’s not in love with him—or any of them.”

Jeff: “Oh—how can you tell that from here?”
Lisa: “You said it resembled my apartment, didn’t you?”

In correcting Jeff’s reading of the action, Lisa identifies her
own, empty socializing with Miss Torso’s, using the latter’s space
and activity to temporarily “stand in” for her own, off-screen activ-
ities. In this way, the courtyard set takes on a metaphorical func-
tion, and its spaces become sites for the vicarious playing out of
fantasy scenarios projected upon it from another space, that of the
interior of Jeff’s apartment.

It has become by now a critical commonplace to connect the ac-
tivities in Jeff’s apartments with those in the apartments across the
way. Jean Douchet, for example, interprets what Jeff sees in the
apartments opposite him as projections of his own desires. Robin
Wood views each character or story as functioning to comment on
Jeff’s relationship with Lisa. The squabbling Thorwalds and the
overly amorous newlyweds thus become projected options for Jeff
if he were to marry Lisa, and both options are portrayed as equally
unacceptable. Hitchcock’s direction often supports this notion of
projected options. For instance, in their first scene together, Lisa
asks Jeff to leave his job at the magazine and the single, vagabond-
like existence it promotes. As she seductively pleads “isn’t it time
you came home,” the camera dollies in and reframes the couple to
include the newlyweds’ closed window in the background, associat-
ing her indirect proposal of marriage with them.

By the same token, it is surely no coincidence that the Thor-
walds’ apartment is directly opposite Jeff’s and at a level that is ap-
proximately the same as his own. Indeed, its frequent presence in
the background of scenes that take place in Jeff’s apartment subtly
colors our reading of those scenes. Most significantly, it provides a
crucial point of reference at the conclusion of Jeff’s first argument
with Lisa, when he refuses to leave the magazine and become a fashion photographer. As Lisa begins to set the table for dinner, Jeff looks at the Thorwald apartment which is also engaged in dinner activity. The mirroring that takes place here is rather complex. Thorwald, who in several respects reflect’s Jeff’s notion of marriage as entrapment and whose plight is compounded by the fact that his wife is an invalid, serves her dinner in bed. She openly rejects this husbandly gesture by tossing aside the flower which he had put on her tray. Meanwhile, Lisa, whom Jeff has just rebuffed, prepares and serves dinner to Jeff, who is also, like Mrs. Thorwald, an invalid. Though Jeff seems to identify himself with Thorwald as the hen-pecked husband in a bad marriage, Hitchcock complicates this identification by likening Jeff, as ungrateful, cranky invalid, to Mrs. Thorwald. The sequence clearly confounds any simple theory of projection that might reduce the relationship between the film’s foreground and background to that of one-for-one allegory.

The use of the newlyweds’ and the Thorwalds’ apartments cited above represents one way in which Hitchcock can make his set design function meaningfully within the narrative. But in order to achieve this in these scenes, Hitchcock needs to articulate a relationship between the spaces of the actual set. In other words, Hitchcock reconstructs, as it were, the overall space in order to make it signify at specific points within his narrative, using camera movement (as with the newlyweds), editing (the Thorwalds at dinner), or some other formal device. Hitchcock narrativizes the space, in part, by drawing it into the temporal continuum of the narrative, giving it associations with specific characters or actions at specific moments. The distinction that I want to make here concerns the difference between construction and reconstruction, between an object, event, or space and a reading of that object, event, or space. For instance, the overall set design constructed by Hitchcock and his art directors sets forth certain absolute thematic ideas, such as the claustrophobia of the enclosed space of the courtyard or the literal spatial opposition between Jeff’s and Thorwald’s apartment, which might be seen as floating motifs without any fixed place in a narrative sequence. These thematic motifs exist statically within the set before filming begins. Their construction and staging has given them a potential for narrative realization that can only be realized by their placement in a temporal sequence.

Their reconstruction begins when characters enter these spaces
and events take place within them, that is, when the shooting starts. Camera movement, framing, and editing create the space anew, either realizing ideas implicit in the set, such as the point-of-view editing which links Jeff and the Thorwalds during dinner, or reading the set in a way which elicits a new idea, such as the re-framing which positions the newlyweds’ window in the background as Lisa obliquely proposes marriage. In this way, concrete space becomes “psychologized,” that is, it becomes related to character psychology. By a similar process, the original block of space becomes narrativized, that is, it is made significant for narrative purposes. One example from early in the film will illustrate what I mean.

In the first shot after the credit sequence, the camera dollies out of Jeff’s rear window to explore the set. Though somewhat narrativized by the camera movement which “reads” the set, the set exists largely as pure spectacle—something to be looked at and admired before the story proper begins.25 Subsequently, two elaborate crane shots survey the courtyard, moving from right to left. The first surveys the overall space, and the second introduces specific characters such as the composer, the couple sleeping on the fire escape, Miss Torso, and Jeff. All these characters are engaged in apparently random, morning activities. The camera movement that presents this activity is as much descriptive as narrative in effect. The movement functions merely to describe, as it were, an equilibrium, a state necessary to a narrative but distinct from the disruptive process that sets a narrative in motion.26 Though the narrative has begun, nothing of major narrative significance has been initiated, as least nothing that implies temporal linearity or involves narrative causality. Indeed, the second crane shot is not continuous but actually cuts from the composer to the couple on the fire escape, deliberately eliding the space occupied by the Thorwalds. This enables Thorwald’s subsequent entry to disturb the film’s initial, non-narrativized space with a narrative urgency.

It is important to note that both of these crane shots conclude their “neo-realist” portrait of daily routine with close-ups of Jeff, his back to the window, asleep in his wheelchair. Jeff’s consciousness will play a major role in shaping this space for us. Once Jeff wakes up, the story—and the cutting—begins, as Hitchcock deploys point-of-view and reaction shots to counterpoint Jeff’s telephone conversation with Gunnison, his editor at the magazine. What is interesting about the editing here is that although it estab-
lishes Jeff’s voyeuristic interest in his neighbors (the sunbathers, Miss Torso), it remains rather random in terms of its narrative function. By that I mean that there is no sense of a connection between what Jeff is saying and what he is seeing. The two spaces—that of Jeff’s apartment and that of the neighbors across the way—remain separate. That is—until Thorwald enters. As the Willie-Lomanish salesman returns to his hot apartment, looking haggard and at the end of his rope, Jeff, complaining that he has had nothing to do for the past six weeks but look out of his window at the neighbors, tells Gunnison that “if you don’t pull me out of this swamp of boredom, I’m gonna do something drastic . . . . like get married. Then I’ll never be able to go anywhere.”

As Jeff and Gunnison talk off-screen about marriage, we see the Thorwalds’ apartment in which the tired husband is greeted by a nagging wife. For the first time in the film, the dialogue and the visual action coincide.27 Thorwald is identified with “doing something drastic,” an identification which sticks with him as a character. An expectation is introduced which will soon be realized. At the same time, Jeff’s perception of the Thorwalds’ marriage as a kind of imprisonment and denial of free movement—“I’ll never be able to go anywhere”—relates not only to his present immobility in his wheelchair but to his potential marriage to Lisa. In other words, the first seeds of the narrative to follow are planted here and made significant for us by a kind of synchronization of word and action. Point-of-view editing and dialogue have begun to narrativize the space, i.e., to create meaningful relationships within it.

There will subsequently be references to the random events and characters seen in these initial crane shots, but, unlike the Thorwald story, their presence here does not introduce narrative expectations. The narrative recuperates, as it were, these events and characters retroactively, developing them into a series of subplots tangential to the central narrative. The central narrative—indeed, all these narratives—becomes tied to and organized around Jeff’s perception. With one crucial exception, i.e., when Jeff falls asleep as Thorwald exits with “Mrs. Thorwald” on their way to the train station, the events which follow will be understood from Jeff’s point of view.

The exception, I might add, is there to prove the rule. The narrative so effectively allies the spectator with Jeff’s reading of events that, even though we see “Mrs. Thorwald” leave, we suppress that knowledge, preferring instead to suspend our reading of
its significance until another explanation, more consistent with Jeff's logic, is made available to us. It soon comes in the form of Lisa's pat rebuttal to Doyle's evidence from eyewitnesses: "We'll agree they saw a woman—but she was not Mrs. Thorwald. That is, not yet."

The shot of "Mrs. Thorwald's" departure reminds us of the presence of another narrating agency—that of Hitchcock, whose narrative "consciousness" here exceeds that of the sleeping Jeffries. Hitchcock uses this sequence as a snare to complicate our reading of the film's events and our identification with Jeff. Though apparently full of significance, the sequence refuses to deliver up its meaning to us, in large part because it is not read but merely described, presented to us through the same sort of omniscient crane shots with which the film began. In terms of Roland Barthes' hermeneutic code, this sequence-shot snares, equivocates, jams, and provides only partial answers. Its meaning is incomplete, awaiting the interpretation of some reader figure and, in that way, permitting the spectator to suspend interpretation of it.

Two levels of narration are foregrounded by this sequence-shot—the "subjective" readings of events by Jeffries collide with the "objective" narration by Hitchcock. Moreover, each level is identified with different, aesthetically opposed formal devices. Jeff reads/narrates via point-of-view and reaction shot editing patterns. While also implicitly bound up in this stylistic device, Hitchcock, as omniscient narrator, reads/narrates via camera movement. For example, the film's first act of "narration" occurs while Jeff sleeps, well before the coincidence of dialogue and action discussed above. After one of the initial crane shots which surveys the courtyard, the camera tracks from Jeff's face to his cast and from there to the various objects in his room (smashed camera, action photographs), which serve to explain the cause of Jeff's injury: he presumably broke his leg taking photographs of a crash at a car race when his attempts to get something "dramatically different" brought him too close to the action. Hitchcock's camera movement engages us in a cause and effect logic through which we assemble Jeff's "story." Thus implicated in the logic of detection and positioned/addressed as readers of clues, we readily identify with Jeff's attempt to do the same later in the film. This "narration," however, differs from that which begins with the introduction of point-of-view editing moments later—not only in its privileging of Hitchcock as narrator but also in its essentially descriptive function.
It tells us about Jeff’s character by engaging us in an active reconstruction of past events, of a previous story that will relate only indirectly to the Thorwald murder mystery or the love story. In other words, it does not cause these other stories or set them in motion in as direct a way as Thorwalds’ (or Lisa's) entry does. One might conclude, then, that Hitchcock plays with different kinds of narration, exploring the relationship between omniscient and subjective narrators, which are, in turn, seen in terms of the different “psychologies” of camera movement and editing. His use of these different narrative voices produces a layered narration, which constantly shuttles the spectator back and forth from one level to another and from identification with one narrative voice to that with another. In playing with different kinds of narration, Hitchcock foregrounds the process of narration itself, making us aware of the various mediating agencies through which the story is told.

The interplay between omniscient and subjective narration finds resolution in the final shot of the film, in which the omniscient narrator is seen to contain and over-ride all other narrative voices. The crane shot which surveys the courtyard and those whose apartments open onto it echoes the film’s initial crane shots, providing a closure of sorts. Yet that closure is over-determined, characterized by an implausible simultaneity in the resolution of the film’s various subplots. The composer and Miss Lonelyhearts listen together to his recording of “Lisa;” the childless couple have a new dog; Miss Torso welcomes home her short, fat, soldier boyfriend; and the newlyweds squabble. Meanwhile, the Thorwald apartment is being repainted; the new paint covers over the bloodstained narrative that is past and presents a fresh surface (a blank canvas, as it were) for the playing out of a new story. The crane concludes its circular survey of the major characters in the film with a return to Jeff’s apartment, where he is found asleep and with both legs in plaster casts, a comic doubling which functions as something of a “topper,” as a gag which recalls and extends the slow disclosure of the courtyard space and final revelation of Jeff in a cast that structured the crane shot which opens the film. This gag is itself topped by the final image of Lisa, dressed for a globe-trotting adventure and reading (apparently) a book whose title, Beyond the High Himalayas, suggests her capitulation to Jeff’s way of life. Yet this image is soon revealed as a deception, a piece of theater complete with costume (her “male” attire) and props, which has been staged for Jeff’s benefit. She picks up a copy of Harper’s
Bazaar, a magazine identified with the "old" Lisa, and begins to read it. Her "act," which is designed to deceive Jeff, recapitulates the narrator's own "act"-ivity in manipulating/misleading the film's spectators.

The neatness of the narrative resolutions which we see in the final crane shot becomes something of a joke on Hitchcock's part and draws attention to his own arbitrariness as narrator. Like Lisa who offers Jeff a preview of coming attractions and presents herself as spectacle for his gaze, Hitchcock ultimately spectacularizes his own presence as narrator. It is as much Hitchcock whom we have come to see as it is the story which he tells. The concrete playing spaces of Rear Window thus finally refer us to another, more abstract space—that of Hitchcock's narration.

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NOTES

(This article is based on a paper delivered at a Hitchcock conference held at Pace University in June of 1986.)

1 Plato, Republic, 393a.


4 Alfred Hitchcock, "Rear Window," Take One, 2, no. 2 (1969), 18.

5 The film's reflexivity has, of course, been discussed by virtually every critic that has dealt with the film from Jean Douchet and Robin Wood to Robert Slam (Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard [Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press], 1985) and David Bordwell (Narration in the Fiction Film [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press], 1985). My interest here lies with the reflexive aspects of the film's treatment of space rather than with issues of plot and character or viewer activity. Thus, I will treat Rear Window largely in terms of its exploration of the nature of cinematic space, hopefully complementing the work of others on the film.

6 Meyerhold's Constructivist theater did away with the curtain and the proscenium shortly after the turn of the century, and the modern theater of Brecht and others repeatedly plays with the notion of the proscenium and with Aristotelian unities. I have used the term "traditional theatrical space" to distinguish the classical techniques I refer to here from modernist practice, in which a non-traditional, theatrical space is created.

I would like to thank Tom Gunning whose comments on the mss. led to a rewriting of the discussion of theatrical space.

8 Indeed, only spectators within films may enter into it, as in Sherlock Jr. and The Purple Rose of Cairo.

9 Boris Eikhenbaum makes this distinction between the resistance of theatrical space and the conduciveness of cinematic space to manipulation in “Problems of Film Stylistics,” Screen 15, No. 3 (1974), 25-26. Eikhenbaum argues that time and space in the cinema are constructions and that the cinema does not merely reproduce the time and space of phenomenal reality, but actively constructs them. In the theater, however, time and space are more or less “naturalistic,” i.e., determined by the actual time and space of the performance. Thus, theatrical time and space are given; they are passive blocks of theater which resist all effort to shape them. For him, cinematic time and space are not merely filled but built (through montage, camera movement, and other medium-specific devices).

Though Eikhenbaum exaggerates the resistance of theatrical time and space to manipulation, his distinction becomes useful in describing the “psychologies” of the different times and spaces in the traditional theater and in montage cinema.


13 Gunning considers the issue of film narration in a way which is relevant here. For him, narration takes place on three levels—the organization and staging of the pro-filmic event, the reading of that event by the camera (framing, distance, angle, movement), and the final reconstruction of this camera-generated footage in the editing. See Gunning, 37-40.


15 Frank Scully, “Scully’s Scrapbook,” n.d., newspaper column in clippings file on Rear Window at the Film Study Center of the Museum of Modern Art.


18 One person has suggested to me that the array of screens resembles a bank of television sets on display in the window of an electronics store, a display practice that persists from the 1950s to the present day.

19 See, for example, the Annabelle dance films (Edison, 1894), Fatima (1987), From Showgirl to Burlesque Queen (Biograph, 1903), or Pull the Curtains Down, Susie.
20 Stam, 44.

21 Here, I am referring to Hitchcock in a somewhat different way then I have before. His former status as art director has nothing to do with his status as implied author, narrative presence, or enunciator; it is merely part of what David Bordwell would call his "biographical legend." The relevance of biographical information here, like that of on-set production information earlier, can be argued only on a figurative not on a literal level. His biographical legend informs our reading of the film without literally existing within it. By the same token, a critical discussion of the film's set design ought to acknowledge any extra-filmic criteria that led the critic to focus upon it in the first place.

22 The sense of claustrophobia produced by the courtyard design is enhanced by the shooting of the film within the confines of a studio sound stage. Shooting on a location (without sets whose perspective has been forced) would have resulted in a less centered space and one possessing less sense of being controlled. Certainly the sound that was recorded during production on location would have had a different, perhaps more open, spatial quality.


25 A similar conjunction of camera movement and spectacular set design occurs in the Babylonian sequence of Intolerance; in both instances, the crane shots have a descriptive rather than a narrative function. Indeed, Griffith brings his multi-storied narrative to a halt in order to display his fabulous set.

26 That is, it is the descriptive element of narrative process, not something that falls outside of narrative itself.

27 This coincidence of dialogue and action immediately follows Hitchcock's cameo appearance in the composer's apartment. Bellour argues that these appearances occur "at that point in the chain of events where what could be called the film-wish is condensed." See Raymond Bellour, "Hitchcock; the Enunciator," Oscura No. 2 (1977), 73. Ruth Johnston made a similar point in her paper on Rear Window at the Pace conference on Hitchcock (June 1986). Hitchcock's gesture of winding the clock here might be seen as a setting of the narrative in motion since it is followed, more or less promptly, by Thorwald's entry.


29 Hitchcock's objectivity here clashes with Jeff's subjectivity, where elsewhere the two narrative voices seem to coincide or agree. Interestingly, this "objective" shot initially serves to prevent the audience from seeing the truth of Thorwald's guilt, while Jeff's limited subjectivity provides a more accurate understanding of what has happened. It is important to note, however, that Hitchcock's 'objectivity' is ultimately redeemed; we discover that we, like Thorwald's eyewitnesses, have been had; we misread what we saw. In this way, "objectivity" has been revealed to be accessible only through a problematic subjectivity (our own misreading).

30 Closure takes place through two successive gestures, the crane shot and the dropping of the bamboo shades, which answer the film's opening and give the film a chiastic (abba) structure.