

Recuperation and *Rear Window*

by [Murray Pomerance](#)

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Misfortune comes from having a body.

– Confucius

On Sunday the 6th of April, 2003, at a little after noon Eastern Standard Time, I sustained a tibial-fibular multiple fracture following a severe ice storm, and was taken to Toronto's St. Joseph's Hospital where I underwent a surgical procedure known as Open Reduction Internal Fixation, thereby gaining, among other things, a stainless steel plate in my leg, a hefty cast (below my knee), a delicious supply of first morphine and later codeine in my bloodstream, the requirement (following an epidemic of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome in the area) to quarantine myself for ten days in a relatively confined space, and thus a new sensitivity to L.B. "Jeff" Jefferies's condition in *Rear Window*. While I was not courting Lisa Fremont, dining on lobster from "21", or living within perceptual range of Greenwich Village (what Erving Goffman would have defined as the same "social situation" as he), and while his wheelchair was replaced by my crutches; his full-leg cast by my smaller "soft slab" (hard in front and soft in back but genuinely weighty); his courtyard window by my television, collection of videotapes, and laptop (on which I am writing these words); still, Jeff was sufficiently in my heart for me to want to try here a new assessment of his often-studied and fascinating role in this often-studied and fascinating film, one that gives proper consideration to Jeff's medical status and to *Rear Window* as a document of a medical experience. This is certainly very far from a fully satisfactory approach either to *Rear Window* or to Alfred Hitchcock, and in taking it I hardly intend to seem as arcane as the French endocrinologist who in 1929 explained the posture of Thetis's neck in Ingres's "Jupiter and Thetis" (1811) in terms of an improperly functioning thyroid gland" (Rosenblum 1985, 23). Yet I think this approach will show some aspects of the film in new and helpful light while at the same time making it possible for me to link an intense private experience with an important cinematic document that I happen to care about. To be sure, it can be said of Jeff in summary that "in a wheelchair, his leg in a cast for nearly six weeks with nothing to do, he looks" (Sharff 1993, 6-7); yet we might wonder why exactly that preoccupation might appeal to someone in exactly Jeff's condition, with what consequences interesting to a student of Hitchcock, or of this particular film. More bluntly: why if he wanted to play upon the act of looking might Hitchcock have arranged for his protagonist to be caught up also in recuperation?

Let me extend myself on one analytical limb and reflect that since Jeff sustained the injuries which necessitated his wheelchair-bound position in that cast by being hit by a racing car out of control while he was trying to take pictures of it (one such photograph featuring prominently in the delirious tracking shot which serves to introduce us to central elements of his world), and since that cast is indeed so massive, there can hardly be doubt that he, too, had a surgical procedure. Beneath that debilitating and itching plaster are incisions and perhaps even steel plates. Indeed, his surgery had to have been more complicated than mine was, more invasive, and by the time we discover him basking in the summer New York heat he has gulped down, we can be sure, the same kind of postoperative dosing of barbiturates – probably roughly the same barbiturates – as I did. I can conclude this because the appearance of that cast is informative to those who are, or have been, involved in orthopedic surgery; much as the fact that dinner in this film is ordered from “21” is informative to those in the know about the social class in which Lisa Fremont resides. There is no way Jeff is simply a man who doesn’t get around a lot, although he is surely that. He is also on intense pain-killers, probably non-stop, and at least some of what we find fascinating about him (what has been found fascinating in the extensive canon of critical work on this film) owes to the effects of such drugs, although other causes are typically proposed by a critical armature that neglects Jeff’s medical condition. As I am newly familiar with these effects I find not only that I appreciate Hitchcock’s film with new gusto and that I recognise in James Stewart’s performance new subtleties and masteries, but that I have found a new sympathy for Jeff, a new bond of connection that makes him more transparent to me and his diegetical adventures in framing and decoding his neighbours less bizarre (certainly less dominating) and more logical in my estimation.

Reflecting that every movement toward something is also a movement away, the approach I am taking openly disregards as essential a certain critical approach to *Rear Window*, by no means the reigning critical orthodoxy yet also not without allure, that allies Jeff’s camera use (both in photography and in gazing) to the repressive program of a controlling state bureaucracy. Writing, for example, of *Rear Window*’s attempt to “recuperate the cinematic apparatus from its contamination by the emergence of the national security state”, Robert J. Corber suggests that its hero

deploys the techniques of the national security apparatus to spy on the neighbours of his Lower East Side apartment complex. To be sure, he lacks the listening devices, hidden cameras, and microfilm of the FBI and the CIA, but his telephoto lens allows him to scrutinise even the remotest corners of his neighbours’ apartments and to discover their most carefully guarded secrets. Yet in admitting its complicity with the government persecution of suspected Communists, homosexuals, lesbians, and other “undesirables”, Rear Window was simply . . . [admitting] that its technology facilitated the systematic repression of basic civil liberties (the right to free speech, the freedom of association) as a way of reclaiming that technology for the postwar settlement. Implicit in the film’s “confession” of its own tainted procedures is a critique of McCarthyism. The film pathologises Jeff’s constant surveillance of his neighbours by suggesting that he suffers from an arrested sexual development (1993, 89-90; emphases mine).

This is certainly interesting, even as an argument about the hegemony of the 1950s without reference to this film at all. But my argument here is that other forces provoke Jeff’s use of the gaze, that “scrutinising his neighbours’ apartments” and “discovering their most carefully

guarded secrets” as a monitoring technique of social control could not be farther from his interests; that the film actually does not succeed in pathologising Jeff and that, indeed, to do so it would have to invoke exactly what is invoked by Corber (and others), namely, an “arrested sexual development”; further, that what is “arrested” in Jeff isn’t sexuality at all but something else more basic still; and that if “arrested sexual development” had been the focus of Hitchcock’s attention here he need hardly have called into being a protagonist who could not stand on his own two feet to have trouble getting his arms around Grace Kelly. Most importantly, it is not the cinematic apparatus that is being recuperated in this film; and Corber’s use of the word “recuperation” is entirely too blithe.

Four aspects of Hitchcock’s portrayal of Jeff strike me in particular as being related to the recuperative state of being: the notably “dry” quality of consciousness, gregarious imagination, lucidity (a kind of focal clarity), and avidity for social life, all of these summing to an intellectual and narrative hunger. I should stress that “avidity for social life” does not necessarily mean a desire to participate in activity with other people. It can be a fascination with what people do, even coupled with a predilection to watch them from afar. But such an avidity is certainly directed away from the self, to the concerns, foibles, ensnarements, and adventures presented from the outside. The intellectual and narrative hunger experienced by Jeff are my concern here, not as aspects of his perduring personality or professional armature but as existential imperatives for him while he endures the particular condition in which we are constrained to meet him (1).

It is worth noting before I proceed that in some ways quite different than what I attempt here, Jeff’s mental life has been written about to the point of exhaustion in a literature bent on seeing this film in other terms. Jeff has typically been taken as a (chauvinist) case study of boredom in confinement. His professional status as photographer has been used to explicate his “Peeping Tom” proclivities, as if he never stops working day and night and can muster no defences to stop himself from concocting images of others when they present themselves to him. Paula Marantz Cohen even attributes the murder of Mrs. Thorwald to Jeff’s imagination (1995, 168).

Indeed, so too can his peeping be seen as a form of laziness, the negative link between it and his work habits hinted at by Stella (Thelma Ritter), his nurse, when she mentions that “The New York State sentence for a Peeping Tom is six months in the workhouse. And they got no windows in the workhouse” (quoted in Sharff 1997, 108); his windowed bachelor pad is thus a locus of anything but work. His method of analysis, his calculation, his linkage of observed fact to dramaturgical explanation (his “scripting” of the lives of the neighbours upon whom he is spying) are often thought symptomatic of his hard-boiled journalist training or of his voyeurism. Jeff is widely, and delightfully (if sadistically), presumed by many who write about him to be randy as a goat, not only because he mentions to Lisa that his sex life is wanting but also because his attentions to the cavorting Miss Torso, the pathetic Miss Lonely Hearts, and the newly-married couple next door seem especially prurient. And the fact that for all his desperate desire to devour the little movies that are being displayed to him in the many rear windows he can see Jeff in fact misses a lot of the action of this film that is made accessible to us (more eager still than he to see stories played out) because he keeps dozing, is generally accounted to the torpor evidenced by that early shot of the thermometer reading 93°. The heat apparently makes him drowsy; the

drowsiness makes him miss scenes; that he misses scenes leads him to misdiagnose, and also to work with new feverishness in his diagnosis, frantic to put together in a cinematic way the shards of narrative left available to his waking mind. Yet I think it questionable that his actions can be accounted for in terms of either torpor or randiness, since neither of these account for the complexity of his engagement in the world and since, as well, it is hard to imagine him both torpid and sexually alive.

Although he is hardly in a position to be exchanging cash in the marketplace, in a certain sense he is a perfect capitalist in his endeavour, since, in Jonathan Crary's words,

part of the cultural logic of capitalism demands that we accept as natural the rapid switching of our attention from one thing to another. Capital, as accelerated exchange and circulation, necessarily produces this kind of human perceptual adaptability and becomes a regime of reciprocal attentiveness and distraction (1995, 48).

Certainly, that the courtyard tales are so frequently interrupted, that a certain kind of attention from Jeff is a requisite to the proceedings as part of our field of view, and that capital circulation stands as the organising principle behind both Jeff's watching and the actions he watches, supersede in importance a simple evaluation of the content of the little dramas as being, for instance, "about dirty linen that gets washed in the courtyard;. . . about moral solitude, an extraordinary symphony of daily life and ruined dreams" (Truffaut 1978, 78) or as being "a multiple projection of James Stewart's sexual preoccupation" (Chabrol, 41; translation mine).

But much of this critical riposte assaults our protagonist's dignity more than is necessary for an appreciation of the film. The proposition that he naps a lot because he can't take the heat, for example, neglects that at the end of the film, when no further action remains for him to miss in torpor, we are given yet one more glimpse of the thermometer in order to see that it's still hot outside: the heat is dramatically independent of Jeff's consciousness. The narrative clue to his dozing is his cast: his pain-killers occasionally knock him out. To those who would object that we do not see Jeff take any painkillers it must be said that we do not see a great many things here that can be known, intuited, or assumed on the basis of what we do see: Stella's husband; the coffee shop where Jeff "plans" to meet Thorwald; Lisa's social sphere; and so on. Even the assumption that he is knocked out by the heat, by the way, demands associations, conclusions, and extrapolations on the viewer's part – and the heat outside is itself as invisible as the painkillers. The thermometer indicates the heat: the cast and behaviour, to those who have taken barbiturates like morphine, are similarly indicative.

Regarding the idea that Jeff is too hot: the thermometer shots bracket the film in order to set it in New York in the peak of the summer, not to tell us why Jeff can't stay awake. It's always hot like this in that city at that time, and New Yorkers know it and handle it just fine. Indeed, we see that none of Jeff's neighbours – also New Yorkers – are dropping into slumber because of the heat, which must also affect them: that the thermometer we're reading happens to be outside his apartment doesn't indicate that it signals about him. A couple of girls on the opposite side are sunbathing; Miss Torso is scantily clad (at home, rehearsing a dance routine), the couple with the little dog are accommodating to the heat by sleeping out on the fire escape (a standard routine in this social class). Because it's the peak of summer, too, there has been an exodus from the city (Billy Wilder's *The Seven-Year Itch*, made the same year, is explicit about this in its opening

narration) and people in Lisa Fremont's class, who live on Sutton Place, are by and large not in town; they are in the Hamptons, eating their lobster at Gosman's in Montauk or having it less casually at the Hedges Inn in East Hampton or Gordon's in Amagansett or The Lobster Inn in Shinnecock or Joe Duck's in Southampton. The thermometer shot is also important, then, because it signals something to us about Lisa: that this is the time of year when someone like her can afford not to be in a place like this, that she can very well manage, like the rest of her social crowd, not to be here suffering this heat, even if Jeff can't, and that her presence may therefore be interpreted as something of a token of abiding commitment to him.

A last comment about the conventional reading of Jeff – this time respecting his apparent diffidence toward Lisa (and putative randiness because of the “tempting” dancer across the way). Jeff, I would argue, is not the traditional romantic hero, eager to couple with the maiden of his dreams, since in his condition it is fascination with the multiplicity and complexity of the world, not yearning for bodily or soulful release, that organises his response. His is precisely the recuperative condition to which I am about to return, and it is only in recuperation that we know him. To Lisa, then, he is hardly as diffident as has often been claimed by those who would cast him as ungrateful and impolite in the face of her magnanimity and civility (and she is no forerunner of the rejected Midge in *Vertigo*). Jeff and Lisa are not meeting for the first time at the beginning of this film, although it is for the first time that we are meeting them; Jeff knows all about Lisa's classbound interest in selling thousand-dollar gowns, dropping over to Paris for luncheon, and arranging for “21” to deliver. And it is not because he does not agree with them that Jeff turns a deaf ear to Stella's open suggestions that he pay more attention to Lisa; it is simply that Stella's is a song he has heard one time too many, and one which he doesn't need to hear at all since he is already humming it inside his own head. As to Lisa's incompatibility: while Jeff doesn't want her cramping his style as a globe-trotting photojournalist it is plain that he finds her overwhelmingly attractive, a little funny in the most charming sense of the word, trustworthy in the extreme, generous, and brave. He is not rejecting her wealth; but he has not figured out how to link it to his need for free movement (a need magnified for his subjectivity by the fact of his immobilisation at present). If he seems occasionally to become a little serious in his banter with her – and it is affectionate banter that characterises their relationship, not hostility – it may well be because he has come finally to thinking of their friendship in exactly the serious terms that she makes a point of invoking; that he is confounded by what looks like an obstacle to the union he clearly wants as much as she does. By film's end we have every reason for feeling that Jeff will be Lisa's for certain, and happily so since Lisa will also be Jeff's: her escapade on the fire escape outside Thorwald's apartment and contending with Thorwald as she steals the ring is proof positive that she will be able to journey with him wherever he goes. The casualness with which he earlier attacked the lobster dinner she arranged for shows that Jeff will have no trouble fitting into Lisa's world; nor could any observer except the one most naive as to social class considerations imagine for a moment that for a working man to accommodate himself to luxury presents difficulties. Lisa is the partner who will need to work at adapting. Jeff, therefore, is hardly gawking at Miss Torso or the newlyweds because elegant Lisa is not a fitting object of his fixation, because he's not getting from her whatever a red-blooded man is supposed to want. She is, and has always been, all the girl Jeff's hormones require; but, as I hope to show, in his present state there is indeed something lacking about her that Miss Torso and the newlyweds provide,

something he might not need more generally in his life, once he is healed, but that is an obsession with him as he sits trapped in the body we are permitted to see.

That something is strangeness. And it bears upon what I have called the “dry” quality of his consciousness. Let me argue that if Jeff is not still on pain-killers, nevertheless he has taken sufficient quantities in the very recent past that they have affected his thinking, and that what we are seeing in this film is a systematic display of a certain kind of judgment. Jeff Jefferies is something of a postmodern *flâneur*, a “man of the crowd” who finds his most profound stimulations not in the bounded, traditional, habituated world of civilised domesticity but in the circulation of strangers, the flow of humanity on the streets of neighbourhoods not his own. Dana Brand suggests that “like the narrator of Poe’s ‘The Man of the Crowd,’ Jeffries has no difficulty reading his neighbours at a single glance” (1999, 125). It is true that with a career in photojournalism he has managed to exploit this taste, and true as well that in his *flânerie* Jeff is emblematic of modern urban man, eager to decode the signs offered by rapidly circulating strangers in order to experience the thrill of identification. But it is very easy to forget the passage in Poe that so moved and intrigued Baudelaire and prompted him to invoke the *flâneur* in his essay on Constantin Guys. Poe’s man of the crowd is not one who automatically or naturally, spontaneously or casually moves away from his own too-familiar precincts in order to mingle with intoxicating strangers who fill him with a “delicious novelty of emotion” (1998, 84). Instead, he likens himself very specifically to one who has emerged from a period of long and debilitating illness. The narrator says that he,

now convalescent, and, with returning strength, found [him]self in one of those happy moods which are so precisely the converse of ennui – moods of the keenest appetency, when the film from the mental vision departs ... and the intellect, electrified, surpasses as greatly its every-day condition, as does the vivid yet candid reason of Leibnitz, the mad and flimsy rhetoric of Gorgias. Merely to breathe was enjoyment; and I derived positive pleasure even from many of the legitimate sources of pain. I felt a calm but inquisitive interest in every thing (1998, 84).

It is the recollection of this illness and the “calm but inquisitive” state of mind as he recovers that make him sit in the window of a Coffee-House and stare with wonder at the “tumultuous sea of human heads” passing by on the other side of the “large bow-window”. Both Jeff Jefferies and Poe’s “man of the crowd” and Baudelaire’s *flâneur*, then, experience the delirious joy of what might be termed recuperative perception.

Poe’s narrator describes both Jeff Jefferies’s experience and that of the viewer who shares and interprets it when he reflects that

at first my observations took an abstract and generalising turn. I looked at the passengers in masses, and thought of them in their aggregate relations. Soon, however, I descended to details, and regarded with minute interest the innumerable varieties of figure, dress, air, gait, visage, and expression of countenance (85).

This is all but a synopsis of the long opening tracking shot of *Rear Window* in which first we discover the array of the courtyard, the masses of apartments on all sides, the bustle of activity in the street beyond; and then deliberately, with a distinct appetite and sense of appreciation, “descend to details” of the lives of the many people who are Jeff’s neighbours, unknown

strangers, indeed – although the spaces of their lives press so close upon his space – since it is only through affectionate epithets that he is able to refer to them. Although the shot is not constructed diegetically from Jeff’s point of view, there is no other point of view in the film with which it can so closely be associated; and so when we discover him dozing, we can imagine, if we like, that he is dreaming the perspectives from the memory of daily inspection.

The modern city after Haussmann may seem forbiddingly impersonal when considered as a renovation of the collection of densely woven communities imbued with longstanding all-embracing personal relationships. But city dwellers need not take a romantic perspective such as this when appreciating the quality of their own lives. That contemporary urban relationships are functional rather than emotive; that in the city one is frequently in experiential range of persons one can see but cannot hear (Simmel); that interactions and collisions between representatives of different cultures are commonplace there, and rapid; that a form of panoptical control is exercised by citizens upon one another in the name of an overriding law which is invisible, and therefore abstract, to all, seem rudimentary to the grounding of *Rear Window*, elements of the scene to be noted yet at the same time taken for granted. Writing about John Michael Hayes’s scripting of this social world of rapid circulation, Steven DeRosa comments:

The murder of the dog provided Hayes with an opportunity to indict the occupants of the courtyard for their apparent detachment and refusal to accept social responsibility. The Siffleuse (a professional whistler), as she is known in the script, for her “clarion and melodic” call to her dog, cries out, “Which one of you did it? Which one of you killed my dog? You don’t know the meaning of the word ‘neighbour.’” It is a delicate moment in the script, which set the moral tone Hitchcock desired, without becoming preachy (35; emphasis mine).

The woman’s complaint, if it really is an indictment, is certainly, as DeRosa astutely suggests, *not preachy*. The suggestion that Hitchcock “desired” this “moral tone” is illuminating, because only in a world utterly founded upon, and thus accustomed to, the moral distance of the geographically proximate, the strangeness of neighbours, the publicity of the intimate could such an “indictment” be made *without* preachiness. The Siffleuse is expressing a fact, plain and simple.

Rear Window’s is in some ways a distinctly post-Haussmannian universe, one that assumes, and is grounded in, the changes Haussmann effected in urban life by way of opening up the closed environment and the fixed living style to circulation and mobility. While the perspectives offered in Haussmann’s Paris are unavailable in Jeff’s limited views of Greenwich Village, while the mobility and circulation implied in his gaze are characteristically American, still it is the Haussmannian renovation that made possible the social relations we see depicted in *Rear Window*, relations dependent on the circulation of social agency, identity, and motive. The city no longer an agglomeration of characteristic, fixed, and self-contained neighbourhoods has been opened upon long thoroughfares to a new commercial viability and a new cultural sensibility in which mobility and strangeness are the hallmarks of experience. Broad sidewalks facilitate the formation of the crowd that appealed so to Poe, and also the generation of the circulation out of which, by razing neighbourhoods and fashioning a new urban space aesthetically designed for supporting and emplacing a new social form, Haussmann would organise the intellectual and commercial transaction of strangers or, as Schivelbusch puts it, “the advancement of the

bourgeoisie's business interests" (1986, 181). In a century which saw the rapid development of railway travel with what Schivelbusch describes as its attendant "panoramic perception" (192ff), there came also onto the scene an opening of the railway terminus into the main avenues of the city and a flooding of the immense circulation of strangers this permitted into the commercial precincts of the department store (see Rappaport). The complex of apartment buildings which contains Jeff and the many unwitting objects of his attention is structured like a department store itself, with the contents of each bounded perceptual area discrete yet capable of interrelationship. In each "window" he can "window shop", as it were, using his imagination to pick up fascinating tidbits or make provocative speculations. As *Rear Window* was Hitchcock's first production in a wide-screen format, its aspect ratio "approximated the shape of the windows surrounding Jefferies's apartment" (DeRosa, 45), hence the implication in the film (often critically admired) that Jeff is like a moviegoer absorbed in a number of tiny "films".

Each proscenium contains a drama Jeff can consume (and we with him) independently of the other dramas; or he can look upon them collectively as what Hitchcock called "a group of little stories that . . . mirror a small universe" (Truffaut, 216). And in order to do this, he need not be any more a familiar to these people than they are to one another, or we are to them, or we are to Jeff himself. Our watching and the cinema through which it is engaged are both post-Haussmannian in that respect. The same modern era that is opened to the circulation of commercial, social, aesthetic, and criminal life also sees the birth of the fictional film, in which on a routine basis people who do not know one another can gather together in the darkness in order to invest themselves in realistic stories about still other people they can recognise and know but have never met.

Poe may have had some trepidation about the public quality of the eroticism implied in his character's perambulations – that the novelty of the crowd as a social form might well make an eager involvement with the delightful nuances of its coldness, specifically, seem irrational, even insane. Only four years after "The Man of the Crowd", he published "The Tell-Tale Heart", a chilling little story containing the oddest prefigurations of both *Rear Window* –

If still you think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body. The night waned, and I worked hastily, but in silence. First of all I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs (1998b, 196).

– and *Rope*:

I led them, at length, to his chamber. I showed them his treasures, secure, undisturbed. In the enthusiasm of my confidence, I brought chairs into the room, and desired them here to rest from their fatigues, while I myself, in the wild audacity of my perfect triumph, placed my own seat upon the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse of the victim (1998b, 196)

in which his narrator takes pains to articulate his sanity in the face of what he believes will be his interlocutors' deep suspicions. "True! – nervous – very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why *will* you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses – not destroyed – not dulled them" (1998b, 193), he begins; and then argues, "What you mistake for madness is

but over acuteness of the senses” (195). Declaring that a new power of sensation and conviction had brought him to feel for the first time the extent of his sagacity – in other words, to experience not the breadth of his philosophy’s focus but the particular nature of his mode of concentration, its very workings, to have an existential awareness of it as a distinct pleasure – he aligns himself with the man in a wheelchair who uses a telephoto lens to augment the powers of his perception and increase the nourishment of his fantasies (even as, by using that particular lens, he flattens the fantasies into screened narratives). If our first thought about Jeff is to isolate him as a deviant, a peeper, a misbehaved cripple compensating for his bodily debility by stealing glances of one another that etiquette and proper social form properly deny us (“Prior to [the death of the dog], Jeff has been primarily a voyeur”, writes John Belton, “After it, he becomes a *provocateur*” [2000, 14]), nevertheless Poe can lead us to re-evaluate both his situation and his decisions. He is a man of the crowd at a point in history where media narratives have already cultured him to read social clues as the foundation of dramatic constructions, a point where urban circulation, already profound, can be magnified technologically to the point of making available at a physical distance the smallest perceivable facts promising bold new proximities of social relation and interpretation. And he has sufficient time for meditative gazing; indeed, since he cannot move and cannot always be dozing, there is nothing else for him to do.

This process is, of course, nothing if not extremely rational, and far from being a questionable type, Jeff is a model of contemporary sanity, even probity. But his sanity is not only lucid, it is dry – uninebriated. He is in many ways the perfect descendant of Poe’s man of the crowd, who began his experience in a coffee-house window, of all places. Coffee-houses and coffee culture developed through the eighteenth and nineteenth century as a hyperrational antithesis of the culture of alcohol (in which intoxicated withdrawal from the rational world was a supreme value). For Schivelbusch, the “gravitational centre” of coffee before 1900 was “where capitalism and middle-class values had most thoroughly penetrated society”, the coffeehouse attaining a significance so pronounced that “coffee became *the* symbolic drink of the bourgeois order” (1993, 85). Facilitated by the spread of coffee, chocolate, and tea, but coffee above all, was a restrained personality, centred upon sobriety, internal dryness, and mental alertness, that lent itself to the systematic expansion of commercial profit in cultural and political life. The coffee-house and the broad thoroughfare thus develop together, with mutual reinforcement. The pleasures of the man who, once suspended in malady, now soberly and rationally perceives the intricate workings of the quotidian world are post-Haussmannian pleasures, centring on rational enterprise and good business. In terms of Jeff Jefferies, one interesting by-product of his intelligence-gathering activity is revealed to us again and again: an accomplished photographer with an outstanding career, he is now, in front of our very eyes, lifting his camera and taking sightings of dramatically involving activity around him, *quite as though in preparation for making commercially viable photographs*. Hitchcock, indeed, using Jeff as his pretext, *is* making such photographs and selling them to us.

The pain-killers that would have been available to Jeff after his accident, and that were abundantly available to me, are not intoxicants. Morphine has the effect not of distracting the consciousness, of making it buoyant and of detaching it from practical concerns, but of focusing and sharpening it, pinpointing perception, and indeed augmenting the power of concentration so that a complex vision or idea can be sustained over a relatively lengthy period of time without passing into memory. While not increasing the pulse or the respiration, it has rather the effect of

very strong coffee. One has a sense of increased patience in perception, of gradual focal sharpening, of being able systematically and sedately to search for relevant details and sustain what Poe called a “calm interest in every thing”. Rather as though it is being examined through a telephoto lens, indeed, the world flattens itself and seems to extend from the eye (as in what Ortega y Gasset in 1925 called “distal perception” [1972, 112]). The hierarchy of relevancy in which we can be enveloped in the press of everyday life – a hierarchy in which vicious murder is taken as being more important than tinkering at a piano – is set aside in favour of an egalitarian perceptual democracy, all persons, observable facts, and perceptual phenomena equalising with one another in terms of the intrigue and fascination they offer.

When all subject matter is capable of sustaining interest, both mortality and complexity are accessibly discernible in all directions and in all things. So can it be that for Jeff, even after he has discovered the butcher Thorwald standing out from his ecological background as the protagonist in a story-within-the-story that is brutal and chilling in the extreme (standing out just like a lit tip of a cigarette glowing in a field of darkness), the perceptual field is still filled with fascinating details of the continuing, and continually intriguing, lives of others. Even after he has assured himself that Thorwald has killed and cut up his wife, in other words, he can wonder whether the composer will finish that song, whether the newlyweds will get out of bed, whether Miss Lonely Hearts will find a boyfriend, whether the dog owners will get another dog. Jeff’s incessantly shifting perception is characterised by a kind of nervousness akin to the condition acclaimed by the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart”, a nervousness that opens him to an insatiable hunger for facts and sights, an unresolved and unresolvable curiosity as to the outcome of perpetual unfoldings. He reflects what Schivelbusch calls a “culture permeated by nervousness” (1993, 129), the camera lifted professionally to his eye suggesting not so much a yen to surveil his neighbours as a hunger in the face of them.

The quality of Jeff’s consciousness, then, is of an attenuated and exaggerated concentration and sobriety, a hyperrationality. So powerful are his reflections for him – so intensely does he *feel* the extent of his mental powers – that the appreciation of fact sweeps over his impulse to action. Given the choice of doing or noticing, he chooses to notice, and to revel in his capacity to do so. This may seem like paralysis. In essence, his devotion to science paralyses him, exactly in that the ongoingly fluid dramatic unfolding of factual revelation so raptly engages him that he cannot bear to interrupt himself staring in absorption at the many variant dramas to which he is given access in order to take a position vis-à-vis any of their characters. Freshly – still freshly in his memory, which presses him gently with intimations of his vulnerability – returned from the borders of death, newly revived and energised, he will not withdraw from the overwhelming investment of interest in the open consequentiality of human life around him. Where earlier all had been vanity – “*All in vain*; because Death, in approaching him, had stalked with his black shadow before him” (Poe 1998b, 194) – now all is wonder, as for Shakespeare’s stunned Miranda. In order to make explicable for the viewing audience the magnitude and profundity of Jeff’s experience, when in fact its materiality (its susceptibility to lighting and dramatisation in itself) is scanty, Hitchcock must create a design that supplies reasons for our believing Jeff is acting soundly and sanely when in response to what he sees he does nothing. Hence the invention of not just an illness but an immobilising accident; a wheelchair; a heavy cast. Any serious illness, however, any sudden realisation of the expansiveness of mortality, could have

brought Jeff to a state of mind in which he would want to spend his days with that lens pressed to his eye, watching the people around him for clues as to their places in the order of things.

Although sufficient evidence is presented early in the film to attest to its duration and extensiveness, the post-surgical pain in Jeff's body has received curiously little attention as an explanatory device for bringing together his physical position – in the space of the wheelchair and in the space of the one-room apartment – and his obsessive preoccupation with the world outside his rear window. Indeed, the film itself, far from examining Jeff's gaze as orthopedic, and therefore Jeff's orthopedic situation in terms of his optical one, offers us a chance for too-easy displacement of considerations of his embodiment onto the idea of a skin condition, his stabilising (but also debilitating) cast being posed principally as an obstruction to him scratching an itch. Hitchcock himself can be critically implicated in this displacement: "During the moment that Jeff's cast causes his leg to itch", writes De Rosa, "Hitchcock indicated, 'It might be a good idea if the music coming from Miss Torso's apartment was a little comment on Jeff's scratching his leg, just as a coincidence, of course'" (49). Here, then, we can find one more rationale for defining Jeff as a man who can't quite "scratch an itch" – who has, that is to say, unresolved sexual problems that stand in his way with Lisa and prod him with Miss Torso. For a person who has sustained the kind of injury Jeff has, however, not being able to scratch an itch is the least of the unpleasantness that is troubling him. The cast also signals intense pain, current or remembered (and most certainly to follow); muscular atrophy; and a gross physical disability that will produce disorientations, awkwardnesses, incapacities, and strangely unpredictable vulnerabilities – all of these symptoms more intense and diffuse precisely because of what the enormity of the cast indexes – a massive bodily injury.

The injury is held up to us throughout the film – through the agency of the positioning of Jeff in the wheelchair, his difficulty moving in it, his cast (to which he draws attention by scratching. What else could he reasonably do to "show" us that cast?), and the solicitude of his visitors (Thorwald excepted) – as a cinematic attraction, something for us to be fascinated by; and yet also as an opposition to the array of attractions constituted by the dramas (including the murder) taking place in the little apartments-screens-stages outside. The film is a game in which the attention of the viewer bounces like a ball between Jeff's situation and the outside action, but as viewers of the film most scholars and observers have opted to focus their attention on the mini-dramas, principally the Thorwald case. In the context of such a focus, Jeff's entrapment is typically downplayed as a comedic, colourful embellishment. But between the two poles of attraction in the film, Jeff's imprisonment and the tightly bounded displays he can't stop himself from watching, there is a vital and troubling relationship that should itself be a focus of our interest. For Hitchcock, this relation between the stationary observer and the active world was what led to

a possibility of doing a purely cinematic film. You have an immobilised man looking out. That's one part of the film. The second part shows what he sees and the third part shows how he reacts (Truffaut, 214).

Bodily entrapment is a motive for projecting oneself out of a body beset by it. In Jeff Jefferies, we find not only stasis but a concomitant itch for human contact; a yearning to get out of himself into an absorbing relationship. His interest in peeping, then, stems not from his being a

photographer but from his injury: under normal circumstances he looks only at the subjects Gunnison pays him to photograph. If we regard Jeff's injury as the root of an impulse to form associations of some kind, we may seek to know, before leaping to the visions that play out across the courtyard, what other relations are possible for him in fact.

Not Lisa. Lisa Fremont, editor of a fashion magazine, is leading a life crammed with obligations and events. While she is delighted to devote an evening to Jeff's company, and to arrange for sumptuous dining, she is not exactly at liberty to be an ongoing object of his attention. When she is with him, she is a locus of perfume, a vision of loveliness, a model of style, more than a source of fascination. With Jeff, we see her pearls, her immaculately groomed flaxen hair, her azure eyes, her painted lips which are without trace of blemish and yet, also, perfections of constructive art. The close-up of his blue eyes gazing at her from the shadow she has cast upon his face, when first she comes into the apartment, is enough to tell us Lisa has drawn Jeff entirely out of himself, at least for the sweet duration of this moment; and yet for purely practical reasons the spell cannot last: Jeff is too familiar, professional photographer that he is, with spells, faces, visual constructions (and this Lisa, we must recollect, was a *Life* magazine cover); but more importantly, in his present recuperative state, it is variation, flux, the energy of a narrative he requires, not an icon. It is watching, not gazing, that interests him.

Not Stella. Stella, for her part, is equally preoccupied and, when she is with Jeff at least, a tempest of opinion, professional movement, efficiency, and amicable brusqueness. Like the good professional she is, she reveals almost nothing about her personal life that could engage her patient's fancy, that could change his state in any material way. Not Gunnison. Gunnison the photo editor does business by telephone, and has little time – if the telephone conversation we overhear is as typical as it seems – for any but the most perfunctory conversations. Not Doyle. Lieutenant Doyle is himself the prototype of the gazing male so many scholars wish to see in Jeff, a police detective by trade and therefore a man whose days are occupied with gathering, assessing, categorising, evaluating, and substantiating data, much of it visual. As a conversationalist he's blunt and frank, even chummily so, yet not very interesting; and he holds no mysteries. Aside from these people, there are no social resources readily available in Jeff's life, a life now filled with extended periods of wakefulness in which he can be sensitive to the demands of his body while drawing few if any satisfactions from within his own apartment. During the opening credit sequence, as Franz Waxman's title theme plays, the matchstick blind on Jeff's window is slowly raised by an unseen force: we come soon to understand how this force is the projection of his rational will, since only beyond this blind does a world wait that is actually accessible to his social need.

The broader social structure in which Hitchcock shows all of this to be happening is one of rapid and increasing mobility. People are habitually on the move since work does not take place in the home environment (Thorwald is a paragon of the displaced worker); family relations do not guarantee social position (Lisa needs a job); and business and social interaction depend on encounters with people one does not know (Thorwald's readiness for an encounter in a coffee shop with a stranger who calls him on the phone nicely evidences this). One's social relations cannot be deeply rooted, since it is through the multiplicity and movement of relations that

economic activity is organised. So it is that no great irony attaches to the fact that Jeff's most intriguing attachments are not to the people who know his address and bring him dinner and medication. Nor is there anything ironic about the fact that when he watches the strangers outside he sees only fragments of the activities in which they are engaged, the deeply integrated social moment being only an obstruction to the interruptions and changes that move the current of economic life through the city environment. What does seem extraordinary is Jeff's ability (by which I mean, the viewer's) to deduce so very much about the lives of his neighbours from so little information, to read them, as Brand puts it, "at a glance": this is due to a deeply embedded matrix of organised "factuality" in which Jeff's observations, suspicions, theorisations, and conclusions are grounded. Such a matrix exists when the social world is filled with observers like Jeff, notators and calculators, whose approach to the world transcends the casual glance while never quite approximating the penetrating gaze. It is a world of clue-takers, who look without commitment since their visual field is full of so many contradictory subjects to look at.

This is a civilisation that, as Jean Starobinski suggests,

ought to satisfy man's elementary need and thus transform it . . . Instead it frustrates this need, so that instead of being transformed it remains harsh and raw, a dangerous source of potential disorder beneath the reassuring semblance of a well-ordered world. Hence it is essential to denounce the scandalous discrepancy between appearance and reality (132).

The dramatic highlights of *Rear Window* are moments in which the "dangerous source of potential disorder" suddenly, precisely, casually reveals itself "beneath" the surface of Jeff's observations: consider the danger, for example, "beneath" Miss Lonely Hearts's wine glass as at her little table, in the company of a "friend", she raises it to make a toast (and Jeff, watching, raises his wine glass too, in this way projecting himself outward as the immobile embodiment of that "friend"); consider the danger when the Siffleuse's whistle is not answered one night; consider the danger Jeff discerns beneath the zinnias in that flowerbed, merely by looking very carefully at the way they manifest themselves in the sunlight; consider the danger posed by the very darkness of Thorwald's apartment, the empty darkness, the hollow darkness containing only the lit tip of Thorwald's cigarette, as everyone else in the courtyard comes out to look for the lost dog. Consider the composer, who cannot find a way to finish his song but will be expected to perform at his piano tonight, because he is having a party. Consider the newlyweds, whose blind cannot remain drawn forever; they must get out of that marriage bed and come into the light of day where the dangers of everyday life can touch them.

Into all of these continuing unfurlings of eventfulness, Jeff can project himself at will, as long as he can continue to rely on the gregarious imagination which is his passport to urban life. Imagining his way out of the self that is perforce the body, the mortal body, he brings especially trained powers of lucid observation, a stable detachment, an insatiable desire to see what is still dark, that is, what is still to present itself. He also has a hunger for action, understandable in a man used to travel, adventure, physical strain, and accomplishment but who must now content himself with doing nothing. Contentment in such an event is not a matter of repressing desire but of translating and projecting it, so that through a dramaturgical arrangement and an investment of sympathy the accomplishments of others (even their failures at accomplishment) gain palpable significance for one who is observing in what Roger Caillois called a "sort of voluptuous

panic” (Goffman, 380). Quoting Caillois, Goffman in fact suggests that our mode of engagement in the dramatic activity of others involves a “leaning into” their anticipated conduct (381).

For Jeff, however, it turns out that “leaning into” others’ conduct and experience, the embodiment of participation, is implicating in a way he could not have foreseen. His recuperative perception, in other words, is the substantive basis of a dramatic engagement. Let us consider the turning point of the movie, a moment at which Jeff’s energetic exertions to convince Lisa and Stella he is more than just a lazy Peeping Tom, that more is going on in Thorwald’s apartment than a benign wifely visit to the country, take effect and the full horror of the murder across the courtyard settles in. Screenwriter John Michael Hayes having invoked Lisa’s feminine intuition about a wedding ring being a woman’s “basic equipment” and sent her across the courtyard to climb up Thorwald’s fire escape in search of it, he “layers” the script further by adding a suicide attempt by Miss Lonely Hearts, surely a dramatic scene that will capture Jeff and Stella’s attention while deflecting them for a crucial moment from keeping an eye on Lisa who is in harm’s way if Thorwald returns (see DeRosa, 36). Truffaut, a particular fan of this film, was enamoured of this moment:

One of the things I enjoyed in the film was the dual significance of that wedding ring. Grace Kelly wants to get married but James Stewart doesn’t see it that way. She breaks into the killer’s apartment to search for evidence and she finds the wedding ring. She puts it on her finger and waves her hand behind her back so that James Stewart, looking over from the other side of the yard with his spyglasses, can see it. To Grace Kelly, that ring is a double victory: not only is it the evidence she was looking for, but who knows, it may inspire Stewart to propose to her. After all, she’s already got the ring! (223)

It is the next moment that is architecturally significant here. Thorwald, who has indeed returned, aggresses upon her but suddenly catches a glimpse of what she is doing. His eyes see her waving finger. He does the geometry, suddenly looking straight across the courtyard to see who it is that is receiving her message. But Jeff has been mentally vacationing in Miss Lonely Hearts’s apartment and has just returned to Lisa. Instead he sees Thorwald staring out at him. Panicked, he must fumble to wheel himself back out of Thorwald’s sightline, but it is too late.

This event marks not only Jeff’s undoing as the invisible and omnipotent viewer, able to project his fantasy into the dramas playing out for him with no expense to his position; but also his implication legally with Lisa in the break-in. Since Thorwald is seeing Jeff seeing, Jeff’s behaviour taking a view of life – until this moment, with the exception of Stella and Lisa’s affectionate criticisms, an invisible non-entity in the film – is transformed in a flash into exactly the same kind of performance-at-a-distance that he has been entertained by. The suddenness of this transformation, indeed, is its principal hallmark, the characteristic most shocking for viewers and most like the offscreen prediegetic accident that has caused Jeff’s present condition. As Jeff’s accident, my own: in a fraction of a moment, everything is changed. Now he is for Thorwald what Thorwald and the other neighbours had been for him. And what Thorwald sees, seeing Jeff, is precisely himself: which is to say, the man who is the target of Lisa’s frantic signalling. This is because in the moment of recognising that Lisa is signalling, Thorwald must also recognise himself recognising; he must see that he is already and also a reader of her signal,

just as Jeff is. If she is proposing (that is, waving a ring), she is proposing also to him (a step up, we can imagine, from the wife he butchered and from whose finger he has craftily removed this ring in order to keep, as Scottie Ferguson will accuse in *Vertigo*, “souvenirs of a murder”). Just in the way that Jeff philosophically “leans into” the anticipated actions of those he watches, Thorwald philosophically “leans into” Jeff’s vigil upon Lisa. So enthusiastically and believably does he “lean”, indeed, that subsequently Thorwald crosses the courtyard and attempts to take over Jeff’s space, throwing him off the balcony and breaking Jeff’s second leg.

Jeff’s narrative involvement with the Thorwald story, carried into his conviction that a wedding ring is there to be found and his urgent desire to have evidence of it – that is, his need to see the story embodied – depends on more, however, than the presence in Thorwald’s apartment of activity that lends itself to narrative organisation. After all, it is not that there pre-exists a ready-made story to be found that leads Jeff to find a story, but instead Jeff’s voluntary, even urgent invocation of eventfulness, Jeff’s postoperative need for muscular movement counterpoised against the brutal fact that his own muscles still lack motility. Thorwald, then, as the dramatic protagonist who begins as a manipulator of bodies and soon enough becomes – following Truffaut’s reading – a man receiving a marriage proposal is utterly a projection of Jeff’s own febrile and hungry spirit, Jeff who began as a manipulator of bodies (those of his models and the body lying in the wheelchair, too) and who is now, *because Thorwald has caught the signal*, a man to whom a proposal has been made. Another way to say this: Thorwald having seen and understood it, the signal itself has augmented presence and meaning for Jeff.

When Thorwald finds his way across the courtyard, and is looming in Jeff’s doorway – “What do *you want* from me?” (emphasis mine) – more is at stake than a mere physical threat or, indeed, “an illumination of the deep reason for solitude in the world, which turns out to be . . . in one word, the absence of love” (Chabrol, 43). Now the narrative and psychic unity linking himself to this murderer is evident to Jeff for the first time, an “association” that Spoto claims is linked to Jeff and Thorwald’s each being “pressured by emotional demands from an attractive blond” (1983, 371). That notwithstanding, the two of them have read as narratives the behaviour of their stranger-neighbours. To be sure, if Jeff has not poisoned and hacked up a blond who shared his bed he has decapitated at least the idea of a wife, negated every serious thought of long-time friendship that has come out of Lisa’s head. The concept of the marriage, its golden sealing ring, he has narcissistically refused to abandon even as he systematically puts off the lover who would wear it with him; so that he can cavalierly promote himself as a ladies’ man while keeping a hungry lady away; in short, he is a tease to Lisa quite as Lars has been a tease to him. And like Lars, he cannot bear to be seen in the (flash) light of day for what he is, a man caught in a trap. Lisa’s observations of Jeff are considerably less harsh, and Stella’s considerably more witty, than the piercing, shocking, brutal, and devastating gaze Thorwald shoots at Jeff across the courtyard – shoots with such force, indeed, as to make Jeff physically recoil; but this aggressive gaze, brave and at once foolhardy, is the one he used to bring to work with his camera and the one he employs to subdue Thorwald in the finale. When he pops the flashbulbs in Thorwald’s face, we are treated to Thorwald’s perspective on them – a vision of a world flooded all too suddenly with an excess of white light, and then, in a desperate and horrible afterglow, sickening redness, because in this supreme moment of vision and self-discovery for both men the very blood vessels of the seeing eye have become the eye’s dessert.

One wishes for a happy ending: that, if he is suddenly aware that he is a living analogue of Anna Thorwald, the bedridden invalid, Jeff might also sense that he fares better than she, perhaps because his principal caregiver can afford an unlimited amount of sympathy; perhaps because she offers an unlimited love; that, at any rate, once Jeff has seen himself as he has made Thorwald see himself, nakedly and with great cleanliness, he will truly be ready to heal. Consider that the additional ten weeks or so during which he'll now be laid up might cause him to miss still more distracting opportunities from Gunnison, even to fall out of Gunnison's Rolodex prison. Lisa will become an even more regular visitor, those nappy denims wearing in and looking for all the world like a skin. Jeff will be able to see that being with her might become its own redeeming narrative, one in which he finally escapes the need to be a narrator. At the end of the film, when a slow pan reveals Lisa in blue jeans covering her *Vogue* with a book called *Beyond the High Himalayas*, the throbbing musical cue of the songwriter's now finished (and quite beautiful) song, a demo recording of which he is playing for the musically sensitive Miss Lonely Hearts, indicates nothing other than a perfect resolution to the puzzle of the reconciliation of individual passions and social class difference.

If the matchstick blinds are dropping, closing off that vista of fascinating other social worlds, he will bid them open again in the morning. With a new broken leg, Jeff will require more pain-killers and, therefore, more conviviality to intrigue his rational, exceedingly eager, newly lucid and gregarious mind. I have no trouble taking Franz Waxman's "Lisa" to be what Jeff is dreaming in his rounding sleep tonight. But, now that she has caught a taste for adventure and has become one of the protagonists in the little films outside the rear window, can Lisa in the flesh, yet near enough to be seen without a lens, sustain his fascination tomorrow?

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Endnotes

1. It is interesting that James Stewart's performances address illness and the therapeutic situation in all four films he made for Hitchcock: in *Rope* (1948), he administers philosophical therapy to a pair of deranged minds; in *Rear Window* (1954) he is in a cast; in *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956) he doses his wife with barbiturates and has a history of child delivery, appendectomy, and other procedures; and in the second half of *Vertigo* (1958), following a sojourn in a clinic for mental collapse, he wanders in a kind of obsessive delirium through the streets of San Francisco. This delirium, William Rothman suggests to me in private communication, is in some interesting ways the opposite of his condition in *Rear Window*, since it compels him to focus not on the fascinations of the world at large but the promising hints of a particular object of concentration which he refuses to relinquish.