

## The Front Window, or, Hitchcock's Sanction of Voyeurism at Cinema

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**Abstract:** Cinema has been studied by means of interdisciplinary discussions including psychoanalytic readings. In conformity with researches on cinema and visual pleasure, this article analyses layers in which Alfred Hitchcock's film *Rear Window* explores scopophilia and voyeurism in the cinematic apparatus. Taking into account reviews regarding Hitchcock's work this reading acknowledges a link of complicity established among director, main character and viewer, turning all of them performers-eyewitnesses, which sanctions the film as an evocative employ of the voyeuristic feature of cinema.

**Keywords:** cinema, Hitchcock, voyeurism, scopophilia.

**Resumo:** O cinema vem sendo estudado por meio de discussões interdisciplinares incluindo leituras psicanalíticas. Em conformidade com pesquisas sobre cinema e prazer visual, este artigo analisa camadas em que o filme *Rear Window* de Alfred Hitchcock explora escopofilia e voyeurismo no aparato cinemático. Contemplando pesquisas acerca da obra de Hitchcock esta leitura reconhece uma ligação cúmplice estabelecida entre diretor, personagem principal e espectador, tornando-os todos atores-testemunhas oculares, o que sanciona o filme como emprego evocativo do atributo voyeurístico do cinema.

**Palavras-chave:** cinema, Hitchcock, voyeurismo, escopofilia.

*The cinema offers a number of possible pleasures.*

*One is scopophilia. (Laura Mulvey)*

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### **The viewer at the cinema from the perspective of psychoanalysis**

The cinema is an entire system of signification in which a “text” – an arrangement of images (static, moving, absent) and sound (speeches, soundtrack, noises, silence) – is displayed to a spectator in a dark room. As suggests the psychoanalytic approach to cinema studies, an impression of reality is experienced by this viewer at the cinema environment, throughout the space that combines the screen and the room.

This space that configures the cinema environment, or the cinematic apparatus defined by Jean-Louis Baudry (FLITTERMAN-LEWIS, 1987, p.180), is constituted by a complex organization that links: 1) a physical structure (the required material to display the body of the film), 2) ambiance conditions (the combination of dark room, suitable seating, rectangular screen and projected light), 3) the film (the object itself as a “text”<sup>2</sup>) and 4) the viewer (the spectator as an entire “mental machinery”<sup>3</sup>), whose function is implicit in the system of cinema (ibid., p.181). Besides, according to Stam, Burgoyne and Flittermann-Lewis, the cinematic apparatus may be understood as “a totality of interdependent operations that make up the cinema-viewing situation. (...)Another way of defining the apparatus is to consider it as the point of intersection of a number of relationships – relations of text, meaning, pleasure and spectator-position that crystallize and condense in the projection of a film” (1999, pp. 145-146).

In this psychoanalytic conception, the inherent impression of reality that occurs in the cinema room is related to a phenomenon of recognition, as a result of the action of the unconscious<sup>4</sup>. In conformity with the outcome of this arrangement, Christian Metz (2006, p. 16) states a viewer’s effective notion of “participation”<sup>5</sup> in the movie. As the viewer faces the screen inside the dark room, he exists as a spectator at the same time as he “resides” in the film performance. This happens because the cinema is capable of,

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2 Flitterman-Lewis’ italics.

3 Flitterman-Lewis’ italics.

4 The psychoanalytic film theory has its foundation in Jacques Lacan’s work. This article takes into account the relationship between unconscious and language to investigate the voyeuristic feature of cinema as a signifying system in Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*.

5 Metz’ italics.

“more than any other form, (...) reproducing or approximating the structure and logic of dreams and the unconscious” (FLITTERMAN-LEWIS, 1987, p.180). At the very moment of the audience’s experience, to borrow Lacan’s words, “I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think” (LACAN, 1986, p. 750).

In addition, as recalls Laura Mulvey (1985, p.307), at the cinema room the ambience provided by the luminosity (the darkness inside the room added by the varied intensity of lights and shadows projected on the screen) helps spectators to feel isolated from one another. As a result, this environment affords the impression of a voyeuristic situation: “although the film is really being shown, is there to be seen, conditions of screening and narrative conventions give the spectator an illusion of looking in on a private world” (ibid.).

### **Visual pleasure, voyeurism and cinema**

Considering the ambience produced by the cinematic apparatus, the psychoanalytic approach on cinema recognizes a viewer’s voyeuristic status and acknowledges, therefore, a connection between cinema and scopophilia. From a Lacanian perspective, Metz (1982, p.95) states that a feeling of pleasure, as a libidinal phenomenon, occurs inside the cinema room since, to the viewer, the observed object “is unaware of being watched” (ibid.). Metz validates moreover the association between cinema and scopophilia pointing to different approaches to voyeurism, taking into account the film as a subject “present” in the cinema room as well as the viewer: to the author, “the film is exhibitionist, and at the same time it is not” (1982, p.93).

From Metz’ viewpoint, on the one hand, the presentation itself<sup>6</sup> is conceivable from an exhibitionist facet. The cinema implies, consequently, a voyeuristic system in which the “performance” plays the exhibitionist role in the perversion’s arrangement inside the

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<sup>6</sup> In this instance the film is not regarded as a “text”, but as a show of a whole displayed to the viewer.

cinema room 7. Therefore, the exhibitionist component of this contract is aware of being observed, thus “wants this to happen, and identifies with the voyeur whose object he is (but who also constitutes him as subject)” (ibid, p.94). On the other hand, regarding the film as a “story”, as Metz suggests, its non-exhibitionist aspect takes place at the cinema room. The film is a product displayed to the spectator, a “text” supposed to be watched; hence it does not watch the audience: it is made towards an audience. In this sense, the film can be “aware” of the viewer; however, it is “unaware” of the phenomenon of recognition occurred during its projection, consequently bringing forth a “mechanism of satisfaction”<sup>8</sup> (ibid., p. 95) to the cinematic apparatus. In accordance with Metz’ perception, one may apprehend the cinematic apparatus as a catalyst to visual pleasure and, thus, to voyeurism.

In addition to the favorable ambience, the viewer’s impression of participation may be attained at different stages of the film exhibition by means of visual and audible perceptions. Accordingly, the visual pleasure has been explored by the cinema industry and associated to techniques of filmmaking in a countless number of productions as an element of the narrative. The subjective camera is possibly the most widely used resource for simulating the viewer’s gaze; added to other visual effects, it supports the viewer’s notion of participation in the story. Besides, voyeurism is a recurrent subject in films; as a part of the narrative, the gaze that results of such effects endorses the impression of a “real” voyeuristic act at the very moment of the film projection.

Many films have voyeurism for subject; thanks to their strong appeal on visual pleasure, some of them are constantly remembered in reviews. *Peeping Tom* (1960), by Michael Powell, and *The Conversation* (1974), by Francis Ford Coppola, are celebrated movies which explore the false impression of “looking in on a private world” (MULVEY, 1985, p.307). Besides the voyeuristic feature, their visual language helps to confound the viewer’s gaze and settles the proper conditions for the viewer’s impression of

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<sup>7</sup> According to Metz (1982, p.93), in this “socially acceptable practice of perversion” a bilateral feeling of triumph is experienced at the moment of exhibitionism. Here both the exhibitionist and the watcher play duals, namely “active/passive, subject/object, seeing/being seen” (ibid.).

<sup>8</sup> The “mechanism of satisfaction” is also called “mechanism of gratification on cinema” by Flitterman-Lewis (1987, p.183) and Stam & Pearson (2009, p.202).

involvement in the story. *Blue Velvet* (1986), by David Lynch, *The Truman Show*<sup>9</sup> (1998), by Peter Weir, *American Beauty* (1999), by Sam Mendes, *8mm* (1999), by Joel Schumacher, *Caché*<sup>10</sup> (2005), by Michael Haneke and *Das Leben der Anderen*<sup>11</sup> (2006), by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, are other examples: directly related to the mechanism of satisfaction, these films evoke scopophilia and voyeurism even by making the viewer's eyes convert into the character's ones in some scenes. Along with other genres, suspense films fit in this description. Stories of crime, murder mysteries, transgression, doubtful behavior of characters and, evidently, eroticism – the very subject of voyeurism – are also translated into the screen by means of visual aspects<sup>12</sup>, thus enhancing tension. This is recurrent in Alfred Hitchcock's work, whose plots are usually delineated by these elements as one may see for example in *Psycho* (1960) and *Vertigo* (1958).

One film, however, outperforms the convergence between visual pleasure, voyeurism and cinema: Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) is a paradigm of this association. *Rear Window* presents voyeurism as a subject matter and investigates it by exploiting the cinematic apparatus, positioning the audience "inside the scene" during nearly the whole movie<sup>13</sup>. Other films use equivalent schemes, nevertheless they are only partially explored. Throughout the film as a "story" as well as a "text", Hitchcock's *Rear Window* relies on its own visual language for its articulation. Not for nothing, *Rear Window* has served as source to other films. As though a tribute to this accomplished production, *Body Double* (1984), by Brian De Palma, *Manhattan Murder Mystery* (1993), by Woody Allen, and *O Outro Lado da Rua*<sup>14</sup> (2004), by Marcos Bernstein, for instance, are inspired in Hitchcock's movie. Hitchcock himself used *Rear Window* as a reference for the

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<sup>9</sup> This film has an interesting mechanism of continuity. Rising from the cinema room to the TV screen, the notion of participation in a TV reality show is, in some way, encouraged, which gives a proper outcome to the film.

<sup>10</sup> "Hidden"

<sup>11</sup> "The Lives of Others"

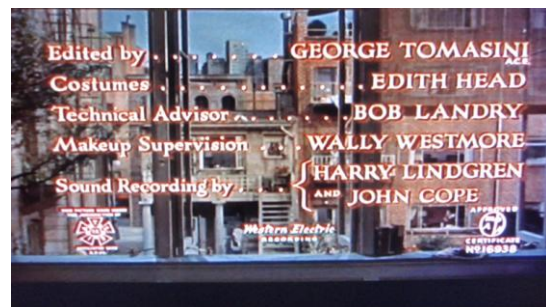
<sup>12</sup> In this article, audible effects are not taken into account as a primary matter.

<sup>13</sup> The main point of view is radically changed only four minutes before the end of the film, when the camera is moved out from Jeff's apartment. In other words, Hitchcock searches to preserve a "hypnotic" impression of a voyeuristic participation in approximately 97% of the film.

<sup>14</sup> "The Other Side of the Street"

subsequent *Vertigo*: the main character, hurt in an accident at work, turns his watched object into voyeuristic obsession while *déjà vu* images like the imminent fall of the character or the curtains on the large window give an impression of continuity from one plot to another<sup>15</sup>.

The work of Alfred Hitchcock has been analyzed by means of psychoanalytic approaches on the subject of voyeurism at the cinema. The employ of the subjective camera along with the explicit way in which the director makes the main character's window resemble the cinema screen makes *Rear Window*, in Hitchcock's own words<sup>16</sup>, possibly the "most cinematic" of his films. Hitchcock validates the voyeuristic character of cinema throughout the film by exploring the mechanism of satisfaction as cinematographic language. Hitchcock's *Rear Window* plays with the screen such as a "rear" and "front" window at the same time, from the moment the curtains are undrawn (pictures 1 and 2):



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<sup>15</sup> In *Rear Window* the main character L. B. "Jeff" Jeffries is a photographer who acts as a detective; in *Vertigo* John "Scottie" Ferguson is a detective. Both characters start the story away from work, because they were hurt in an accident: in *Rear Window* this remains Jeff's physical condition while in *Vertigo* Scottie's problem is related to the trauma caused by his accident. The take of James Stewart (who played both characters) suspended at the first scene of *Vertigo* reminds Jeff's imminent fall at the final moments of *Rear Window*. The reference is followed by the next scene of Scottie playing with his cane in a room with a large window as background, similar to the window of Jeff's apartment, from where, sitting in his wheelchair, he watches his neighbors. Even if Jeff's is a rear window and in *Vertigo* it is a front window, the curtains are an important visual element – they are set like a "memento".

<sup>16</sup> "I chose this picture of all the films I have made, this to me is the most cinematic" (Hitchcock, Alfred. In: STAM & PEARSON, 2009, p.199).

Picture 1

Picture 2

*Pictures 1 and 2: At the very beginning of Rear Window, the opening credits appear while curtains are literally opened up at the window-screen.*

### **Rear Window and voyeurism: from the impression of reality to the viewer's performance**

*Rear Window* narrates the story of photographer L. B. "Jeff" Jeffries whose leg, broken in an accident, forces him to temporarily use a wheelchair. Because of his condition, Jeff spends his time observing the neighbors through his living room's window. One day, Jeff starts suspecting that a neighbor has murdered his wife. From the window, Jeff tries to investigate the supposed crime. Hitchcock has built his scenery in such a way that the viewer has the impression to occupy the same position as Jeff's. Along with the use of the subjective camera, this embodies the viewer as a voyeur just as Jeff: both set in a chair, static at the dark room partially illuminated by the "external" light emanated from their window – or their screen – observing the "other" outside.

Above all, the window's shape is similar to that of the cinema screen. Hitchcock emphasizes that correspondence from the time of the opening credits, and persists in displaying it throughout the film. In analogous situations, the audience is combined with Jeff's. The spectator is a viewer and Jeff is a voyeur, just as the viewer turns into a voyeur and Jeff turns into a viewer. Hence, Jeff is a viewer in relation to his neighborhood in the same way that the viewer who is present in the cinema. Since Jeff is a voyeur in relation to his neighbors and the viewer is a voyeur in relation to Jeff, the viewer is also a voyeur in relation to Jeff's neighbors – "I" am Jeff; we are "one and the same" (METZ, 1982, p.93):

I'm at the cinema. I am present at the screening of the film. *I am present*. Like the midwife attending a birth who, simply by her presence, assists the woman in labour, I am present for the film in a double capacity (...) as witness and as assistant: I watch, and I help. By watching the film I help it to be born, I help it to live, since only in me will it live, and since it is made for that purpose: to be watched, in other words to be brought into being by noting other than look (ibid.).

The dual is reinforced by the takes (pictures 3 to 8) alternating Jeff's eyes ("I watch" Jeff)

and the scenes seen by Jeff ("I am" Jeff). As one may see further ahead in the film, the alternating images are a persuasive appeal used in more than once. The sequence of takes explores the viewer's "isolation" in the cinema environment and catches his eyes. Regarded by Metz as a "primary cinematic identification" (FLITTERMAN-LEWIS, 1987, p.183), the recognition of the "I" by the spectator is produced at this very moment by means of physical and psychological strategies, while a "hallucinatory" condition (such as an instance of dreaming) is also generated, as pointed Jean-Louis Baudry (ibid, p.182).



Picture 3



Picture 4



Picture 5



Picture 6





Picture 7

Picture 8

*Pictures 3 to 8: At this sequence, the subjective camera prompts the viewer to follow Jeff's look.*

The “rear” window is the main window of Jeff’s apartment. From his living room, Jeff observes windows of other apartments as a voyeur, watching his neighbors’ daily life. Jeff’s window is the largest one on the scene and has the shape of a screen. This unique point of view for the character is, at the same time, the apartment’s window, Jeff’s view, Jeff’s eyes and the screen of the cinema – our window, our view, our eyes (“I am Jeff”): in the obscurity, in front of the window (or the screen), Jeff’s view intermediates the spectator’s view - Jeff’s fascination becomes ours.

The movie starts in a hot summer day; because of the heat Jeff’s neighbors open their own windows, making their routine more visible. This situation may also characterize the negligence of the neighbors in being observed, reaffirming, on the screen, Metz’ remark that “the object I am watching is unaware of being watched” (1982, p.95). In his voyeuristic watching, Jeff realizes that one of his neighbors, Thorwald’s wife, has disappeared. A suspicious behavior makes Jeff believe that Thorwald has murdered his own wife. Jeff tries to tell the story to Stella (his nurse) and Lisa (his girlfriend), but they do not believe him.

Looking at the screen, thus adopting Jeff’s eyes, the viewer also sees what Jeff sees (pictures 9 to 12), unlike Stella and Lisa. At this very moment a sort of “contract” is signed between the character and the viewer. It not only sanctions the viewer’s voyeur position but, as usually happens in suspense films, establishes a link of complicity between spectator and the character. Now, more than never, “I perform” Jeff’s partner.



*Pictures 9 and 10: By means of the subjective camera, the viewer sees Thorwald's suspect behavior through the window.*



*Pictures 11 and 12: Jeff watches Thorwald behind his camera lenses: the rounded blurring effect in some takes is important to induce the viewer's condition as a voyeur, like Jeff's.*

Once he has persuaded Lisa and Stella to trust his assumption on Thorwald's behavior, Jeff explains the situation to his friend Tom Doyle, a detective, who does some inquiry but does not find anything irregular. Even if the point of view – the window – is the same to Jeff, Stella, Lisa, and occasionally to Doyle, the viewer “acts” like Jeff's trustworthy partner in the cinema room: the only one who sees what Jeff sees when other characters are out of scene. Jeff and the viewer, together, perform the “I”. To the product of the “story”, however, as Jeff does not realize that the spectator is present, he needs the other characters (Lisa, Stella and Doyle) in order to prove his interpretation.

After the death of a neighbor's dog, another ingredient to Jeff's assumption – the dog had tried to dig at the backyard and Thorwald had seemed worried about that – all neighbors leave their own windows<sup>17</sup>, interacting between them. Jeff, nevertheless, preserves his (our) voyeur status in relation to all neighbors refraining to show himself at the window. The other's unawareness of Jeff's attitude is perhaps an exception to Thorwald, whose behavior differs from the others': perceived only by the bright of his cigarette in the darkness, has Thorwald discovered Jeff (or the viewer)? Up to this moment, only the viewer and Jeff were at the darkness watching the other; the viewer

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<sup>17</sup> Also Jeff's – and ours – screen (or screens).

at the room of the cinema is not seen by Jeff, who is not seen by his neighbors. Thorwald, the object of Jeff's and the viewer's observation, at this time is also in the darkness and possibly observing "us" as well (picture 13).



Picture 13

*Picture 13: At the window, the bright light of a cigarette denounces Thorwald's presence.*

The scene described takes advantage of the plot. The matter of voyeurism, in other words awareness/unawareness of the observed subject and visual pleasure, may be seized on the take showing the bright light at the darkness. Hitchcock explores the pleasure in relation to the other's unawareness by linking it to the villain's omnipresent joy in suspense films (villains supposedly "dominates" the other). Thorwald is the suspect smoking at the darkness; smoking is spontaneously related to introspection. Besides, the darkness corroborates the tension (people are "afraid" of it and, usually, frightening scenes have place at night in suspense films). Hence, Hitchcock's choice of the static image of a window in the darkness with the bright light instant, reaches the attributes to compose a successful suspense scene at the same time as it plays with the voyeuristic aspect of cinema, emphasizing the "participation" of the viewer. The "hallucinatory" condition mentioned by Baudry (FLITTERMAN-LEWIS, 1987, p.182), once again, is emphatically offered to the viewer; the "I" set in a dark room in front of the screen is actually before the window and performing the "story" – watching and being watched.

One night, when Thorwald leaves his apartment, Jeff asks Stella and Lisa to help him find

any evidence of the “crime” inside the suspect’s flat, whose window was left open. Thorwald, however, suddenly returns to his apartment, surprising Lisa. Jeff watches the “scene” from his window but, just like the film spectator, he cannot intervene. At this moment Thorwald realizes Jeff’s existence, as one may see through Jeff’s camera lenses. Both Jeff and the viewer understand that Thorwald is coming up: Hitchcock manages to create a classic suspense effect while achieving the voyeuristic performance on viewer’s impression of “reality”.

As Thorwald enters Jeff’s apartment, Hitchcock makes a drastic change to the viewer’s condition. The “I” impression is preserved alternating, nevertheless, the subject. Up to this moment, the viewer had been straightly related to the main character’s eye; now, the viewer’s look starts to change of position. Hitchcock continues to use the subjective camera placing the viewer’s standpoint in regular intervals, sometimes into Jeff’s, sometimes into Thorwald’s viewpoint. The alternating images, once more used as a persuasive appeal, turn the “text” into a cinematic game. They raise the tension on the scene – it is, above all, suspense – although the director accomplishes a visual “joke” on the subject of voyeurism at cinema. The apex of this successful disorientation (the impression of being Jeff and the “new I” Thorwald) is given by the camera’s flash effect: Jeff uses the flash in order to stop Thorwald, who moves towards him at the darkness. The viewer is Jeff watching the light projected against Thorwald, although he is also Thorwald surprised by the flash effect (pictures 14 and 15).



Picture 14

*Picture 14: Jeff uses the flash against Thorwald. "Behind" the camera, the viewer sees him strongly illuminated by the light source.*



Picture 15

*Picture 15: After the flash, the effect caused by the light is seen by the viewer through Thorwald's eyes, "in front of" the camera.*

At the end of the scene, Jeff is pushed out of his own open window. At this moment, Hitchcock interrupts Jeff's voyeur status and leaves the viewer in an unclear position: he is a spectator in the cinema, however a voyeur in the story; he is the good guy, although, he has now the murder look as well. The viewer is not Jeff anymore, and the subjective camera continues to give him the voyeur look. The rupture is marked by: 1) the move of the camera to the yard (now showing the scene from various angles), 2) Jeff being pushed out of the window (he is the one pushed out; the viewer still stays on his seat, as a voyeur in relation to the scene, to Jeff and to the neighbors), 3) the audience's view of Jeff suspended at the window (the viewer sees Jeff from above (picture 16)). The viewer is not Jeff anymore; however, at the moment Jeff falls, this is not Thorwald's look either, he is already being caught. Who is the viewer after all, and what does he know? Could audience's gaze correspond, now, to Hitchcock's gaze? Hitchcock is, doubtless, giving

the viewer back his position in the cinematic apparatus.



Picture 16

Picture 16: *Jeff falls from the window. Who is the viewer looking at him?*

### **Hitchcock “plays” the sanction of voyeurism at cinema**

The work of Hitchcock has been largely studied by means of psychoanalytic film theory, so has *Rear Window* in particular, for a good reason. *Rear Window* may be understood as possibly the closest translation to the meaning of “cinematic”. In this work, Hitchcock insists in points which help the viewer to reach the expected reaction to suspense. After all, in conformity with the conception of a connection between cinema and scopophilia, this film embodies the voyeuristic character of cinema pointed by psychoanalytic readings. Persuasive appeals for placing the viewer into the main character’s look are used throughout the film. Accordingly, they reinforce a voyeuristic approach of the audience and psychological features of the cinema system. As says Mulvey, “the look is central to the plot, oscillating between voyeurism and fetishistic fascination” (1985, p.312).

In *Rear Window* Hitchcock searches, above all, to explore the cinema system as “language”. Not only does the director pursue the psychoanalytical subject of recognition, but he also plays with the look – he investigates cinema and audience. With the subjective camera, the director lends us Jeff’s eyes (pictures 17 and 18); at the

moment Jeff falls asleep, nevertheless, the viewer watches what he does not see<sup>18</sup> (the viewer watches the suspect). At the final scene, moreover, when Jeff falls asleep, Lisa thinks to be deceiving him by changing a book she was supposed to read. The act of taking a fashion magazine instead of the book shows the dissimulated behavior of Lisa: she simulates being a different person while observed by Jeff, despite the spectator's presence. In this "reality game" even the soundtrack, an ingredient of ambiance, is sometimes played in *Rear Window* by a neighbor. Hence, the cinema environment is, as well as the film, conceived by Hitchcock.



Picture 17



Picture 18

*Pictures 17 and 18: The close-up of Lisa helps to simulate the viewer opening Jeff's eyes, so as Thorwald's look to Jeff seems to be towards the audience.*

In order to recognize *Rear Window* as a sanction of voyeurism at cinema it is also important to have in mind that the whole scenery was constructed in the dimension of a "real" rear courtyard, and that Hitchcock placed the camera "inside" Jeff's room. He directed all scenes only from Jeff's back, from Jeff's – and our – point of view. This may embody Hitchcock's voyeur status in relation to all of us.

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18 Ironically, in accordance with Mulvey (1975, p.312-313), Jeff is a photo-journalist, a story maker and captor of images; such as a "text", thus, Hitchcock plays with his condition as well. We all act as Hitchcock's "performers" during the film.

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