

Prison Film Series

Rear Window

Surveillance and Culture

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I am running on a treadmill. I see grainy footage of women acting sexily. Mixed with this I see a man sitting at a control desk watching the same footage and furiously selecting further footage from other monitors. He is a security guard — in a pop video. I am at the gym; the video is on MTV. The video is for Groove Armada's *I see you baby (shaking that ass)* better known as the music for the equally scopic Renault Megane adverts.

Later that evening I'm relaxing in front of the television and Peugeot want to sell me a car. During the course of the advert the car (a 207) is caught on CCTV, webcams, video cameras and tracked by satellite round the city but the security guard only notices the car has left the secure car park when it returns and is repositioned to give him (us) a better view. During the course of the advert a voice over and 'Matrix' styled text tells us 'you are caught on camera over 300 times a day' pausing, during the repositioning, before telling us 'Give them something to watch'. Last year Toyota sought to sell us the Yaris by showing a woman repositioning the CCTV cameras in her underground car park so that they all 'guarded' her car. The security guard notices none of this.

The year before that Danone's Actimel advertising campaign mirrored the use of concealed cameras and private investigators to unmask fraudulent benefit, accident and personal injury claimants. A 'housewife' is shown to be very active whilst observed by cameras and surveillance teams. After using the product she asks for her money back and is shamed into running away by the footage displayed on monitors around the store.

Research suggests only distracted watching of CCTV monitors — just like our own experience of TV then, or those ever-present, never-vigilant guards of adverts and pop videos. Famously 'hoodie' wearers don't want to be watched yet the Surveillance Camera Players do. The players seek to expose the issues raised by CCTV by presenting plays to them; on them, at them?

This concern with surveillance is not new as one character says to another — in reassurance — in Jane Austen's novel *Northanger Abbey*,

consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. ... Could they be perpetrated without it being known in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing; where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies ...

The religious have always felt the all-seeing eye of god on them. So perhaps it is just the cameras that are new. Gary Marx's tracks the long standing fascination of popular culture with surveillance. He notes the surveillance theme in many popular songs from *Santa Claus is coming to Town* to Sting's *Every Breath you Take*; so 'you better watch out, you better be nice'.

My own list of specifically CCTV pop music runs from this very early Del Amitri:

*Close-circuit cameras in department stores
shoot the same video every day
And the stars of these films neither die nor get
killed
Just survive constant action replay
(Nothing Ever Happens' Waking Hours 1989)*

to Hard Fi's album *Stars of CCTV*.

The point of all these examples is to show some of the ubiquity of CCTV and surveillance as themes in popular culture. We will mention Endemol's *Big Brother* in passing and the whole clearly touches on Orwell's too but now I want to talk about one of my favourite films, *Rear Window*.

Jefferies's Neighbourhood Watch

'The New York State sentence for a peeping Tom is six months in the workhouse!' is what Jefferies (played by James Stewart) is told by his nurse when she catches him staring out the window in Hitchcock's 1954 film. Stewart's character does not end up in prison but many of the main characters spend some time looking through that window. The plot is outlined below with surveillance issues highlighted. In doing this I lean heavily on Sharff and more lightly on Belton as well as my

own (re)viewing of the DVD. Throughout this, and later, some of the academic writing about the film is set out.

A man spends his time looking out the window. He sees much, but not everything. He thinks that some things he sees signal a murder. He comes to persuade his nurse and girlfriend of this; they investigate the 'murderer'. They harass the man — a note and phone calls — and he eventually retaliates. The short story on which it's based doesn't even feature a nurse or girlfriend.

It's hot in Greenwich Village, New York (a specially built set at Paramount Studio Hollywood), windows are open; people are sleeping on fire escapes and roofs. 'Jeff' Jefferies, a photojournalist, is laid up with a broken left leg in a full plaster cast. He is discovered asleep in his wheelchair by the stealthy camera which has already swept nearly 360° past other windows in the courtyard. The camera noses around Jeff's apartment. We learn his name, occupation, interests and probable cause of the accident all by silent observation. Sharff notes half of the film is 'observer controlled' and a third 'silent'. Much of the observation is through Jefferies' long lens camera or binoculars by him and others and is silent or marked by short *sotto voce* exchanges.

Jeff's window appears to have the best view — he is the film's protagonist — but he cannot see everything, and crucially he misses some of the action — it is a suspense film. When he wakes he can see into the windows/lives of: 'Miss Torso', a dancer; a composer; 'Miss Lonelyhearts'; a sculptress; a couple with a dog and the home of travelling salesman and his bed-ridden wife. A pulled-down blind prevents us seeing into the apartment of a couple of newly weds most of the time. Other characters flit about. For instance early on two young women who might be — this is the fifties and Hitchcock also likes to tease — sunbathing nude on the roof are perched from a passing helicopter. Jeff smiles imagining the view.

Miss Torso is token 'eye-candy', she showers, she works out but Jeff finds — as do we — the act of looking across the courtyard compelling in its own right. The composer, whose clock is wound by Hitchcock in his statutory 'guest' appearance, supplies much of the music for the film as he works to get a tune right. Miss Lonelyhearts's search for love provides an important distracting sub-plot. The sculptress reacts to events and has a spat with the salesman but mostly dozes in her garden chair. The couple raise and lower their dog into the garden and the dog's death forms part of the suspense.

The travelling salesman (played by Raymond Burr, who went on to fame on the right side of the law in *Perry Mason* and *Ironside*) quickly comes under suspicion and the increasingly directed gaze of Jeff. We get to know his name is Thorwald eventually but that requires active detection by Jeff's girlfriend, Lisa, not the camera. Events draw most of the characters outside or to their windows eventually, even the honeymooners. Writing only ten years ago Sharff likens the scenes in the windows to '8mm silent movies' though later talks of studio monitors. Now, and for my purposes, they might be seen as CCTV monitors and the apartments might be imagined as cells though others have seen them as a strip cartoon.

The chat between Jeff and his nurse (Stella, played by Thelma Ritter) indicates he has been amusing himself watching his neighbours over the last six weeks of his convalescence but it is clear from a phone conversation with his magazine boss that he is bored and itching for action. The nurse takes some interest in his viewing and is only mildly critical, remarking that watching the bathing beauties hadn't raised his temperature. They gossip about the things he's seen but he is

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worried that the salesman's wife is no longer around. He'd seen them arguing and the salesman coming and going with heavy bags in the early hours. Later he sees a large knife and saw being wrapped and a heavy trunk tied with rope taken away. Their other topic of conversation is his girlfriend Lisa Fremont, who works in fashion, who is trying to get him to commit to her and a safer and steadier career in fashion photography.

Lisa (Grace Kelly) is less tolerant of his viewing habits but is eventually drawn into his narrative of murder, dismemberment and disposal. She and the nurse — straight out of Shakespeare via Brooklyn — take it on themselves to do what cameras and even our hero Jeff cannot do. They dig up the flowerbed that the couple's dog had been sniffing around and Lisa shins up the fire escape into Thorwald's apartment looking for clues. Jeff's agonised impotence is increased — he can only look but not act — when Thorwald returns to discover her. All that Jeff can do is call the police — an experience not unknown to CCTV control room staff.

The police do turn up and rescue her. Jeff has told them that a woman is being attacked and we witness this attack. She is arrested and taken off to the police station, the nurse is despatched to bail her. Jeff is now alone and Thorwald twigs that he is being watched and comes calling. Jeff can only hold him off temporarily by firing his flash bulbs before, ironically, he is defenestrated.

This is not art house cinema nor even *film noir* but an Oscar-nominated and high grossing Hollywood product so a lot of tying up has been done but luckily this is easily achieved with a pan, a tilt and a zoom around the courtyard: the temperature is back to normal; the honeymoon is over, the newly weds are arguing; the sculptress resumes snoozing; the couple have a new dog; Miss Torso's GI is back in town (his main interest is her fridge); Miss Lonelyhearts has hooked up with the composer and the song is completed — bizarrely the words feature the refrain 'Lisa'. Thorwald's flat is being redecorated.

Jeff has a war-time buddy in the Police who he gets to informally check out his fears. The buddy is sceptical throughout and only takes Jeff seriously after Thorwald's attack. In many respects the only active policing through much of the movie is by Lisa and the nurse. Jeff might be seen to be on a stake out. Yet he falls asleep during one crucial moment and misses the death of the dog when Lisa — intent on getting his attention as she intends to stay the night — declares, 'show's over' and drops the blinds. The raising and lowering of the blinds brings a more theatrical than cinematic feel to some of the proceedings but reminds us that we are watching an entertainment; and that watching is entertaining.

Whilst the protagonists may do policing they are very selective about what they act on. In addition to the suspected, but never seen, murder we witness Thorwald's attack on Lisa upon finding her in his flat and a sexual assault on Miss Lonelyhearts by a young man she has invited back to her flat. We also see Miss Torso having to deal firmly with an unwanted advance and entertain three men in her flat without giving encouragement to them which Lisa calls 'juggling wolves'. Much could be, and has been, made of these gender issues. Here we turn to the not unrelated ethical issues.

CCTV ethics — 'I'm not shy. I've been looked at before'

The nurse may not be shy but Jeff is worried that Thorwald's look back at them portends something. As we see most of the watching is done by Jeff, and eventually Lisa and Stella — only the guilty confront their — our — gaze. Hitchcock is unembarrassed by his

voyeurism or his bid to lock us in too but his characters are. Stella goes on from talking about the current penalties for being a peeping tom to say:

They got no windows in the workhouse.
In the old days, they used to put your eyes out with
a red-hot poker.
Any of those bikini bombshells you're always
watching
Worth a red-hot poker?
Oh, dear.
We've become a race of Peeping Toms

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Later still in the conversation she imagines him before the judge and pleading, 'it was only a bit of innocent fun. I love my neighbours like a father'. This paternalistic argument is often deployed by proponents of CCTV. 'Friendly eye in the sky' as one minister called it.

Innocent fun or not Jeff looks embarrassed when he 'catches' the newly weds kissing before the blind is drawn yet he sneaks another peak and Stella hisses 'Window Shopper' on observing him. Lisa, before converted to its uses/pleasures, sermonizes, 'The way you look into people's windows is sick [...] doing it with binoculars and wild opinions about every little thing you see is ... is diseased'.

Jeff's police buddy not only reminds him of the Constitutional issues involved in his suggestion he raid Thorwald's flat but also declares, 'That's a secret, private world you're looking into out there. People do a lot of things in private they couldn't do in public'.

Only after the attack on Miss Lonelyhearts and seeing her tears does Jeff, yet still clearing thinking of Thorwald, ponder:

I wonder if it's ethical to watch a man
With binoculars and a long-focus lens.
Do you ...
Do you suppose it's ethical, even if you prove that
he didn't commit a crime?

And Lisa responds, 'I'm not much on rear window ethics'. Clearly we can transpose these questions to CCTV. Lisa's answer in part is action. She decides to dig up the flowerbed. Jeff is concerned and she taunts him, 'if you're squeamish, just don't look'; that is if you only like to see women simply as 'being' rather than 'doing'.

Of course all these fine speeches about ethics are undercut by the constant looking across the yard and our continued looking at the film.

Rear Window Shopping — the theory of your choice

I first became aware of the film through a mention in Laura Mulvey's essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' where she elaborates another theorist's work:

In an analysis of Rear Window, Douchet takes the film as a metaphor for the cinema. Jeffries is the audience, the events in the apartment block opposite correspond to the screen. As he watches, an erotic dimension is added to his look, a central image to the drama. His girlfriend Lisa had been of little sexual interest to him, more or less a drag, so long as she remained on the spectator side. When she crosses the barrier between his room and the block opposite, their relationship is reborn erotically. He does not merely watch her through his lens, as a distant meaningful image, he also sees her as a guilty intruder exposed by a dangerous man threatening her with punishment, and thus finally giving him the opportunity to save her. Lisa's exhibitionism has already been established by her obsessive interest in dress and style, in being a passive image of visual perfection; Jeffries's voyeurism and activity have also been established through his work as a photo-journalist, a maker of stories and captor of images. However, his enforced inactivity, binding him to his seat as a spectator, puts him squarely in the fantasy position of the cinema audience.

Stripped of its psychoanalytic elements this can be applied to CCTV, its control rooms and pop video and car advert mock-ups of them. Were I to direct a remake or homage, there have been others; I would set it in a CCTV control room — new UK film *Red Road* has its protagonist work in one. There is also scope to see our desire, and that of the authorities to see more, as part

of a psychic drive even if you don't go down the Freudian or even Lacanian route of much feminist film studies such as Mulvey's.

Other feminist film theorists such as Tania Modleski, are more ambivalent seeing Hitchcock as neither misogynistic nor a proto-feminist. That is claiming more points of view within Jeff's flat than just his and that Lisa's action is not simply a projection of his. Others still have concentrated on the class and gender related meanings of Lisa's and Stella's dresses and Lisa's final shot in slacks.

The patron saint of surveillance studies is Michel Foucault. Some very obscure stuff has been written based upon his works, and translations thereof, but much of it is interpretations of his discussion of Jeremy Bentham's idea of the Panopticon. Since Bentham's Panopticon was not built much of the debate takes the Panopticon as a metaphor (though see <http://www.radi-alomniview.com/index.php> for details of modern attempts to achieve 100 per cent surveillance).

Published as *Surveiller et punir* Foucault's book is not just about disciplining, disciplines or the disciplinary but a wider 'theatre', screen or monitor for our purposes, of oversight and punishment. I think he overemphasizes the move from spectacular public punishment of the body to private 'soul training'. For exam-

ple, the media now routinely pillory female celebrities for the sin/crime of cellulite and both sexes for their sexuality, politics, lifestyle etc. Home Secretaries might prefer the quiet of incarceration to the public mauling of the press.

Clearly a Foucauldian reading of *Rear Window* is possible to set beside the many feminist and psychoanalytical ones. I have largely eschewed those temptations here. One purpose of Bentham's Panopticon was to observe staff as much as prisoners but also, to save money, not to let prisoners know whether they were being watched or not. Yes, those dummy speed cameras and unwatched or recorded monitors have a precedent.

Some theorists concern themselves with the fourth wall, that is the wall in which Jeff's window is set. Surely other apartments would have the same or possibly better views. In the very few scenes looking back at Jeff's the windows are not lit so as to not to shatter the

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premise that the visual world is laid out solely for our delight.

It is not Jeff's job to watch his neighbourhood though, with Lisa's help, he does his citizenly duty. However, he doesn't do his neighbourly duty. He can't prevent the dog being killed and all the neighbours listen to and look upon the owner's distress but turn away. Moreover, Thorwald initially has no reason to believe he is being, or might be, watched. Any modern remake would have to take the reality of CCTV, camcorders, webcams and mobile camera-phones into account. So another pleasure of the film is its period innocence, the night then did not 'have a thousand eyes' (Bobby Vee, 1963).

It could be argued that the film is a romance between Jeff and Lisa (some of the film's later posters don't feature binoculars or cameras but the couple in a clinch), or that each of the couples in the film has something to say about coupledom. It might be that the film is about Jeff growing up and giving up adolescent voyeurism for a mature heterosexual relationship. Some have focused on the psycho-sexual aspects — the broken long lens camera (castration), Jeff's confinement to a wheelchair (impotence) — and others suggest that it is about cinema itself. One of the many pleasures are the multiple readings of the film. Because I am interested in CCTV and the growing inter-disciplinary surveillance studies I have emphasized these aspects.

The precise meaning Hitchcock intended for the film can be argued; some alternative 'readings' have been touched on. I think we can be clear that Hitchcock is interested in cinema and therefore viewing if not 'watching'. So I make no claim that he foresaw CCTV or the extent of modern surveillance though Orwell's 1984 had been published a few years earlier. I hope it is clear that in addition to the visual pleasure I get from the film and the intellectual pleasure I get from the accreted commentaries on it, I now want to take the opportunity to add CCTV specifically, not voyeurism or surveillance to those commentaries.

Clearly CCTV as part of the management of a prison is not the same as the use of CCTV in public or a

semi-public space. However, the term, indeed the initials have become associated with its use against crime. Hitchcock uses his cameras — think what he could do with *Big Brother* footage — to create a largely visual feast for the eye. That is art. My concern with CCTV is just that. I am seduced by Hitchcock's art; I want you to be too. But we should not be seduced by CCTV.

I contend that previous eras have been pre-literate or oral and that we are moving from a literate era into a visual one. CCTV and the shows that depend on it emphasize the visual. CCTV does detect crime but it also defines crime. Crimes that can be seen come to be seen as 'Crime' and other nuisances that are caught on camera come to be seen as crime too; worse still, outside the view of the cameras other crimes, from domestic violence to corporate fraud drop further down the pecking order of crime or priority.

Psycho is arguably Hitchcock's most famous film but many see *Rear Window* as his best (it lies 13th in the International Movie Database top 250 <http://www.imdb.com>). Whether this is true it is certainly productive of popular and academic discussion and visual pleasure. In *Rear Window* Hitchcock certainly gives us much to talk about but more importantly 'something to watch'.

Recommended Reading

Belton J (2000) *Alfred Hitchcock's Rear Window* Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press.

Groombridge, N. and Murji, K. 'As Easy as AB and CCTV?' in *Policing* Vol 10 No 4 Winter 1994 283-290.

Marx G 'Electric Eye in the Sky: Some Reflections on the New Surveillance and Popular Culture' in Ferrell and Sanders (eds) *Cultural Criminology* (1995:106-141) North Eastern University Press.

Norris, C Moran J and Armstrong G (Eds) (1998) *Surveillance, Closed Circuit Television and Social Control* Aldershot: Ashgate.

Sharff S (1997) *The Art of Looking in Hitchcock's Rear Window* New York: Limelight.

Surveillance and Society — an online journal — at <http://www.surveillance-and-society.org/>

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