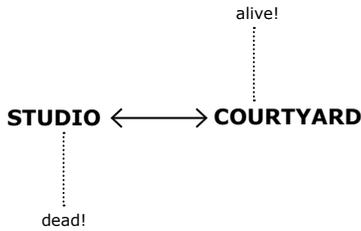
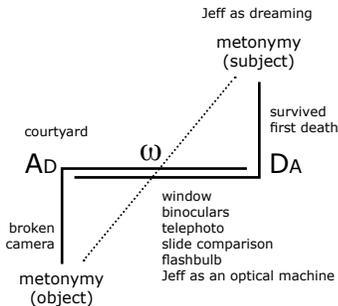


# REAR WINDOW: the scopic margin

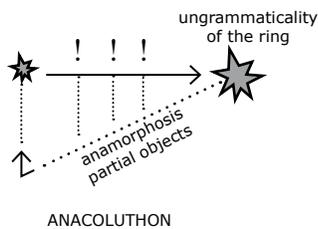
Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) is one of a series of the director's "single set" films. Action takes place almost entirely inside the studio apartment of Jeff Jefferies (James Stewart), invalidated action photographer living in Greenwich Village. The set was reconstructed from a site scouted in New York and given a fictional address as per Hollywood code. Jefferies' rear window overlooks an urban courtyard housing many artists: a composer, sculptor, dancer, and singer (whom we hear but don't see). There's also a "Miss Lonelyhearts," a childless couple who dote on their pet dog, some newlyweds, and two roomates who like to sunbathe on the roof — who all keep Jeff entertained while he convalesces. Privacy is not an issue. A heat wave has forced residents to throw open their windows and curtains; all share in a new openness, but Jeff's nurse Stella scolds him for paying more attention to his neighbors than to his girlfriend, Lisa (Grace Kelly). One neighbor ultimately becomes an obsession: Lars Thorwald, whose sick and cranky wife suddenly disappears. Jeff thinks its murder, but soon Lisa and Stella take up the cause and try to convince Jeff's war-time buddy, now a policeman, to investigate.



*Rear Window* subtly reverses the obvious "naturalism" of the relationship between Jeff's studio and the urban courtyard. The subtle metonymy of the opening leaves it open whether Jeff has been injured or actually died from his accident. His cast reads "Here lie the bones of L. B. Jefferies"! In contrast the courtyard becomes a giant body whose parts represent body parts: heart, ears, hands (sculptor), legs (dancer), genitals (married couple), head (composer), voice (offstage soprano who practices octave-long scales).



The lively courtyard has an element of death (Ad), the Thorwald apartment. Jeff as disabled (dead?) endures the stage "between the two deaths" as a disembodied gaze, a vengeful eye that employs optical anamorphosis to corner Thorwald.



The main story proceeds in a linear way from Jeff's crash, through a series of optical interventions leading to Lisa's invasion of Thorwald's apartment. Discovery of the ring initiates the "orthogonal chiaroscuro" and Thorwald's revenge.

**Room Chiaroscuro.** At the film's opening, the camera focuses on Jefferies' three-part rear window; the comparison to a film screen is clear. The curtains open in sequence and the camera peers out the window and slow-pans the urban courtyard. We are in an expository space where Jeff will observe the action on the outside, in the courtyard and apartments opposite, using their natural "fourth walls" just as a film set constructs three-walled rooms leaving space open for cameras and lights. The wall of residences constitute a kind of crossword puzzle; each resident seems to lack something, a husband, a wife, a boyfriend, a lucky break, children; and the sculptress is partly deaf. Only the newly-weds to the left of Jeff's window seem content; they close their shades for privacy but this is a sign that they have everything they need on the inside. The opening music gives way to an on-site supply of music from radios, practicing musicians, and ambient sounds. Still, the tunes seem to be magically synched to the action. This makes Jeff's apartment even more like the theater's auditorium, where spectators may discuss what's going on in the story beyond the window-screen.

If the studio is akin to the "frontal chiaroscuro" that shows a frame inside a frame, the courtyard's spherical quality allows for a type-2 "orthogonal chiaroscuro." Rotation is implied in the three buildings that form the courtyard opposite Jeff's building. With a natural *extimité* in this commonplace urban form, Hitchcock sets up a social *extimité* in the case of the odd couple, the Thorwalds. Jeff watches Anna Thorwald badger her husband. She's suspicious of his phone calls to long-distance numbers. After a night of fitful sleep, she's mysteriously disappeared. Jeff suspects foul play, and the inside of the murder becomes a matter of external observation. The inside of Thorwald's jewelry display case (he's a traveling salesman), the inside of a clothes trunk, the inside of Anna's purse — all these interiors become parts of a web of clues that Jeff and Lisa attempt to assemble.

Chiaroscuro is not just a visual technique that determines the set construction and unfolding of the story, it's a model for how the film works. The film divides into two parts, each controlled by its relevant form of chiaroscuro. The frame-within-the-frame of chiaroscuro holds until the point where Thorwald realizes how he has been discovered. Eluding the police, he locates Jeff, who has been a gaze from Thorwald's point of view. Thorwald then rotates the logic of the film by walking around the block into Jeff's building, entering, and attacking Jeff. Jeff, whose nickname duplicates his last name, a kind of Jefferies<sup>2</sup>, is in his singularity a  $\sqrt{-1}$ , because of his original metonymic singularity. As an action photographer, he "should not be at home." He is now in the position of the Homeric Nobody, Odysseus, who must blind the cyclops and still buy for the time to escape. His *-i* (no put intended) status is maintained by shooting off flashbulbs from his camera. He runs out of time, and Thorwald shoves him out his window, an extreme version of the "reverse angle shot."

When we see *chiaroscuro*<sub>2</sub> at work, we are reminded of the metonymical opening of the film: a tracking close-up shot across a table with photographs and Jeff's damaged camera. This discarded memory couples with the slow pan to Jeff's cast, upon which is written "Here lie the bones of L. B. Jefferies, R.I.P." The cast, a substitute tombstone, a case of antinomasia ("Stalin") renaming Jefferies after his accident, <>. Did Jeff survive the crash? Is Lisa real or a dream maintained by the momentum of life that rushed back to his apartment? Why doesn't he marry Lisa? Is it because she's not fit for jungle life or because he is in fact dead? Is Stella a therapist or is she an undertaker preparing a body? This seems to be a long-shot speculation, not worth the trouble because we enjoy the suspense of the mystery story and need a more ordinary set of assumptions. But the clues are set within the traditions of the death drive and the theme of "between the two deaths," metonymies — holes in front — joined with the metonymy of the end, his fall out the window. Finnegan falls again, and the hole in back is a simulated marriage with Lisa, reading a book-within-a-book (literally!), a fashion magazine concealed by *Beyond the High Himalayas* by Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, William O. Douglas, who had written famous decisions on questions of privacy. As in the anthology of *Dead of Night*, we never know whether to count or not to count this final container, which like the four sides of a drawing could be a diagram or just the sides of the paper: Möbius!

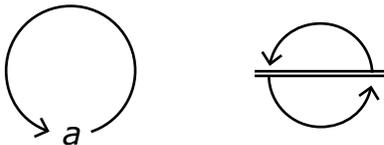
**Acousmatics of the Inverted Babel.** Environmental on-set sounds are the sound track of *Rear Window*. Popular songs of the mid-50s pump out of undisclosed apartment radios. An organ-grinder in the street cranks up some favorite tunes. A soprano practices scales. A



The three-paneled window is a coupling of the visual screen and the standard three-part film narrative (with two plot points). The single set film intensifies the relation of the film to the dream and the dream to the death narrative, whether or not we take seriously the possibility that Jeff has actually died in the accident depicted at the beginning of the film.



Lisa becomes Jeff's surrogate once she sees that Thorwald is tying up a large trunk. Jeff, far from being the embodiment of the Foucauldian male gaze, is feminized when he convinces Lisa and Stella about Thorwald's guilt. Jeff's immobility turns him into a visual mechanism, complete with a dolly, his wheelchair. In the discourse of analysis, he is in the position of TRUTH, and alternates from a position as observer to that of expositor.

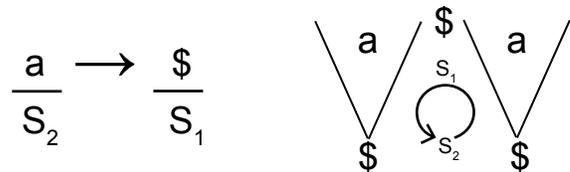


The gapped circle identifies the structure of the courtyard with Jeff's apartment in the location of the objet petit a. The parallels between Thorwald/Anna and Jeff/Lisa revolve around a twinship established by coincidences and parallels. Thorwald sells jewels; Jeff's lens are jewel-like. Anna is an invalid, Lars ranges freely; Jeff is the invalid while Lisa ranges freely, etc.

composer begins a work at the beginning of the film that will, at the end, include "Lisa" as the eponymous heroine. His completion of the work is time with the solution of the crime and the reconciliation of Jeff and Lisa, a timing emphasized by the cameo appearance of Hitchcock shown winding the clock in the composer's apartment. The possibility that we are attending the death-narrative of a photographer killed in action relocates this courtyard in a Dantaeian Hades, an inversion of the Tower of Babel from Genesis. Its openings are compartments in a memory theater that must be connected before an escape, R1, can be effected. The internal puzzle is not only the "partialized" neighbors (Miss Lonelyhearts wants a boyfriend, the composer needs a wife, the couple with a dog possibly have lost or desire a child, the dancer is waiting for her husband to come back from the Army) but the puzzle of the Thorwalds, an R2 that is inconsistent in terms of Detective Doyle's analysis: he drinks but not to drunkenness, is moderately successful, respected by his neighbors, never causes trouble. Going past these specs is, according to Doyle, not allowable in our society. Crime lies in a margin that is restricted ordinarily — it takes a warrant to search further.

This is the real case of voyeurism in *Real Window*. Jeff is not a voyeur except in two senses: (1) as immobilized, he has nothing better to do than watch his neighbors, who voluntarily display intimacies of their daily lives because of the heat (in this he is a model for own own movie-watching behavior); and (2) as a dead soul, he can travel anywhere, watch anything. He is an invisible spirit not recognized by his neighbors, only one of whom looks back. Jeff's point of view is the *objet petit a*, the object-cause of desire for Thorwald, although the desire is the negative form of an evil eye who has seen him kill and dismember his wife.

Jefferies "does not know he is dead," and this ignorance is transferred to the audience who sees him as a normal character in a film, alive from beginning to end. This is not an "interpretive" issue. There is no question in deciding whether or not Jeff's initial accident was fatal. Rather, all narrative, because they have a beginning, middle, and end, relate directly to the Lacanian category of "between-two-deaths"; all relate to the rules of the death drive. Only in a few films is there an overt gesture made to acknowledge this connection. This could be one of them; at least it's more interesting to think in these terms.



**The Discourse of Analysis.** Probably more than any other film, *Rear Window* depends on its status as a form of discourse. The subject, a candidate for the genre of narrative known as the death narrative, oscillates from the position of a viewer (other) to that of a master of exposition, where the set of signifiers, S2, occupies the position of truth. This set can be regarded as the collection of clues that add up to Thorwald's guilt, the composition of apartments and their occupants that are reconciled at the end, or the final, second "death" of Jeff, as he enters into a convalescence with two broken legs and Lisa as a permanent companion. The master signifier of the circular process is the wedding ring, the counterpart to the circular lens of Jeff's surveillance and signifier of the  $\sqrt{-1}$  of the name. A wedding ring without a wife is equivalent to Jeff's mirror-name, Jeff(ery) Jefferies. "Jeff" repeats the name of the father, i.e. the child is "nobody new."