It’s easy to imagine Alfred Hitchcock sighing, playfully exasperated, as he quips: “I am a typed director. If I made Cinderella, the audience would immediately be looking for a body in the coach” (qtd. in Harris 5). This rueful observation suggests his awareness of—and amusement with—the level of audience expectation attached to his work. Indeed, an educated viewer walks into a Hitchcock film with a certain idea of what a “Hitchcock film” will contain—suspense, intrigue, and plot twists because he has delivered them consistently in the past. Hitchcock toys with that anticipation: a pulsing drumbeat reveals a set of three curtained panels that obstruct our view of the scene. Slowly, teasingly, like curtains rising in a theatre, the swatches of fabric that have blocked our view rise out of the frame—until we track decisively forward with the camera, leaving the restraints of our window-view behind as we dip down into *Rear Window*.

The opening sequence to Hitchcock’s 1954 classic foreshadows a film that will pursue two agendas. The first, obviously, is to thrill. From the onset of that first drumbeat and the tantalizing promise of something hidden behind those curtains, Hitchcock has us poised like detectives, ready to unravel a mystery crafted by The Master. And yet, before a murder—before a puzzle piece, before even a main character—Hitchcock introduces us to heat. A lazy camera movement guides us around the courtyard of a sweltering apartment complex, doused in a saturated, steamy color palette to heighten a sense of effortless sexuality. A dancer across the way prances about her apartment in only her underwear. A couple blearily wakes up to their incessant alarm, the heat so potent that they’ve resorted to sleeping outside. A thermometer tells us the temperature is through the roof. When we finally do meet photographer L. B. Jefferies, his eyes are closed and his forehead is doused in sweat: it is, indeed, unbearably hot.

This sweaty sauna of an apartment complex suggests an inherent, primal sexuality to *Rear Window*. Heat, Hitchcock seems to say, boils people down to their cores, both physically and emotionally, stripping away layers of social
norms as quickly as it does clothing. It is interesting that this heat, with its connotations of sexual tension, is what enables Jefferies to indulge his infamous voyeuristic tendencies. Bed-ridden by a broken leg, he lives vicariously through his neighbors, fascinated by their day-to-day struggles and triumphs. In some ways, he is more interested in exploring their personal lives than fostering his own relationship with socialite Lisa Fremont, played by the ever-glamorous Grace Kelly. Stella, his nurse and the other major female character in the film, laments that “we have become a race of Peepin’ Toms”; and, indeed, it seems that Jefferies embodies a new generation of voyeurs.

Forgive the comparison, but in watching *Rear Window* I can’t forget an iconic scene from *Animal House*, the cult classic that it seems most college fraternities are still trying to emulate. Desperate for a glimpse of the sorority women disrobing above him, John Belushi’s character pulls a ladder up to the side of the sorority house and peeps through the window. We, the audience, peek with him into a world of beautiful women—without any consequences. Just as we do with Jefferies, we write Belushi off as harmless; in the context of a sex-charged college romp or a suspenseful mystery, the motif of the voyeur adds a layer to the farce or intrigue. On some level, though, by exempting characters like these from punishment or judgment, we run the risk of glorifying the concept of “peeping” altogether. That risk invites an uncomfortable reevaluation of the way we detach, or even excuse, cinema from our normal societal conventions.

Of course, the playful use of voyeurism is where I draw the line in terms of similarities between the films—and even then, their approaches to the topic can’t exactly be equated. That said, the movement of two such different films towards voyeurism as a tool for entertainment speaks to a more deeply ingrained trend in cinema. Laura Mulvey, in her breakthrough psychoanalytical study “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” posits a “scopophilic instinct”: the special pleasure we take in looking at another person as an erotic object. In an arguably patriarchal industry, she continues, film assumes the image of woman as “raw material for the active gaze of man” (843). Sexism in the film industry is old news, and Mulvey explores why this cinematic convention has been allowed to thrive for so long. “Going far beyond highlighting a woman’s to-be-looked-at-ness,” she claims, “cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself . . . cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire” (843).

“An illusion cut to the measure of desire”—it’s a phrase I stumbled over on my initial reading and one I continue to stumble over now. If anything, it
seems to name the entire glorified nature of our Hollywood construct—a sparkling world of deities we might sometimes call actors but never people, and films we might sometimes call stories but never realities. Cinema, it seems, is “an illusion” that we carefully create for ourselves to channel our own primal desires. As the curtains of Rear Window’s opening credits rise off the screen, we can’t help being excited. We’ve paid a hefty ticket price for another mystery to solve, another story to immerse ourselves in and pretend we are a part of. We condone voyeurism because we, as audience members, are voyeurs ourselves, seeking out pleasure in the lives of others for the cheap thrill of pretending their thrills are our own.

Hitchcock, however, seems to scold us for our readiness to forgive these voyeuristic tendencies. In Stella’s stern reproach of Jefferies, we hear his reproach of our own desire to experience without consequence, to indulge without contributing, to encourage this new race of “Peepin’ Toms.” Avi Spivack states in his essay on the 50th anniversary of Rear Window that Hitchcock was always, first and foremost, “a director about character and psyches.” Jefferies is no more a coincidental voyeur than Rear Window is coincidentally set during a heat wave; he’s a character serving a purpose, not only in the narrative construct of the film, but as a warning in Hitchcock’s exploration of our primal desires.

Indeed, Jefferies offers an inversion of the myth of Echo and Narcissus, in which Narcissus is punished for repulsing Echo’s love by being made to fall in love with his own reflection in a pool. He wastes away as he gazes obsessively at himself, unaware of the world around him. Stella’s warning comes to mind as a converse: Rear Window’s fascination with oppressive heat, with strained sexuality, and with “Peepin’ Toms” would seem to warn us against taking excessive pleasure in the lives of others.

If we place Narcissus and L. B. Jefferies at the extremes of a spectrum, then the middle ground is an interesting area to explore. Both characters, because of their respective fascinations, gradually detach themselves from their ability to love. Narcissus rejects Echo, and L. B. Jefferies is reluctant to delve any deeper into his relationship with Lisa. This reluctance suggests that investing too much in either the self or the outside world can be detrimental to their synthesis: to romance, and, to some extent, relationships in general. We seem to be exploring not just voyeurism in Hitchcock’s hot, steamy world, but the ways in which voyeurism detracts from our desire for meaningful interactions with others. We begin to prefer immediate gratification over commitment, indulgence over long-term results. Lisa offers Jefferies a long-term relationship that demands maintenance and stability, but he clear-
ly prefers the easy entertainment of spying on his neighbors. Indeed, Jefferies’s aversion to marriage with Lisa is a perversion of his own voyeurism—he is content to indulge in the lives of his neighbors rather than cultivate a loving bond in his own home. Perhaps, then, Hitchcock is warning us not just against voyeurism, but also against becoming desensitized to the value of human relationships.

With that warning in mind, we can see the pitfalls of the “illusion cut to the measure of desire” (Mulvey 843). By experiencing our desires through illusion, we run the risk of neglecting the actual work needed to achieve them in our lives. We gravitate toward the easier option of vicarious experience because it is faster, less risky. It also means that we can be selective in what we experience, perhaps to the extent that we avoid the consequences of our desires altogether. Through voyeurism, we can experience love without heartbreak, life without death, inspiration without the frustration of hard work. Initially, it seems utopian. And yet, the more we invest in this other world, the more we grow detached from the reality that sparked our desire in the first place. We become Narcissus, unable to tear our gaze away from a pool that only grows shallower and shallower.

This danger begs the question: how can we come to terms with our own fascination with film, our own “voyeurism,” if that entertainment is detrimental to our personal lives? Have we reached the point where we are indulging excessively in a world of our own creation? If the answer is yes, we might wonder if there is an inherent danger to the art form itself. But Virginia Woolf, in her 1926 essay “The Cinema,” conveys a quiet faith in what was then a fledgling medium. Reminding us that those who say “everything has been said already” have “presumably forgotten the movies,” Woolf celebrates cinema despite its pitfalls, simultaneously wary of and excited by the medium’s awesome power. True, she admits, “at first sight the art of the cinema seems simple, even stupid” (217). It seems to pale in comparison to literature, where poetry, novels, and even words “are compact of a thousand suggestions of which the visual is only the most obvious or upper-most,” where we must complete the suggestion with our own thought (219). Film, in contrast, allows us to be passive, to watch without engaging our minds. We might consider voyeurism to be one form of this passive watching, a self-indulgent activity in which “the eye licks it all up instantaneously, and the brain, agreeably titillated, settles down to watch things without bestirring itself to think” (217).

But Woolf does not believe the medium has to be so limited. Cinema, she tells us, “has within its grasp innumerable symbols for emotions that have so far failed to find expression”; film can depict, through image and impression,
what words alone cannot. Because “so much of our thinking and feeling is connected with seeing,” films can elicit powerful reactions in our conscious and subconscious minds (219). And if we take the time to trace these reactions, then even our voyeuristic approach to film possesses the potential for meaning, for fulfillment, for dialogue. By dialogue, I don’t mean the standard conversational exchange between two characters. I mean a dialogue of interpretation—a conversation through which an audience member can dive into meaning rather than forever remain the unquestioning voyeur. Film, as a synthesis of so many aesthetics—the visual, the auditory, the emotional, the physical—intimidates our normal urge to analyze, to ask why. We risk falling prey to the personal detriment Hitchcock warns against only if we take pieces of cinema in stride, if we are content to let this art form remain as “fully-clothed” as Woolf claims it is. The audience is the component that allows cinema to arrive at its full potential; by contenting ourselves with remaining as spectators, we do a disservice to the pieces that are trying to challenge and provoke us.

Hitchcock slyly alludes to this “dialogue” through the arc of his hapless hero. As his suspicion of a murder in the apartment complex builds, Jeffries’s voyeurism becomes a tool for achieving a goal—solving a crime—rather than a bad habit born out of boredom. The transition has clear effects on other aspects of his life: perhaps most importantly, it unites him with Lisa in an attempt to solve the puzzle. The final, riveting minutes of the film see Jeffries forced to confront the murderer, Thorwald, in his own apartment; and it is the intrusion of the world of his voyeurism into the world of his personal life that finally forces him to take action. Voyeurism turns into passive spectatorship, which turns into puzzle-solving, which finally results in active involvement.

On many levels, this journey parallels our own journey through the film. Returning to that first snapshot of *Rear Window*—a steamy apartment complex, bathed in the summer heat wave—Hitchcock puts us through the same paces as Jeffries. He sedates us with heat, drains our itch to engage by offering us easy entertainment, then slowly, gradually, reintroduces to us the thrill of solving a mystery. We eagerly put together the puzzle, strain our senses for clues, peek behind curtains for whatever might lie past them. The tricky part, though, is maintaining that level of involvement after the credits have started to roll. If we can somehow continue the dialogue—perhaps even make it our own—cinema becomes less a window to peer out from, and more a lens to see through.


