

The Retroactive Structure of *Rear Window*

Alfred Hitchcock's 1954 masterpiece, Rear Window, gives away its secret in its title and opening credits.¹ We are going We are not inside somewhere looking out but outside what we thought was an inside looking in. This is a topology that Hitchcock will pursue until he has gone in a full circle of consequences of this reversal, so the guiding figure of this film will be an "interior 8," a circle that folds in on itself, a circle that has not so much distinguished an inside from an outside as it has folded inside and outside themselves over each other. Topology doesn't explain Rear Window, it IS Rear Window, and Rear Window is one of the many names by which film teaches us how to desire.



Figure 1. "Jeff" (L. B.) Jefferies, sweating in the summer heat wave that is driving his neighbors to expose themselves to open air and open view. After a pan around the courtyard space, the camera gives a close-up of Jeff's face and the thermometer reading 94° F. This is the film's "natural history," a justification for intruding on private lives *via* the willingly open windows that merge with the convention of the fourth wall of cinema, the imaginary opening where audiences take the place of camera and crew on the interior set.

Rear Window opens in a way that repeats the audience's generic experience of any film, at least in the days when audiences watched films in darkened auditoriums, popcorn in hand. The screen brightens from the energy beamed out from the projection room, energy that takes shape with colors, edges, shapes, like figures out of fog, accompanied by music, voices, sounds that lend credibility to the motions on the screen. If something should fall and break, we will hear it smash and cringe if it was a

valuable museum piece. If an object whizzes past, our stereo ears will synch up to the stereo of the Doppler Effect and imagine that it's passing us for real. On the screen we know to be flat, we get cues of depth that allow us to be pulled forward into the reality of the screen's depths. The camera moves, looks around, so do we. It sees a world that, in *Rear Window*, for the next 112 minutes, will be our world. It is our "rear window," looking inward, to our own imaginative capabilities, rather than outward.

When the transfer is complete, we will tilt out of our seats into a virtuality not unlike the life of the interior urban courtyard simulated to be in south Manhattan, 125 West Ninth Street (fictional), based on an actual courtyard at 125 Christopher Street in Greenwich Village. The area around Sheridan Square is well known to the Gay Community, because it's the location of the Stonewall Bar, scene of an uprising of gay and lesbian bar patrons against the violent police intrusion June 28, 1969. If there is something of a vortex in this part of New York, where meetings with the north-south grid (3–8th Avenues) and enlarged east-west streets (6, 14, 23, 34, 42, 59) continue the theme of transgression begun when it began at Terrytown, home of the famous fiction writer Washington Irving, who wrote sensational ghost stories. If you are into geo-

¹ Graham McAleer, "Jacques Lacan: Psycho-Analysis and Fashion," December 2, 2017. URL: <https://ethicsoffashion.com/jacques-lacan-psycho-analysis-fashion/>

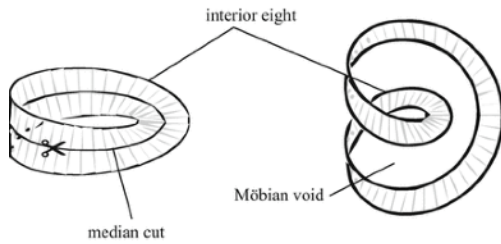


Figure 2. The interior 8, derived from the Euler circle's "inability" to show an intersection as an overlap (and thus it creates an "interior/exterior void") can be created by cutting a Möbius band along its median line, revealing that the band is simultaneously 360°, 720°, and 180°. At the band's "join" (where we connect the two ends with a twist) the mark made on one side connects to the dot on the other, but only after an additional circuit is made. The median cut produces the 8, an "inside that is an outside" and *vice versa*.

psychics, the 31 miles between "Sleepy Hollow" and Broadway's terminus at State Street in Bowling Green is more than enough time for Broadway to pick up sympathetic vibes from the Hudson River, its fluid companion on the journey south.

The courtyard the camera takes us into in the opening of the film seems to be a kind of anywhere.² There are two rear windows, the first being the film with this name, the other being the actual fenestration of the studio apartment of Jeff Jefferies, an action photographer who has been disabled by a recent accident. Possibly mocking this double situation, the opening credits of the film happen while the bamboo screens of the photographer's windows are gradually raised in three parts, like a theater curtain. If "all the world's a stage," this is a stage with a stage inside it, and the mirroring of our spectation with the interior theatrics of this urban courtyard will set the tone for what will be a geometry puzzle as well as a "whodunit."

The "any" of the film makes it easier for us to grasp quickly and identify with it, no fuss. We know what a heatwave is, but we might not think precisely how the heat makes a section cut into the courtyard space. Like the architectural section drawing that pretends to install a transparent fourth wall, the private lives of the residents become visual property. One could call this a "thermal section." It's too hot to close the curtains let alone the windows. Private sounds and private scenes are freely given in exchange for a cool breeze, if there's one to be had. Heat waves are not street-specific. They blanket whole areas, whole regions. They are, in Romance language, a spirit and duration (*temps*) as well as a weather condition. But, in English as well as French and Italian, the idea of tempo is involved. Broadway begins its tidal awareness at the Tappan Zee, the point where its angle straightens out for the rush south to the Upper Bay, then the Lower Bay, then the Atlantic. Like a pulsing heart, the Hudson and its street companion Broadway, must pick up something on their way to this triangulated joint in South Manhattan where the island's lines join at a vertex: a beat, a timing, an expectation.

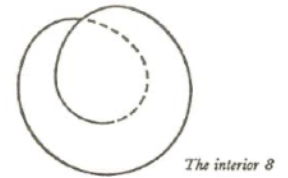
When a system is disturbed, it gets a fever; and cities are no different from mammal bodies, but in reverse. The fever becomes a cause, not just an effect. Heat creates a tempo, a style, a sense that something is going to happen, that it *must* happen. In Greek, *lexis* (style) is contrasted with *phasis* (the sentence that states something meaningful). Normally *lexis* is subordinate; it dresses the sentence with the right words and phrasing to please the audience, so that the meaning of *phasis* does not get misunderstood. But, in a heat wave, we forget about the project of meaning and just try to get by. We adjust our style, we slow our pace, we open our windows to let in some air. *Rear Window* begins by looking at a window, then opening it. It puts *lexis* before *phasis*. What we see out of a window becomes less important than the *act* of throwing open the blinds and cranking open the casements (Jeff's windows crank outward, his bamboo screens roll upward). We can't afford to ignore the first five minutes when this happens. It is Hitchcock's way of stating

² In fact, the set for *Rear Window* was built entirely indoors, built inside a gutted interior at Paramount Studios in Hollywood, North Los Angeles. Jefferies' apartment was set at the original floor level; the courtyard and a level below to handle simulated rainwater had to be excavated.

that he is using *lexis* to structure *phasis*, style (weather, tempo) to re-structure the otherwise conventional meanings brought about through closure of the sentence.

Criticism works in two different modes: (1) by cutting into the work, finding an “inside view” of the operating principles in the form of details or hidden tricks; and (2) a criticism “by punctuation,” which is how the work of art attempts to “tie things up,” how it asserts its wholeness and structural integrity. Where criticism by the cut prefers *lexis* because style is a way of concealing insider tricks, criticism by punctuation treats the work of art as a kind of argument or statement, an appeal to meaningfulness. In *Rear Window* we get the chance to do criticism both ways. The heatwave works like a section, so we are justified in beginning with a criticism by the cut. But, courtyards also enclose, and so *Rear Window*’s single set is a kind of *phasis*. Like the sentence of language, we don’t know the what the beginning means until the end. We must return to the beginning once we reach the end to “repair” what we thought was happening at the beginning. This makes every attempt at closure into something temporal, something *retroactive*. The temporality of meaning is an origami experience, since moving backward to go forward, or forward to go backward, is a kind of palindrome.³ The palindrome’s principle is *plus ça change*: “the more things change, the more they will remain constant.” Palindromes constitute a buffer, an insulation, a binding. It works internally, so maybe glue is a better metaphor for the space of *Rear Window*.

When we watch a film or listen to any story, glue is what we expect. Glue ties the end to the beginning, so its chemical properties must be capable of binding two opposites. In Greek this is called *palintonos harmoniē*, an enduring binding. This is not opposite the more dynamic *palintonos harmoniē*, the force of retroaction, but rather its complement.⁴ You can’t have constancy without change, you can’t have heatwaves without the idea of weather, which is conceived of being, like the seasons, a circle that returns heat to cold to heat again, just as the annual cycle will have Christmas come but once a year. We can take anything one at a time, *palintonos*, as long as there is a cycle, a *palintropos* — the single/singularity and the cycle, the promise of restoration. This is the idea of the interior 8, the “Euler circle,” that is simultaneously inside and outside itself. Tempo is this pulse of movement/change, gauged against our expectations that things will eventually return to what they were. We go to sleep, we expect to wake up. We sweat during a heat wave, we know it won’t last forever. We go into a theater, we expect to come out again. Without such expectations, there is no architecture.



³ This aspect of numbers is called the “sigma value.” See a fascinating study of this effect with respect to 9 in Cecil Balmond, *Number 9: The Search for the Sigma Code* (Munich and London: Prestel, 2008). Amazon.com: “Number 9 tells the story of Enjil, a boy mathematician who is challenged by a spirit to solve the riddle, What is the fixed point of the wind? As Enjil searches for the answer, he and the reader embark on a journey through myth, legend, and religion. Enjil’s adventures lead readers to an appreciation of symmetry within asymmetry, classical ideas, and modern impulses. Along the way Balmond redefines arithmetic for the lay person and opens the gateway to further discoveries.”

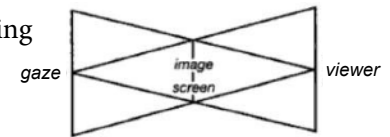
⁴ To get a sense of this, take a number series (1, 2, 3 ...) and reverse it (9, 8, 7 ...), putting the first over the second with a *continuous* line between (1/9, 2/8 ...). The two lines are *palin-tropic* but the cut between them is *palin-tonic*. The words *palintonos harmoniē* comes from architecture, the description of the joint fusing two different materials. The Japanese carpenter, keenly aware of the opposition involved with stasis, made sure to embed, within the complex geometry of every keyed connection between beams and columns, the capacity for movement, in order to resist changes of temperature or, worse, earthquakes. A rigid joint would fail, a joint that could internalize motion would succeed. This principle is not exclusively architectural. It was formalized by Hogarth in the famous S-curve, the “line of beauty.” William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty* (1772).



Figure 3. Stella (Thelma Ritter) lectures to Jeff (James Stewart) in the opening scenes of *Rear Window* (1954). The visiting nurse doesn't approve of Jeff's potentially invasive curiosity about the "bathing beauties" across the courtyard, seeing it as a delay of his destiny to marry Lisa Freemont, modeled (literally) on the famous 1950s successful business woman, model, and fashion consultant, Anita Colby. The resemblance between Grace Kelly and Colby is striking, and would have been noticed by the audience. She was featured on the January 8, 1945 cover of *Time Magazine*, as "The Face."

The *sheltering function*, a condenser or capacitor whose walls squeeze distance into a dense material divider, has its own inside-outside rules, even for spiritual transactions. Anyone familiar with Asian space will be familiar with the apotropaic defense decorations present at most windows and doors. In the West we have mezuzas and welcome mats. Entry is conditional, even when it seems conventional. In a heat wave, however, where curtains must be raised and sashes thrown up, alternative precautions must be taken. This is the substance of the nurse Stella's lecture to the prone Jefferies. Medical insurance Jeff has through work with his magazine pays for her to come to give him a massage and take his temperature every day until he's out of his cast.⁵ Stella, like Sancho Panza, delivers everyday truths in the form of sayings. Jeff, like Don Quixote, resents her simplifications and over-generalizing but in the main accepts her position as authoritative. Later, when we meet the model (and model woman) Lisa Freemont, we realize that this is a feminist film, although it was at first

rejected by feminists, thanks to Laura Mulvey's mistake of identifying the gaze as masculine (in most cultures, it is feminine — allied with the evil eye) and reversing the direction of "scopic drive" defined by the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan in his definitive Seminar XI, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1964). The gaze actually comes *from* the object to the viewer (left to write on the little inset diagram), from a point that is impossible to see or locate, since wherever it is placed, it is always in the center, with equal amounts of visibility and invisibility on all sides. Mulvey repeated the error of a generation of (mostly) French film critics, from Christian Metz to Stephen Heath, who had assumed that the gaze originated in the *desiring, voyeuristic subject* and radiated out, like extromission, to the objects of desire — in particular the *woman* caught within the gaze of the man. In Lacan's teaching (which the theorists had seemingly misread), desire itself comes from the Other, a



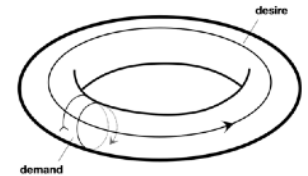
⁵ The cast on Jeff's left leg is the reason we know his name and the association between being laid up with a broken leg and being between what Jacques Lacan called "between the two deaths," the interval recognized in every culture between actual death and symbolic rest, generally calibrated to the time taken for flesh to mortify/desiccate. Following the custom of writing funny goodwill wishes on plaster casts, some wag has inscribed "Here lie the bones of L. B. Jefferies." Thus, we are given an unusually careful instruction in how to spell Jeff's last name, something which only a few critics seem to learn (the most common misspelling is "Jeffries"). Juhani Pallasmaa, for example, doesn't get this or much else straight in his several treatments of *Rear Window*, an early example of which can be found in *Chora 4*. Pallasmaa repeats Laura Mulvey's mistaken assignment of Jeff's curiosity to the male gaze, which reverses the direction of the Lacanian gaze she cites to justify this feminist critique. Many (mostly French) film critics did this, but Joan Copjec famously corrected them at a conference presentation where she traced the misunderstanding to Michel Foucault, whose analysis of Jeremy Bentham's famous Panopticon was, in fact, backwards. Pallasmaa doesn't stop with spelling errors, but makes a series of misidentifications, such as the statement that no one in the film wears green except Miss Lonelyhearts, the nick-name given the spinster Jeff and Lisa watch as she entertains imaginary men dinner guests. In fact, Lisa herself wears a clearly green dress she has brought home from her job in the *couture* world, and the fuss Jeff makes over it could not be missed by even the sleepest observer. Read Pallasmaa's reviews of this and other films if only to play a game of who can find the most errors of fact, reference, and/or meaning. See Mulvey's "The Pleasure of Looking and the Male Gaze in Hitchcock's *Rear Window* and *Vertigo*" to see how bad things get if one key detail is turned backwards or upside down, as Mulvey does with the gaze, which emanates *from a point INVISIBLE within the object of desire TO the observer*, not the other way around. For the correction, see Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1994).



Figure 4. Jeff and Lisa “at cross purposes.” Jeff pretends mastery while Lisa embodies it. This is the classic Lacanian contrast between imposture (Jeff’s position) and charade (Lisa’s). At the level of egos, these are the two options. Imposture, the typically “male” position, requires repetition-compulsion; charade is the hysteric’s preferred mode. Lisa is “hysteric” in the positive sense of continual self-transformation.

combination of an idea/ideal and a rotating collection of various embodiments that ideal. The subject, in this case, Jeff Jefferies, is in relation to this desire “one who makes demands, who asks questions, who *repeats* himself.” The model of this relationship was — significant for any understanding of *Rear Window* — the topological torus. The torus seems Euclidian: as a bicycle tire, it can be inflated or spring a leak. it has a definite inside and outside. On the other hand (literally), we can pinch the torus and, rotating our hand as we move it along the surface, define the lines that can divide the torus into two Möbius-shaped surfaces. Thus, the interior courtyard of *Rear Window* looks to be like any courtyard we might find in lower Manhattan, populated by the usual variety of New Yorkers hoping for a little privacy to keep their interior spaces inflated properly. However, the film shows that

this Euclidean shape is not what it appears to be. First, the “tire” goes flat when the heat wave forces everyone to open their curtains and windows. The airs from the outside and apartment interiors mix. This is the basis of Jeff’s casual voyeurism. He does not have to look hard to see into the lives of others. *Like us, who have paid to get into the movies, he sits and watches.* He is sitting a bit more than most. His broken leg has made him mimic the movie camera on a wheeled tripod. He can scoot around, rotate, extend a bit; but generally he is immobilized until he can get out of his cast. This is emphasized when he calls his boss at the magazine and told that he is not ready for a key assignment. His spirits fall flat at the same time the “bicycle tire” of the urban courtyard is hissing escaped air.



There is an official name for keeping things the same, by neutralizing any disturbance: “idempotency.” In IT lingo, idempotency is the design strategy to defend web servers from what are called “denial of service attacks,” when bot-created requests for a link or other resource are set to flood the system at a specific moment. Idempotency algorithms must deflect the attack by insulating the server, just as the dream deflects external disturbances in order to extend sleep as long as possible.⁶ The buffer function is, like the architectural wall, a condenser — another metaphor taken from electrical engineering. It insulates by compressing, just as a wall, by being dense, allows those on the inside to “buy time.” Think of a castle’s defensive wall, where threats can be spotted from long distances away, while the thickness of its walls force the attackers to compress their attacks. Distance, time, and force are combined in an almost mathematical way that is critical in the case of defensive insulation and isolation.

Jeff must be symbolically as well as literally paralyzed (at least his leg) to take time to heal. Clearly, he also has a cast on his pride, as he defends his youthful adventurous nature from Lisa’s attempt to domesticate him into a fashion photographer. In the background, we, like Stella, suspect that Jeff is afraid of getting married, especially to a woman who is clearly not submissive or in need of testing her talents in

⁶ Freud recounted the well-known account of Alfred Maury’s “event dream,” where an elaborate and seemingly lengthy series of dream events ended with a guillotine execution, when in fact the whole dream had been *initiated* by a piece of the metal bed frame falling on the neck of the dreamer. Freud speculated about how the event that technically triggered the dream ended up terminating it in the dream’s “story space.”

jungles. Lisa is “perfect,” Jeff complains, defending his masculinity as something that must be continually tested in life-or-death struggles to survive in hostile circumstances. Lisa notes that women have a harder job. As they watch “Miss Torso” deflecting advances by her boss at her house-party, Lisa notes that, far from enjoying “the good times,” Torso is doing a girl’s hardest and most dangerous job: defending against wolves.⁷ Hitchcock, if anything, had an eye for the attractive woman who, beneath her appealing appearance, had a calculating, courageous, and skill-based willingness to take on risks. In *Marnie*, *The Wrong Man*, *Psycho*, *Lifeboat*, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, *To Catch a Thief*, *Vertigo*, *The Wrong Man*, *I Confess*, *Stage Freight*, and perhaps others, it is the woman’s job to figure things out and act on that knowledge. *Rear Window* compresses this woman’s ingenuity theme into the last third of the film, where Lisa disobeys Jeff’s advice and breaks into Thorwald’s apartment to find the one object that will prove his guilt: Anna Thorwald’s left-behind wedding ring. This remainder is simultaneously a token of her victory over Jeff’s reticence and idempotency. It is not one ring, but two. It enclosed a finger, once; but now it connects Jeff’s apartment with Thorwald’s — an inner frame that becomes an outer, bounding frame. Just as the “rear window” had circled New York life with an inside frame, the inside used to insulate our consumption of the whole story of Jeff and Lisa, the wedding ring will become a Euler circle, which is to say, a *circuit* rather than a simple boundary between an inside and outside. Like the wedding ring that shows to others that one is married, Lisa shows her capture of the ring to Jeff and the audience, turning the ring into a trophy. The Euler property here is the way the two functions overlap without intersecting. The space that Venn circles would have had to share, in their function of representing Boolean logic, becomes instead a void, an impossibility.

The Two Geometries of Critique: the Cut, Punctuation

The style of critique that Lacanians call “criticism by punctuation,” looks at attempts to “tie things up” and find a necessary retroactive reference of the ending to the beginning. The origami fold of time is, in Lacan-world, called the *après coup*, the “realization after the fact.” This is the double take, the “duh” result of every joke where we get the punch line and think “I *should* have thought of that!” Why “should”? What is in the structure of the joke that makes us feel an intellectual obligation “to have seen it coming”? Obligation is personally felt, but it is felt to be something more general: a structure lying within signifiers where all the clues are given but in a covert, occulted way, to the extent that we imagine that things of great importance are hidden *from* us. The upside of this impish if not malicious concealment is that there is sometimes, as is the case with a joke, the implicit promise that what has been hidden will be revealed. This temporality is refined and perfected by the work of art, even the seemingly a-temporal arts such as painting and architecture where concealment and revelation are like the clock wound up in order to tick until it chimes at midnight.

In the story, particularly the mystery story, there is the concept of “playing fair.” Unless clues are there, open to all, “in plain view” so to speak, the author of the mystery story has been honest with the reader. It

⁷ We see later that Miss Torso is actually married to a G. I. who, when he returns, goes straight for the refrigerator. Her living as a dancer is doubly difficult, in that being successful involves projecting a persona demanded by the audience but unworkable for a peaceful home life. Lisa’s paradigm, Anita Colby, was said to be just as hard-working, and just as ambiguously dependent on her appearance (nickname: “The Face”). Hitchcock was aware of Colby’s reputation, and assimilated it within his model of crafty and daring women who, willing to risk reputations and even their lives, find themselves in the position of helping men who are disabled (Marion Crane, who steals money from her boss’s safe to help her lover, Sam Loomis, get out of a divorce-related debt). See Dan Collins, “Stealing Money from Offices,” *Lacunæ* 16 (2018): 105–124.

is even possible to vary this regulation as Hitchcock does, by having the audience know from almost the beginning who has committed a crime but withholding key evidence, such as the wedding ring in *Rear Window*, or the chest containing the body in *Rope*. In *Vertigo* we do not understand the givens of the crime until we see that what we took to be two separate women were actually the same person; so in effect the sufficient clues are both given and not given. *Shadow of a Doubt* names the suspense we still have to face even if we have the answer before us. The audience knows well in advance of the young Charlotte Newton that her uncle is a murderer, but we sympathize with her in her stubborn belief that her beloved Uncle Charlie is her older male twin, someone she would like to copy, experienced in worldly adventures and charm oozing from every pore. But, the double is a shadow, and the shadow darkens. We, the audience, must see niece Charlie nearly killed to certify this shadow as a solid specter, willing and ready to kill her by throwing her from a train (cf. another “Lady Vanishes”).



Figure 5. Lisa switches from the adventure book, *Beyond the High Himalayas*, to her favorite fashion magazine, published by the same company where Anita Colby worked as an ad executive. This is “criticism by punctuation,” confirming what had been argued at the beginning of the film at the same time Lisa’s superiority is affirmed, but it is also a cut between two publications, a sign that Lisa knows, more than most, how to “keep up appearances.”

Are the mystery story’s rules of the game a matter of criticism by punctuation? This would surely seem to be the case, since at the end of the story we will have realized that, at the beginning, what we were missing had been in full view all the time. At the same time we fold the forward time of diegetic story-telling over the latent memory features that we had known without realizing (= *kenosis*, a Greek term that, since at least 200 b.c.e. has been used in the same way for the same thing), however, we install and power up an interior feature, a *cut*, that allows for this division of what–we–don’t–know from what–is–in–front–of–our–noses. This cut relates, generally, to the inside frame of the urban courtyard reputedly located at the non-existent 125 W. 9th Street. Just as it was forbidden by the Hayes Code to represent actual addresses in fictional films, it is forbidden by the much older code of the arts to move forward without a line to separate diegesis from retroactive

recovery, in the final stage of apotheosis, where meaning-fullness surpasses the simple additive accumulation of separate meanings.

In art, the end should not correspond to whatever the audience can easily guess. This is the principle of the *anacoluthon*, the trick ending. This is the “twist plot,” for which Hitchcock was famous. It was made famous in American literature by writers such as Ambrose Bierce (“An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,” 1890) and William Sydney Porter, pen-name, O. Henry. In his most famous tale, “Gifts of the Magi,” 1905, O. Henry presents us a couple barely able to make ends meet in New York. The husband yet wishing to give his wife something for Christmas, sells his only treasure from his father, a gold watch, to buy a set of ornamental combs for her still-magnificent cascade of hair. His wife, however, has cut and sold her hair to be able to buy a gold chain for her husband’s watch. The gift becomes more than the exchange of two independent gifts. Each gift has annihilated the other, but in this negation the gift takes on the value of the *agalma* of the Magi.

The chiasmus of self-cancelling gifts uses the ancient logic of the double, twins, rivals. In *Vertigo* (1958) chiasmus is elaborated as the device of one actress (Kim Novak) playing two women, who are playing the role of a woman who is herself an actress playing two women. Anahita Shadkam and I have compared this trick to the famous 19c. toy, the thaumatrope, a round disk suspended on a twisted chord that, when spun, combines the images painted on *recto* and *verso*.⁸

Thaumatropes are ancient. They have been found in Magdalenian caves in France, with a living animal etched on one side of a bone disk, the same animal dead on the other. The holes of ancient thaumatropes were punched in the center, unlike the edge-positioned holes of the 19c. examples. The stone-age disk's hole was precisely at the point where the spear was to pierce the animal, so one anthropologist (Marc Azéma) has speculated that the spinning disk was, like the prayer wheels of Tibetan monks, an automation of a spell to insure the success of the hunt. The punctuation (a kill) is prefaced by the cut (the punch and spin to combine the two images).



More radically, I would claim that the thaumatrope's cut between its two sides compares to the cut between the two lines of the numerical palindrome, so that the disk amounts to a *tesseræ* that is permanently attached at the same time it is permanently separated. This is the logic of *après coup*, to be a part in one sense and alienated and separate in another. At the end of *Rear Window*, we have the couple, Jeff and Lisa, "together at last." She seems to be reading an action-adventure book from Jeff's shelves,

Beyond the High Himalayas, by William O. Douglas, a supreme court justice known for his opinions on the rights to privacy (Hitchcock doesn't miss a trick!). But, as soon as Jeff snoozes off, she dumps the Douglas book in favor of the latest issue of Harper's *Bazaar*.

What is the cut? Is it the twisted chord that spins the thaumatropic image, is it the ring that flips from being an interior frame to mapping Thorwald's around-the-block way of finding Jeff's apartment? Is it the flash-bulb blinding that Jeff uses to keep Lars at bay before being thrown out of the window? Is it the gapped circle of the urban courtyard whose small opening onto 10th Street gives us backstories for Thorwald's nocturnal errands and Miss Lonelyhearts' failed trysts? Is the cut a Möbius surface, made 2-d from 3-d thanks to the twist that reaches the join at just the right time, like the watch chain and hair combs in *O*. Henry's story or the discovery of the escaped prisoner in Bierce's "Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" that he was killed but he just didn't realize it yet?

The cut of course is the spin, the twist, the concealed detail, the time when Jeff, trying to watch Thorwald carefully in the wee hours, falls asleep to miss his return with Anna's dressed-in-black rival. The cut is all of these things, as well as being a cut like any other, made by the tools we see Thorwald cleaning in his kitchen after butchering his wife. Her

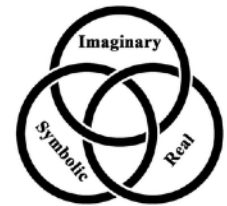


Figure 6. Athanasius Kircher, "Pan," *Cedipus Ægyptiacus*. 1650.

⁸ Anahita Shadkam and Don Kunze, "Is the Alethosphere Not the Perfect Place to Hold a Pandemic?" *Film and Psychoanalysis* (conference), March 27, 2021.

body after all is *dis-membered*. It is converted into a set of part-objects that are mostly dumped in the East River (why not the Hudson?). Police Lieutenant and war-buddy of Jeff's Tom Doyle asks the nurse—Sancho, Stella, if she would like to see the hatbox containing Anna's head, which the dog ("who knew too much") had threatened to dig up: "No thanks, I don't want any *part of it*."

In early cultures, the disassembly of a god or god's representative, the body of the king or a substitute fool, constitutes a sacrificial challenge that instigates a panic. The god Pan, in fact, is a "meroiic" device, a body linked 1:1 to the cosmos: hooves to the earth, midriff to the horizon, chest, head, and horns to the heavens (Fig. 7). In the indexical body, there is a one-to-one correspondence, what is called bijection in logic and "bi-univocal concordance" when we speak of a code's substitution of a unique single sign to a disguised signifier. Bijection is what a Venn diagram does, showing overlap and conjunction. In contrast, an Euler circle shows that this is "impossible in real life" or rather "impossible to *symbolize* in our day-to-day reality but by no means everything there is. In fact, what *cannot be symbolized* or *spoken of* constitutes the most important component of human existence. Lacan labeled this the Real, and noted that the Real was, fundamentally, the sum total of resistances within the Symbolic of language and other semiotic systems. This is a backwards definition, a negative account. It asks us to look in the refuse bin to find what is in fact most important to us. This is what Freud discovered, the Unconscious as the totality of what we deny, repress, fail to see, or that which language ("the Symbolic" is Lacan's generic name) refuses to accept. Positively, the Real is the trauma, which everyone experiences, like it or not (generally not), but subsequently cannot articulate or even remember in any normal way. The Real *haunts* and *threatens*, but it fails to appear in any form we can readily define. As Freud found out in his case work, it is possible and even likely that we don't even know a trauma is happening when it is happening. Its effects may not be felt for years, until we have a symptom or anxiety we cannot assign to any rational source. The Wolf Man, for example, experienced a shocking encounter with his parents' copulation that, at the time, did not seem to phase him. He was instead disturbed by a dream, of seeing wolves perched in a tree outside his bedroom window. It took Freud



considerable time to figure out that the dream had replaced the shocking experience and created anxiety in the place of the actual trauma, the cause.



Figure 7. Is the smashed camera we see in the first minutes of the film an indicator that Jeff has survived or died?

In *Rear Window* there is a trauma that is not mentioned directly, but we have abundant evidence spread before our eyes: the parts of a smashed camera (Fig. 8), a photo showing a race-car wheel hurtling through space at the photographer, a man in a wheel-chair and a cast on his leg. We can put two and two together, but the question we seem unable to ask, because this is a film about a living person with problems like the rest of us, *is this man really alive?* Did he possibly die at the race course? Is the story we watch not really the dream he had in the last seconds of life,

attempting to resolve his life's shortcomings, by inventing a set of encrypted events and agents, to disguise his death dream as a "real life story" so engaging that he would not possibly guess it to be his last?

The death-dream device is the extreme case of the literary device known as the “unreliable narrator.” The unreliable narrator is unreliable on behalf of creating a space beyond the narrator’s awareness, a virtuality analogous to perspectival virtuality but different in a number of critical ways. First, this virtuality *exactly matches, edge to edge* with what is visible, what is “presented in evidence.” If the evidence shifts, so does the shadow it creates. In geometry this feature is called perspectivity, but it is not Euclidean perspectivalism, where unseen sides are mentally added to visible sides because we can easily walk around things to inspect what was previously unseen, or shift our point of view even slightly to convince ourselves that the visible world is not made up of flat stage-props. What guarantees the depth of our visual field, parallax, does not exist for projective perspectivity, because the “shadow” in projective geometry is radically un-inspectable. It is the interval we are in once we allow the possibility that Jeff’s troubles after his accident at the racing event are really being experienced in the second before death. We have abundant evidence that dying people actually have such experiences, that in what is a few second to those around them is lived within fractions of seconds as their mental awareness prepares them for death.

The possibility that Jeff is dreaming a death-dream cannot be dismissed. Even though it is a literary device, dating back to Plato’s account, “The Myth of Er,” retold in *The Republic*, we have no way to refute it as evidence of a dream able to confront the personal past to “fix things before it is too late.” Jeff has things to fix: his delusions of continuing his wartime adventures into middle age related to his unwillingness to recognize the traumas of wartime by converting them into tests of manhood. These are summed up in his rocky relationship with Lisa, summed up by Stella’s morality tales. If Jeff has only a few seconds, lying on the race track ground, to make things right, he has to do it in terms of something external to these problems, something that concentrates his failure to love Lisa properly into an antipodal figure whose failure goes to the extreme of murder. The spatial externality will match the intensification of dissatisfaction as betrayal, murder, and dismemberment. Thorwald is the antipode of Jefferies, a twin who must be placed at a *maximal distance* just as he must be *maximally different*. The antipodes of Jeff and Thorwald convert the ordinary interior courtyard into an Euler circle, which fails at precisely the point where it encounters the unspeakable. It can identify the void: it is a *vesica pisces*, a lozenge-shape such as that found in Medieval representations of the Virgin Mary. Lacan even has his own version, a symbol he calls the *poinçon* or “punch,” the shape made by the train conductor’s device to authenticate and nullify passengers’ tickets. The train in this case becomes the boat that ferries the dead across the Styx to Hades, piloted by Kharon (Χάρων), a. k. a. Hermes, god of boundaries and messenger, keeper and revealer of secrets.

The punch in space that is Jefferies’ interior courtyard maintains the distance between its antipodes using two methods. The first is Jeff’s idempotent status as crippled. His wheelchair prevents him even from reaching the binoculars on a peg above the landing in front of his door. His cast has made him like the early cameras of cinema production, too heavy to move easily, sets were made to move in front of them. The same condition is imposed on the movie-goer, who must sit still in a darkened auditorium and not make noise, lest the ushers evict him/her. This idempotent state reverses the figure-ground relation we enjoy in Euclidean space. Able to walk around, shift our points of view, we are content knowing that the things we can’t see from one position could be easily seen from another, if we took the effort to move. In the figure-ground reversal that takes place in dreaming, the sleeper is paralyzed, or almost. Total paralysis is a reality of deep sleep, but dreaming takes place in the REM sleep that happens just before and after this state. In REM sleep we can experience anxiety, even panic. Our sympathetic nervous system — the “fight

or flight” response — evens out our heart rate variability so that we are maximally ready to do either: kill or be killed. This is the buffer to allow us into the full paralysis of deep sleep, it is constructed by imagining conflicts, confrontations, motions, which we must experience by becoming the ground across which figures will be “projected,” as they were for Plato’s analogy of The Cave, in *The Republic*.

The sympathetic nervous system lives up to the principle of division that Empedocles devised the system of humors that is the first famous application of a “criticism by the cut.” Between hot and cold, wet and dry, this fifth century BCE philosopher used the analogy of Love and Strife, which we might from experience judge to be an thaumatrope, to spin off the Sanguine, Choleric, Phlegmatic, and Melancholic. All the humors but one were, reflecting this principle of division, balances between extreme states. One had to have *some* friendliness (blood), anger, and prudence; but too much would also spell disaster. The fourth humor, black bile, was judged to be poisonous in any amount. However, it was what infected a class that included lovers, poets, and madmen — Shakespeare’s familiar trilogy. In a writing once thought to be Aristotle’s, melancholy was shown to be essential for genius, the basis of the “acute thinking” required to conceive and produce anything creative. However, as Vasari’s *Lives of the Artists* seemed to take pleasure in showing, genius all too frequently ended in madness. In modern psychoanalytic terms, we would say that the artist, denied the cushion allowed to normal neurotics (trying just to get through the day) were forced to push the margin of “ordinary psychosis” to the failing point. The psychotic’s relation to language does not allow for ambiguity; rather, it constructs 1:1 correspondences, unmediated, and experiences this “bi-univocal concordance” as a kind of immediate pleasure (*jouissance*), so intense that it is not always possible

to distinguish from pain.

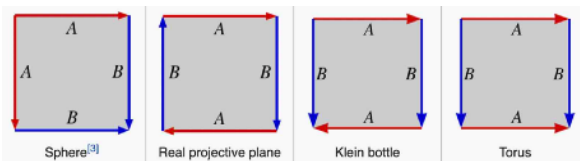


Figure 8. Four fundamental polygons, contrasting projective geometric (2-d) surfaces with the non-projective 2-d surface, the sphere. Where instructions require opposite edges to intersect, projective forms will intersect in opposition, \updownarrow .

If we were to live in the figure-ground reversal, sympathetic nervous system condition of paralysis, we would stand for a fight, and any flight would be experienced as the terror of wanting to run but being unable, something quite common in anxiety dreams. This situation is the design of the final encounter scene in *Rear Window*, when Thorwald discovers Jeff’s location when he sees Lisa gesture to him when she is caught with Anna Thorwald’s ring, holding in

her hands behind her back. Thorwald’s glance identifies Jeff’s apartment as the *locus* of his accuser. *He been seen* — the guilty suspicion of all who sin.⁹

In projective geometry, every line (more accurately, a one-dimensional subspace) is actually a line and a point. But, since the point is a vanishing point, and the point lies on a circular horizon, there is another vanishing point corresponding to the vector’s bi-directionality. The one is still “the one.” It will always be

⁹ For a funny edition of this, see Italo Calvino, *Cosmicomics*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt & Brace, 2000). The narrator is embarrassed to get a message from a source a hundred million light years away indicating that, two hundred million years ago, he had done something he was ashamed of but presumed that no one was watching. Jeff assumes the same insulation from the antipodal opposition separating him from Thorwald. He reasons that “he could not possibly be Thorwald, or murder anyone, let alone his wife,” but of course his antagonism of Lisa suggests that he has taken the first step. His small step, multiplied by the near-infinite distance of antagonism, gives him confidence in his invisibility. When this confidence is broken, it happens “in an instant.” And, when Thorwald completes the large circle around the Manhattan city block, he finds himself confronting a series of concentric circles “engraved” on his retina by Jeff’s flash-bulbs, compressing the last few steps between the antagonists into a Q&A iteration of pauses and advances.

“the one.” The vanishing point (division between the visible and invisible) is really an instruction to fold what seems to be a disk bounded by a circle, over — while twisting it — to make a “non-sphere” that is non-orientable at the same time it is self-intersecting (i. e. folded). This is the virtuality of effectiveness, which cannot be represented on a flat piece of paper except by presenting it in the form of *folding instructions* — what is called the “fundamental polygon.”¹⁰ What is amazing about *Rear Window* is that the plot, the characters, the themes, and the spaces of the film correspond *perfectly* to the rules of projective geometry, as if the film had been directed by David Herbert, Bernhard Riemann, or Hermann Minkowski (prominent geometers of the 19c.). Of course it wasn’t; it was directed by Alfred Hitchcock, but Hitchcock himself was aware of the principles of story-telling that were the equivalent of projective folding procedures. These also correspond to the two types of criticism employed in psychoanalysis, the “criticism of the cut” (distinction) and “criticism of the punctuation” (closure).

For distinction, fiction’s device is the “plot point,” made famous by script-reviewer and writer popular in all film programs, Syd Field. The plot point is the sudden shift of action, setting, or character that revises or even reverses audience expectation. Timing is critical. Field used to argue that, at the rate of one minute of screen time per page of script, a plot point should come before 15 pages have elapsed — longer, and the audience will become complacent. *Rear Window* is an exception. The first plot point doesn’t occur until Jeff notices something strange in the early morning hours in Thorwald’s apartment. Thirty-one minutes and 44 seconds into the film, Jeff hears a scream and the sound of breaking glass. We later see a reference to the diegetic time of the story: at 2:34:40 a.m., after dozing off, Jeff looks at his watch after noticing that Thorwald has left his apartment in the middle of a heavy rainstorm. This exceptionally long wait for the first plot point has been broken up. Jeff’s backstory (his injury and convalescence) has been embellished



Figure 10. The second and last plot point in *Rear Window*, Lisa’s signal across the courtyard to Jeff that she has found the ring and concealed it *en plein air*, on her own finger. This is a double cryptogram, saying to Jeff, “I think I earned this” at the same time “We’ve got the proof, now!” The film counter reads 1:41: 55.

with the nurse Stella’s witticisms and advice. Then, Lisa comes, to waken Jeff with a famous slow-motion kiss lit by the sun’s western decline. We get the light from her face reddening Jeff’s, a bi-directional blush. To treat her beloved, Lisa has arranged for a dinner from “21,” a famous fancy New York restaurant, to be delivered. Lobster is accompanied by a bottle of Montrachet, an expensive vintage.¹¹ After dinner, Jeff spars with Lisa over their relationship, indignant over her heavy investments, insistent on his dedication to hardship and adventure travel. This is a lot of exposition for the thirty minutes we have to wait before finding out that this is a murder mystery! But, it is clear that we need to see Jeff and Lisa not simply as a failed couple, but as partners in a crime of love that will be mirrored across the courtyard and brought to an entirely different, more fatal solution.

By the end of their dinner and contentious conversation, we are

¹⁰ For a somewhat confusing definition of the fundamental polygon that is, grudgingly, accurate, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fundamental_polygon

¹¹ The cheapest bottle of locally available Montrachet I could find costs \$60.00. However, a really good bottle (Domaine Jacques Prieur Montrachet 2018) would run you \$1,328.90.

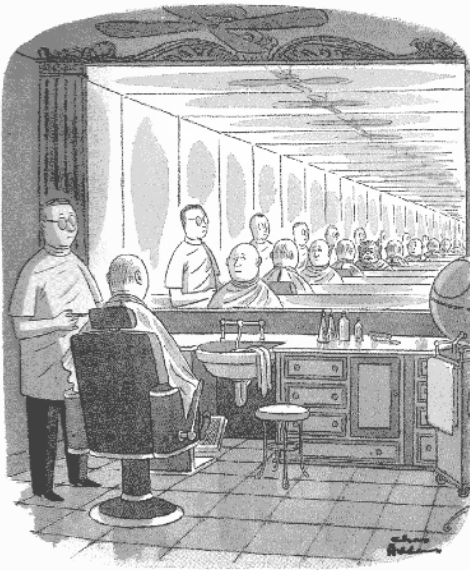


Figure 11. Charles Adams, “Barbershop Mirror, with Monster,” *The New Yorker*.

ourselves tired and ready to go to bed. Hitchcock “keeps us up past our bedtime” by stretching out the story line, finishing the “Jeff doesn’t love Lisa properly” theme with her departure, a goodbye that holds open the possibility of return. One hundred minutes into the film, about 70 minutes after the first plot point, Thorwald catches Lisa in his apartment and starts to rough her up, to Jeff’s horror as he watches helplessly in the dark. He’s called Doyle but the police seem to be taking forever (in film as in real life, “where are the police when you need them?”). When the police “finally” arrive, a new problem develops. Lisa is in trouble for breaking into Thorwald’s apartment and must be taken back to the station to be arraigned. Before that happens, she is able to signal to Jeff, showing him that she’s found the ring. But, this gesture attracts the unfortunate notice of Thorwald who returns Jeff’s look directly. While Jeff tries to settle things with Doyle, he inadvertently answers what he thinks is Doyle’s

return call, but it’s Thorwald calling to confirm Jeff’s apartment address. From this point on we wait on pins and needles for Thorwald to make his way around the block, enter Jeff’s unlocked door, and confront him, with the plan to kill him.

Jeff’s strategy is to blind Thorwald using his flash gun. In the darkened apartment, it will take Thorwald’s eyes time to adjust to the sudden blinding light. We experience the return of vision through simulated color washes over the film. We see things from Lars’ point of view, but of course it’s Jeff’s panic we feel. This is antipodal logic in action: the two “vanishing points” behave as one. Hitchcock directs as if he were David Herbert, Bernhard Riemann, or Hermann Minkowski.

You Only Die Twice

Jeff “dies” a second time when Lars Thorwald pushes him edge-wise out of the Rear Window. The camera angles suddenly shift. Not only is this the first time we have seen Jeff with his windows in the background and the camera on the dais of the entry, after the fall the camera is outside for only the second time in the film (the first involved a close up of Miss Torso accusing her neighbors of insensitivity to the death of the “dog who knew too much.” In that shot, however, we did not see Jeff’s apartment windows. This time a detective poke his head out to tell Doyle that Thorwald has confessed, and the locations of Anna’s body parts are disclosed. The fall has re-broken Jeff’s nearly-healed leg and broken the other, but this move from odds to evens seems to have restored his relationship with Lisa. The final scene shows the couple, Jeff in his wheelchair, Lisa on the couch. She is reading William O. Douglas’s accounts of his travel to Tibet and other highland areas of the Himalayas. Douglas’s authorship was a way of authenticating Jeff’s desires by proxy. (The Chief Justice had the additional luck of meeting the young Dali Lama.) But, as soon as Lisa is certain that Jeff has dozed off, she switches to Harper’s *Bazaar*, the same magazine where Anita Colby had been an advertising executive. This seems, in retrospect, to be a film almost as determined by doubles as *Shadow of a Doubt*, where there were two Charlies, two detectives, and a meeting in a bar called “Two to Two.”

If Jeff had really died the first time on the race track, this second death is fulfilling. Thanks to the antipodal wife-killer Thorwald, Jeff has managed to “work through” his problems with women. Whatever his suppressed fantasies had been, he has met with, and been forgiven by, the celestial Lisa. Happiness is contagious. The frustrated alcoholic composer has finished his masterwork (“Lisa”), Miss Lonelyhearts has come over to listen and flirt, and Mr. Torso has come back from his Army service. The couple with the dog Thorwald had killed for discovering the location of the buried head of Anna Thorwald have a new dog, and the temperatures are back down in the 70s. It’s a beautiful day in the neighborhood.¹²

Does “Rear Window” designate the film *Rear Window* or is it the element of Jeff’s apartment through which his optical adventure develops? This is a bit like Russell’s famous paradox, can there be a set that includes itself as member? We can imagine a catalog that boasts that it includes the titles of all other books, but if this is true it has to list itself as well. This is a simple matter until we wonder what the catalog of that book looks like. Does it also include the book that is inside itself? This is the *mise en abîme*, the bad infinity. *Rear Window* gets around this by involving the projective geometry of the torus, Möbius band, and inside-outside sphere that equates the city block with Anna’s ring and Lars the murderer with Jeff the bachelor. Even though we must leave these speculations to run in the background in order to enjoy the film, it is *because* they run in the background that we can *enjoy the film in the way that we are able to do*. It is a virtuality of effectiveness, without which the Rear Window would be a window and nothing more.

¹² I have not talked about the use of “environmental music” in the film. Instead of a music sound-track by Hitchcock’s favorite composer Bernard Herrmann, we hear music coming from radios, practicing sopranos, and drunken composers. The tune titles seem too good to be true: “Mona Lisa,” “Too See You Is to Love You,” and “That’s Amore” in carnivalesque organ-grinder style. Hitchcock’s cameo appearance shows him winding the clock in the composer’s studio; the soprano seems unwilling to hit the last note of her scale. Nor did I mention the humorous interlude of the just-married couple who move into an apartment to the left of Jeff’s view. At first they close the blinds, but soon enough they become accustomed to the married state and open the blinds. The film is richly detailed, but also well covered with detail-minded commentary. See Stefan Sharff, *The Art of Looking in Hitchcock’s Rear Window* (1977), John Belton’s *Alfred Hitchcock’s Rear Window* (2000), and the masterful overview, Tom Cohen, *Hitchcock’s Cryptonomies* (2005, two volumes). Robert Pippin’s *Filmed Thought: Cinema as Reflective Form* (2020) seems to me to be overly argumentative and tedious, but occasionally brilliant. It pays no attention to geometry, however. Juhani Pallasmaa’s various studies of Hitchcock films, *Rear Window* in particular, are unobservant, imperious, and wrong on so many counts that I cite them simply as a warning to any innocent reader. A Lacanian reading is especially attuned to Hitchcock’s talents. Slavoj Žižek has written about Hitchcock films in many places, but *What You Always Wanted to Know about Hitchcock but Were Afraid to Ask Lacan* is quirky and insightful. For a general way of reading films “psychoanalytically,” my favorite source is Todd McGowan’s *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan* (2007). There is an inventory of Hitchcock interiors by Steven Jacobs, who for all his eye for detail fails to understand the role of the heat wave: *The Wrong House: The Architecture of Alfred Hitchcock*. Inventories are always useful, however, even if Jacobs, like Mulvey and the French critics before her, get the direction of the gaze backwards.