

Paper # 2

Emblematic and Exceptional:

The Intersection of Industrial and Aesthetic Factors in Shaping *Rear Window*'s Significance

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The production and release of every film is undoubtedly influenced by a myriad of interweaving factors, but the circumstances precipitating Alfred Hitchcock's 1954 film *Rear Window* worked with particular importance to shape this film's production, promotion, and exhibition. Two factors of historiographical film inquiry in particular – the industrial and aesthetic/formal – worked in tandem to determine this film's significance, from the industry's recovery from the Paramount Case, strategic combat against the burgeoning allure of television, and Paramount's 1950's big picture business model, to the aesthetic norms of a mid-century Classical Hollywood Cinema, Hitchcock's own approach to formal experimentation, and the shifting role of genre and spectacle in 1954. The complementary interaction between these industrial and aesthetic/formal sets of influences, then, can be analyzed to have contributed causally to *Rear Window*'s significance at the time of its release – not only as joint contextual factors that circumscribed the significance of the film's creation, but as a complex network of communicative historical conditions that worked to maintain the industry's prowess in a time of change in American entertainment as well as to adapt to and anticipate the perceived needs of 1954's straying cinematic audience.

Before an examination can take place regarding the 1954 intersection of industrial and aesthetic factors that shaped the making and release of *Rear Window*, it is crucial to establish the historical context that resulted in the American film industry's position at that point in time. From the 1920's on, Hollywood had been dominated by the industry's studio system; this was an oligopoly of several Major and Minor studios that enjoyed a near-unrivalled control over the production, distribution, and exhibition of mainstream films in America. Major Studios exercised their advantages of vertical integration, run-zone-clearance, and forced block booking on independent or un-affiliated exhibitors, all in order to exploit their established power over American film as a business. Although this industrial norm persisted through WWII, during which Hollywood enjoyed

peak attendance from civilians' urban lifestyles and extra spending money, the industrial practices of the major studios shifted at the beginning of the 1950's in part due to the wake of the Paramount Case.

This case, otherwise termed *United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc.*, had begun in 1938 as an antitrust motion against the Major studios. Although the case was postponed through WWII, both for the priority that the war took as well as the cooperation that the US government required from studios' production of propaganda films, it was exhumed after the war. In 1948, the Court ruled that the Major studios' vertically-integrated ownership over production facilities, distribution, and theaters themselves constituted a "restraint of trade", and imposed the policies of divortement and divestiture to separate the Major studios from their affiliated exhibitors in an effort to free up the market for a segment of independent production (Gomery). Although this legal action failed to radically upturn the industry, the studio system of the 20's and 30's was definitively altered, and the studios' basic functions were changed, "as creators and performers signed contracts for specific projects, rather than the all-encompassing, exclusive contracts that had been the norm" (Gomery). Therefore, although Hollywood remained characteristically adaptive and resilient through the technical punishment inflicted by the Paramount Case, the domestic production market had been cracked open a bit. Not only did each film have to be sold on its own individual merit (thanks to the end of block-booking), but independent production was able to begin flexing its influence and consequently to widen the scope of filmic products (and corresponding aesthetic and market-based approaches) available to the early 1950's audience.

The Paramount antitrust lawsuit was not the only industrial factor that shaped the context of *Rear Window*'s production. This Case ushered in a new mode of production within the Major studios, who cut infrastructure and personnel and produced fewer films in a year, but it also occurred in conjunction with one of the most significant industrial challenges of the early 1950's – an

unprecedented decline in attendance. Although the advent of television is often cited as the sole cause of this phenomenon, it worked with an ensemble of factors that reinforced the popularity of this competitive new entertainment medium, one of these being widespread post-WWII suburbanization. With the return of veterans, Americans moved out of downtown city areas to the suburbs, the birthrate exploded, and families – now tied to a more home-based lifestyle – preferred the more instantly-accessible radio and television to a trip downtown where theaters were located, and spent money on family necessities like cars instead of weekly film viewings. The film industry was rocked during the late 40's and early 50's by this exodus of their target audience; as Douglas Gomery explains in his article, the “typical filmgoer of the past (a better-educated, richer, middle-class citizen) was a member of precisely the demographic that most embraced the suburban ideal”, so while this Hollywood Golden Age type of audience stayed home, the industry had to reorient its approach to mainstream filmmaking in order to exploit the new market of teens and young adults (Gomery). *Rear Window*, as will be analyzed, gains much of its significance from these resulting industrial efforts to approximate and cater to the 1954 audience – one that had been increasingly drawn more towards at-home entertainment as well as independent productions, exploitation films, and drive-ins, instead of the previously monopolistic Major studios.

The American film industry's strategies to re-capture a straying audience in the face of these examined challenges – and which shape *Rear Window*'s significance in the pursuit of this goal – are incarnated largely in the concurrent business strategies of Paramount Pictures, *Rear Window*'s parent production company, who – according to the post-Paramount Case role of Major studios – served largely as a financer of the project brought forth by Patron, Inc. The industrial strategies specific to this studio can ultimately be argued to work jointly with the multicontextual aesthetic influences (both from the studio norms and Hitchcock's unique approach) to shape *Rear Window* into a film that acts both as an emblematic example of mainstream Hollywood production at the time of its release,

as well as an innovative exception to the audience-targeting norms of the year. An analysis of the business strategies that craft 1954 industrial norms of the film's creation begins with Paramount's organization, which remained looser than that of the other Major studios from 1930-1950. In his book, Bordwell describes this set-up as a "director-unit system with a central producer system of planning and departmental centralization", which shifted in the late 40's wake of the Paramount Case enactment to an organization that was – by necessity of individual film merit – a focus on "film-by-film financing and planning" (Bordwell 328, 332). The new package-unit production that characterized the industry at the turn of the 1950's further intensified the general need of the Major studios to "differentiate the product on the basis of its innovations, its story, its stars, and its director" in order to cope with the prohibition on cranking out B films to force onto exhibitors (Bordwell 332).

Although the ban on block-booking and the increasing subtle presence of independent productions necessitated that Major studios differentiate each film product via the allure of its package components, Paramount's strategy appeared at first to run almost counter to this goal. Instead of setting its products apart by formal individualism, the studio instead focused on mainstream-catered, light entertainment. As Dixon describes in his book, the "typical Paramount film of the 1950s is an assembly-line product, designed to fit a predestined mold" that would estimate exactly what audiences wanted, no more and no less (Dixon 128). In addition to remaking many of their older films for significant financial success, Paramount turned their smaller collection of stars and directors into a box-office dominance of the industry through "genre-based franchise filmmaking" (Dixon 134). Although Paramount prioritized a low-risk model of rehashing previous creative properties that – due to their supposedly factory line mode of production – seemed to be an ill-advised strategy with which to motivate their early 1950's films, this choice does fit within the 1954 Hollywood production norm in terms of the Big Picture trend. Since each Major studio had to market individual films on their own attraction, the post-Paramount Case industrial norms included

this Big Picture trend in which mainstream studios differentiated their individual films by focusing on technological enhancements as well as more cognizantly upscaling the production of each film in order to separate them from the burgeoning threat of television and its associated suburb-bound 50's lifestyle. Therefore, even though Paramount focused mainly on remaking in-house properties and maintaining a fairly un-experimental standard, the fact that they appealed to a declining audience through genre filmmaking and paired their own studio financing with shrewdly used big-name stars and directors situates their strategy within this Big Picture production quality trend of upscaling productions and differentiating each film's production and marketing. It is this Hollywood-wide and studio-specific industrial context that cooperated with aesthetic influences to shape *Rear Window* at the time of its production and reception in 1954. The film fits within the industrial norms in that its inception was influenced by Paramount's genre-focused outlook (which during the early 50's centered on city crime/suspense and sci fi) that functioned as the individual 'hook', but it also exceeds these norms due to the innovation that contributed to the aesthetic factors of that era (Dixon 122).

These industrial factors worked in tandem with aesthetic norms of that time period (as well as Hitchcock's innovations) to shape *Rear Window* into a contextually significant film. Just as Hollywood, and Paramount specifically, had input into the business-based priorities through which *Rear Window* was filtered in 1954 (using high production value genre-based individualism that still maintained a low-risk kind of audience appeal), so did the aesthetic/formal tendencies with which these industrial objectives worked closely. The aesthetic norms of Classical Hollywood Cinema remained generally consistent at a basic level, from the shift away from the 20's silent cinema of attraction and toward the industrialized studio system and 30's 'Golden Age', up to this post-WWII moment of both studio and stylistic transition which formulated the significant mix of mainstream genre conservatism and formal innovation of *Rear Window*. Although the interaction of industrial

and aesthetic factors shifted over the era leading up to this period (such as the formal changes brought about with advents in sound cinema, and the educational/propaganda filmmaking in which the studios participated through WWII), the Hollywood mainstream aesthetic standards were able to be defined as such because of their tendency to prioritize formal techniques that adhered to an extent to the ‘classical’ mode of filmmaking. This cooperative industry-aesthetic baseline against which Hitchcock’s contextualized formal qualities can be compared in the holistic embedding of significance in *Rear Window*’s production and reception, then, is rooted in subordinating the graphic space of film to make “narrative causality the dominant system in the film’s total form” (Bordwell 50). As Bordwell explains, the aesthetic norms of Hollywood in 1954 are based in the ‘classical’ practice of diegetic continuity, which centers film compositions, creates believable depth out of movement, and reinforces spatial orientation through unobtrusive editing; these conceptions of “balance, centrality, and spatial definition were also applied to stereophonic sound in the early 1950s” (Bordwell 50-55). The shift in Hollywood’s industrial priorities toward film-by-film differentiation and Paramount’s genre pictures still upholds these baseline Hollywood continuity rules in 1954, and *Rear Window* – as a suspense genre film, produced by Paramount – is significantly shaped by this mold, in that, while it reflects a degree of formal experimentation from Hitchcock’s own techniques, it also bears the influence of Paramount’s relatively un aspirational adherence to the 1950’s aesthetic standard of continuity editing, spatial definition, and overall balance. In order to fully elucidate the extent to which *Rear Window*’s significant aesthetic techniques are shaped by not only the standardizing, big-budget priorities of the industry, but also by formal innovation, then it is critical to examine the influence of Hitchcock’s own aesthetic techniques brought to the table in terms of narration of form/the image, space, and sound.

Although Hitchcock’s own unique formal innovation was neither an enigma of his own creation nor an entirely unprecedented and isolated approach, the context within which he worked –

both in terms of 1954 Hollywood and the historical origins of his techniques – is bottlenecked through his singular authorship in *Rear Window*'s production. Therefore this breadth of aesthetic factors can be most succinctly examined in 'Hitchcock's own' formal viewpoint that interacted with the industry's pre-determined norm, in a contradictory *and* cooperative anticipation of the receptive expectations that would re-capture 1954 audiences' needs for individualistic genre cinema as well as a subtle reintroduction of formalistic film spectacle.

By examining John Belton's essay on Hitchcock's formalist aesthetics, the seemingly contradictory nature of Hitchcock's aesthetic innovation can be analyzed as a middle ground between Expressionist and Constructivist aesthetics that shaped the use of 'narration-by-editing' in *Rear Window* as a significant agent working both within and independently of the industry at the time. Belton argues that Hitchcock's aesthetic narration, incarnated in *Rear Window*'s POV editing, combines Murnau's subjectivity with Eisenstein and Kuleshov's analytical objectivity. When he juxtaposes objective shots of characters looking across the courtyard with subjective POV inserts, Hitchcock "transforms a Constructivist editing experiment into an Expressionist tool, by sandwiching an Expressionist shot within a non-Expressionist frame" (Belton 9). This Constructivist aspect of the aesthetic that informed *Rear Window*'s unique take on narrative editing is an heir of the 1920's Soviet Montage practice of using often rhythmic editing to build cinematic form through juxtaposing images such as a 'mannequin' actor and the constructed object of their view or two dissimilar images tied together as metaphor-through-collision. The Expressionist side of this innovation comes from more subjective traditions, like Murnau (as cited) and the 1920's Impressionist aesthetic framework of film form brought about through mental subjectivity, often taking the form of heavy perspective.

The premise of *Rear Window*, approved by Paramount's industrial focus on genre as a well-financed 1950's suspense narrative, combines these initially diametric aestheticisms into a focus on form with which the viewer is engaged in alternating identification and opposition, according to the

subjectivity or objectivity of the moment. As Belton explains, the nature of Hitchcock's formalist approach to editing is seen most clearly through the use of suspense, which acts as a form of manipulation imposed upon the action in an intrusive reflection upon the film's form itself. This factor not only motivates the diegesis and authorship cooperating through *Rear Window* but is itself re-motivated by the formal framework of expressionist and subjective interaction with mise-en-scene in conjunction with the manipulation of Soviet Montage-influenced Constructivist editing. This synthesis acts uniquely in *Rear Window*, as situated during 1954, in order to create a unique type of suspense through Hitchcock's personal aesthetic combination of these influences working within the standard continuity enforced by the industry at the time. The film was therefore set apart at the time of its production and release *because* of these influences working in tandem; this combination style of film form reinforces the strengths of the suspense genre within which it acts to the industry's perceived market benefit, as well as widening the aesthetic applicability of the film across both the mainstream-rooted audience and audience portions seeking individual film merit in the form of reflexivity, beginning to sow seeds of author-specific criticism in 1954 that would later graduate to an even more auteurist-focused audience niche.

These influences also shape the significance of Hitchcock's film through the aesthetic weight given to set design, which works alongside the viewer-participatory aspect of coinciding subjectivity and objectivity embodied in the narrational editing of the form, as well as the industrial desire to recapture the 1954 audience through a controlled reintroduction of spectacle on the big screen. While the deep-space, segmented set design establishes a concrete theatrical space (literalized through the film's unique single-set construction), for example, the specialized type of editing discussed prior constructs a more abstract, cinematic film space in order to play with spectators' expectations towards those spaces (Belton 1124-5). The role of space through set design in *Rear Window* is also granted a large degree of significance during its era for the way in which it has been influenced by a

new kind of spectacle working with Paramount's industrial desires at that time. Instead of limiting itself to a singular use of 'genre as attraction' or augmented film technology to compete against the increasingly-favored television at this point in time, Paramount as an industrial force cooperated with Hitchcock's own formally reflexive aesthetic strategies in order to revive an engaging spectatorship in the audience, largely through the unique spectacularization of *Rear Window* that came about through the space and set design of the film. As Belton emphasizes in his essay, the set design – financed by Paramount with direct purpose to invest in and profit from this film on individual merit – exists largely as pure spectacle – something to be admired even before the story begins; The set also reproduces the conditions of spectatorship in the conventional theater, with protagonist Jeff functioning as a surrogate spectator gazing across the courtyard at the multiple unfolding narratives: "the basic desires which spectators bring to the cinema – desires for sex, romance, adventure, comedy, etc. – are realized on these mini-screens" (Belton 1127-1132). Therefore, Hitchcock's own previous experience as a set designer and personal priority for the formal function of a visually architectural presence works significantly through *Rear Window* with studio needs for greater individualist spectacle, in order to reclaim and re-estimate the tastes of an audience all the more discerning for the greater wealth of commercial cinematic options available to them in 1954 (Jacobs 12).

The intersection of aesthetic and industrial influences on *Rear Window*'s significance with the unified purpose of reclaiming the 1954 audience occurs through the film's use of sound as well, constructed through industrial awareness and Hitchcock's own formally reflexive technique. Although Hitchcock's use of musical score to guide the film's narrative is in line with the norm of this formal quality according to the continuity-based, centralized aesthetic norm of early 1950's Hollywood, his personal fascination with reflecting on the systems that make up film form itself affect *Rear Window* in the form of his combination of a musical score and diegetic sound, used for

rhythm as well as ironic reflection. The spatial limits imposed on the film by the industry-invested, aesthetically-spectacular single set motivate an aesthetic unity not only through editing/the image but through incidental sound from the diegetic apartment complex. By using “asynchronous sound”, involving an inconsistency or tension between sound and image, Hitchcock emphasizes auditory depth and “taxes the viewers’ senses to their utmost,” particularly during scenes in which the viewer must interpret only the *tone* of conversations from apartments across the depth of field (Fawell). These formal motivations of diegetic, but reflexive, sound design also occur with the song “Lisa”, which was not present in the film’s source text “It Had to Be Murder” by Cornell Woolrich, but was added by Hitchcock as a composition reflective of popular music at the time; The song was intended to unfold in the process of its creation over the course of the film, and ultimately functioned not only as another aesthetic motivation for theme through the film, but also as an ironic subversion of audience expectations, since the final iteration of the song “bears very little resemblance to the Lisa in Jeff’s eyes” (Schroeder 148).

This inherent interactivity of the film’s aesthetic/formal structure, which sets *Rear Window* apart in its era, results from the junction of aesthetic factors in the form of Hitchcock’s reflexive innovation building off of the auditory continuity norms of the era, and industrial factors in the form of Paramount’s desire to invest in enough spectacle (similarly to the other Major studios) in one of their own genre films to merit a differentiated attention to this film, when much of the 1954 audience had been leeched away by television, radio, and the suburban lifestyle. The result, then, is a film that synthesizes these factors in a unique form of attraction that, similarly to specific emphases on deep focus composition through Cinemascope, layers these aesthetic innovations to entice the audience through active viewership, while using this formal strategy to both stand out from other films in the suspense genre and stand steady as an example of the transiently-emphasized genre itself, just with a fresh take on the traditional ‘Puzzle’ in the form of this aesthetic internal contradiction.

A conclusive synthesis of the 1950's audience-recapturing purpose with which these aesthetic and industrial factors were primarily joined in affecting the significance of *Rear Window* is best executed by returning to the investment and marketing that circumscribed the film itself. Just as the give and take between Paramount's classical standards of continuity and Hitchcock's own inherited innovation has acted on *Rear Window* in formal terms, this complementation acts causally through the star-driven emphasis of the Big Pictures of this time. Hitchcock responded to this industry parameter through *Rear Window*, featuring "2 of the decades' most attractive stars" – James Stewart and Grace Kelly, by using their on-screen romantic subplot against expectations in an ironic and critical tone (*Alfred Hitchcock's "Rear Window"* 4). By using stars for his own purpose, the film's give-and-take between contextual norms and innovation takes form through entertaining the audience, but "allowing the director to experiment with new techniques that might not otherwise be acceptable in a commercial medium" (Hitchcock and Gottlieb). Aside from the interaction between potentially contradictory forces, then, this example epitomizes the significance with which formal deviations from industry-set norms results in a genre film that works against the grain and therefore to its advantage, according to financial results: *Rear Window* grossed \$5.3 million at the box office in 1954, and was Hitchcock's "most commercially successful film" (*Alfred Hitchcock's "Rear Window"* 10). Evidently, the combination of industry prediction for what could lure audiences back – even temporarily – to the theater, combined with Hitchcock's retrospectively auteurist warping of parameters set out for him, resulted in a significant and successful gauge of the 1954 audience's tastes – for a film that used a revised type of voyeuristic spectacle, intrinsic to much of the industry's cinematic norms up to that point, as well as uniquely reflexive violations of the construction of these norms. *Rear Window*'s position within the contextual norms of its genre and studio works so significantly with deviations from these expectations because of the 'familiar variation' that set it apart at the time of its release (in terms of acting as an estimation of *and* twist on expectations). Paramount's investment in the film undoubtedly contributed to its potential for executing this

cooperation, as the film's single studio set cost an unprecedented \$9,000 to design and \$72,000 (*Alfred Hitchcock's "Rear Window"* 7). The clear industrial belief in the film's potential to execute its 'Big Picture' priority, while ultimately benefiting from the formal deviations to its aesthetic, emphasizes the significance inherent in the film's act of working both within the industry and subverting it at the same time.

The positive feedback effect of the union of aesthetic influences (both those brought by 1950's Hollywood norms and Hitchcock's own unique directorial approach) and industrial influences (effected across studio differentiation as well as Paramount's own safe genre approach) imbues *Rear Window* at the time of its production, promotion, and exhibition with the significance of a calculated fortuitous historiographical circumstance. These causal factors give the film the exemplary *and* exceptional qualities necessary to fit within the mold of all that the 1954 mainstream industry aesthetically strove for, and to simultaneously subvert these norms through reflexive innovation – all to the significance of using this multi-faceted differentiation of grounded spectacle to recapture that era's active audience.

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