Architecture and the Cinematic Window: Hitchcock's *Rear Window* and the Fantasy Frame

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The architectural window is an appropriate simile to film because they both frame a particular event and objectify the content which they frame. Windows fascinate architects; for example, in Gothic structures windows express the lightness of ascending toward heaven.[1] But it was in 1902, when Irving Colburn patented the sheet glass machine, that the mass implementation of a window's entrancing properties was possible. Ironically, film came into being seven years earlier, around 1895, with the invention of the movie camera by the Lumière Brothers in France. A window's attributes—transparency, illumination, view—have captivated architects and layman alike. Its invisibility extends the interior into the exterior and likewise brings nature inside. But it is a window's scopophilia property, which is the pleasure we take in the act of looking and likewise being looked at, which creates its dominant phenomenal experience. The director Alfred Hitchcock exploited our fascination and voyeurism associated with the architectural window in his film, appropriately titled, *Rear Window*. In this paper I will demonstrate the filmic qualities of the architectural window and its ability to project a space that determines both the viewer and the viewed [**Figure 1**]. In other words, the architectural window has an ideological and ontological dimension that bestows social-political prescriptions on the perceiver and the perceived. In what follows I will briefly trace the historical connections between architecture and film to show how their shared attributes create what the philosopher Slajov Žižek calls an ideological-fantasy space; analyze the role of architecture and the window in the film *Rear Window*; and finally, explore how film techniques create a subject position and delineate that subject position's role in architecture.

A window is similar to a film because it also creates a surface upon which one can project a space containing our intentions, desires, and actions. This is not to say that it creates a make-believe scenario based on reality, but rather, the frame organizes the visual spectrum with a framework that "determines our activity, our mode of acting in reality itself."[2] This is a crucial distinction. The notion that our desire, in the form of a fantasy, is the support for reality comes from Jacques Lacan's claim that in our dreams we are able to attain unmediated access to reality. Slajov Žižek extends this theory by inverting the standard critique of ideology, which posits that ideology is comprised of the imaginary conditions that mask our true condition.[3] Slajov Žižek's inversion, via Lacan, posits the notion that ideology uses fantasy to bring constancy and order to social reality.[4] The traditional view is that reality exists fully present and corresponds to our ideas about it. Further, we are self-identical beings who determine our relationship to ideological mandates. But according to post-structuralists, such as Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze, and Jacques Derrida, reality is never fully present because we experience it through a symbolic network of codes and signs that identifies us and the objects we use. The symbolic network, or language, structures for us the unknowable reality of things in-themselves. In other words, what we experience as reality is, in fact, matter covered and filtered by a veil of words. Bruce Fink explains that Lacan believed that existence or being is a "product of language" because "language brings things into existence."[5] Our perceptions of reality are given existence, meaning, and order by the process of symbolization, or rather, by describing them with words. Implicit within this framework is the unsymbolized or what Lacan called the Real which is the inde-
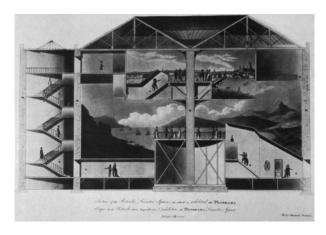
Figure 1

terminate flux that comprises matter: the world as it is before we engage it symbolically.[6] The link between the fantasy-space created by a film or a window is that as a subject, according to Slajov Žižek, we are "present as a pure gaze before its own conception, or more precisely, at the very act of its own conception."[7] Thus, the "pure gaze" of subjectivity can be said to be the same in a film and a window. Both "frames" provide a vehicle for the viewer to create a narration by *projecting* their perception of social relations as they materialize and organize around what they *imagine* to be reality; but something remains hidden by our insistence (or blindness) in the belief that reality is in–itself.

An architectural window is a film screen *par excellence*. Most modern architects have extolled the fantastic powers of the window by equating it to freedom, luxury, and spiritual power. This becomes obvious by the compositional hierarchy that windows command in modern architecture; for example, refer to Mies van der Rohn's *Glass House*, Jean Nouvel's *Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain,* or Stephen Holl's *School of Art & Art History* (University of Iowa). But a window also conveys an endemic guilt to those who look at it askew. For example, in most instances it is improper to walk by the exterior of a building and gaze through the window into the interior. Likewise, it is taboo to stare intently at events unfolding outside one's window. There is a sense of privacy that we pretend to maintain, but we are captivated by the power of our gaze and risk looking inside or to intently scrutinize events unfolding outside our window. In one sense a window, like a film, reveals a world where "conventions within which it has consciously evolved, portray a hermetically sealed world that unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic phantasy."[8] The separation that the architectural window establishes causes one to be unsuspecting of the "conventions" that makeup society (rules, stereotypes, beliefs) because one is removed from the visual register of events, thus assuming a natural and temporally correct subjectivity. It is as if the "voyeuristic phantasy" is expected perception.

THE HISTORICAL RELATIONSHIP OF CINEMA AND ARCHITECTURE

The paths of film and architecture are intertwined in an ideological construction of reality that cannot be reduced to the differences between real things and imaginary descriptions because, according to Slajov Žižek, our actual experiences

Figure 2

rely on a fantasy-space of ideology to repress some incommensurable or tragic thing or event.9 This repressed tragic event can be, such aspects as prejudices against a group of people, personal inadequacies, or design styles. The architecture and film lineage can be traced through the development of cinema and its expression in architectural form. In *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* Anne Friedberg explains how the predecessor of modern cinema was derived from architecture, such as a *panorama* (c1792, **Figure 2**) and its later cousin the *diorama* (1825, Diorama, Park Square, Regents Park: Plan and section).[10] These architectural structures were large-scale instruments that re-presented reality and "provided [a] virtual spatial and temporal mobility, [that brought] the country to the town dweller, [and] transporting the past to the present."[11] A visitor would pass through a series of spatial thresholds signaling that the visitor is leaving the grim city streets and entering another world, or rather a, "spectacle in which all sense of time and space was lost" awaited them.[12] By 1825, *watching* was endemic to city experiences and has been brilliantly analyzed by Walter Benjamin as the theoretical-occupation of *flânerie*.[13] A *flâneur* is an individual who is occupied with strolling and gazing at the city. Freeberg explains the connection between architecture and cinema coalesced from the emergence of a viewing paradigm comprised of such typologies as arcades (window shopping), department stores (display shopping), and exhibition halls (virtual representations of reality). These spaces produce experiences that are timeless because they transpose a viewer's sense of themselves into a commodity-experience that is analogous to the cinematic experience.[14] In other

words, a viewer's identification or subjectivity is constructed by the fantasy created by the commodity of fetishes projected on and by architecture. The fascination derived from one's subjectivity and viewing is concurrent with the emergence of film. Film has had a,

> long love affair/ despair between image and self-image which has found such intensity of expression in film and such joyous recognition in the cinema audience. Quite apart from the extraneous similarities between screen and mirror (the framing of the human form in its surroundings, for instance), the cinema has structures of fascination strong enough to allow temporary loss of ego while simultaneously reinforcing the ego.[15]

The similarities between the film screen and a mirror are shared by the architectural window because all three privilege the pure gaze of a subject. But there is one difference. A window participates in a complex network of architectural composition and symbols whereby the objects of reality are doubled in the "image" that appears within the frame of the window.

THE ARCHITECTURAL WINDOW IN *REAR WINDOW*

In the film *Rear Window,* the character L.B. Jefferies (James Stewart) represents a non-urbanized man who is uncomfortable inside and around architecture. He is a traveling free-lance photographer who, until recently, traveled the world to photograph adventurous events. To his dismay Jeffries breaks his leg when a race car spins out of control and crashes into him while he is photographing the race. This tragic event leaves Jefferies with his entire leg in a cast and confined to a wheelchair within his modern apartment. He can no longer avoid the powerful affectations emanating from the architectural space he inhabits which is the symbol of domesticated life. As an invalid, his every need is taken care of by his out-patient nurse and his beautiful girlfriend Lisa Fremont (Grace Kelly). One day, alone in his living room and with no one to complain to, boredom overtakes Jefferies and he focuses his attention through the window of his apartment toward the courtyard (defined by various buildings). He begins to watch his neighbors while commenting on their activities; in doing so, he begins to structure their lives as they appear to him. The power of his gaze is revealed in a spectac-

Figure 3

the window glass is an ordinary working-class environment but as the camera examines the personal spaces of the others one acquires the sense that there is some extra dimension, a sort of fantasy-like construction, present. The architecture that constitutes the courtyard is comprised of the backs of buildings of various styles; old brownstones, modern brick structures, and mid-century brick buildings. In another dramatic sequence the camera once again assumes Jefferies' point-of-view and focuses on the windows of Miss Lonely Hearts, a jilted women who lives alone; the Thorwald's, a married couple who provide the impetuous of the film's plot; an aloof musician; a scantily clad dancer; an old married couple who are content and set in their ways; an older female artist; and finally, a newlywed couple. The courtyard is a structured and stable architectural environment that when viewed through the window appears *staged* because of the way the camera objectifies each neighbor. It appears as though their actions are "played-out" as projections on Jefferies' window. The courtyard functions as the symbolic-fantasy space containing the ontological determinations of those who are caught by Jefferies' gaze. Said differently, the window allows him to narrate the "identity" of the individuals he sees. This is the paradigmatic aspect of the architectural window which is the ability to implement subject positions onto those who occupy a building's spaces. What the viewer (and Jefferies) is experiencing are the cinematic qualities that the architectural window exudes. The architectural window creates a narrative space to avoid the confines of mediated reality "through the power of fascination."[16] Slajov Žižek explains that Jefferies,

> eludes a sexual relation by transforming his effective impotence into power by means of his gaze, by means of secret observation he 'regresses' to an infantile curiosity in order to shirk his responsibility toward the beautiful woman who offers himself to him.[17]

The failed masculine subjectivity becomes the vehicle that removes Jefferies from the ugly reality of marriage by transferring it onto the newly objectified and distant projection of another's reality. In a manner similar to how an actual film affects a viewer, Jefferies (as a viewer) removes himself from the picture appearing on his window by objectively commenting on the activities of the "actors." One premise running throughout the film is the conflict between reality and imagined

ular sequence of shots where Hitchcock allows the camera to "fly" toward Jefferies' window and miraculously puncture through its invisible limit [**Figure 3**]. During this shot one assumes Jefferies' point-of-view, while the camera moves in a slow and methodical manner showing the courtyard. At first what appears on the other side of

Figure 4

reality. It is believed by many other characters in the film that Jefferies is hallucinating and the entire scenario occurring within the courtyard is invented to alleviate his boredom. This is exactly what Lacan had in mind when he said that the subject (us) is the other of language. If reality is determined by our immersion in language and because language is never fully able to account for everything in the world then gaps must occur in meaning, knowledge, and identity. These gaps reveal the traumatic events that are evaded while one is engaged in so called reality.

The compositional qualities of his apartment, along with his limited mobility force Jefferies to assume the subject position of castration—limited power, lacking authority, and sexual impotence. Nonetheless, his window makes him into an entity that is analogous, according to Slajov Žižek, to Bentham's panopticon. Through the screen of the window Jefferies is able to always monitor the others who, like prisoners, are never sure if he is looking at them. In a sense, we could say that his presence is the absence of an idealized authority. But within this fantasy world where is reality? The events Jefferies perceives exist as he describes them, but through his window one occa-

sionally glimpses reality in its strikingly bare and raw manifestation. It appears between the gap of space to the side of the female artist's apartment; in this gap, or alley between the courtyard buildings, we see an active city street that goes about its business unaware and invisible to Jefferies gaze [**Figure 4**]. It is as if the "real" world is visible but lacks agency in the architectural composition and hierarchical structure of Jefferies' window.

Jeffries lives in discomfort and containment and his problems are manifested and amplified by the spatial demands of his apartment. Not surprisingly the space is modern and is based on an open plan that allows for other spaces to flow between the upper entry area, the kitchen, and the sunken living room. But the flow of the space is abruptly stopped at his bedroom door (a space that we are never allowed to see), which serves as a symbol of Jefferies inability to be a fully functioning agent in this world. This is further expressed by his awkward position within the space marked by the limited movement of his wheelchair. But late one night Lars Thorwald (who, at a distance, looks remarkably like Frank Lloyd Wright wearing his trademark white hat) captures Jefferies attention [**Figure 5**]. Thorwald occupies an apartment

Figure 5

in the courtyard across from Jefferies window. It appears to Jefferies that Thorwald has murdered his nagging wife; a notion that fascinates Jefferies. Or so he thinks. This simple twist sets in motion a narrative that allows Jefferies to disengage from Lisa and focus his attention on a newly fabricated space projected on his window. This fantasy space contains a strong male figure that is capable of acting out his desires. But how does the window as a cinematic experience construct a subject that Jefferies identifies with if it is just the (re)presentation of reality?

ARCHITECTURE-IMAGE-FILM: THE FABRICATION OF SUBJECTIVITY

The French film theorist Andre Bazin asserted that realism in film promotes the belief that film, albeit a mechanical presentation, is capable of revealing the hidden truth within reality (it is more real than reality). In other words, a realist film is unmediated and where nothing in the "film is given a prior significance derived from the ideology of the director."[18] For Bazin a realist film-maker is someone who uses "all narrative means tending to bring an added measure of reality to the screen," and who has a basic distrust for mediation that

does not support the totality of the film form and its intent.[19] In a similar manner, architecture is a construct too and is commonly understood as promoting a realist and unmediated expression of space. For example, this is evident in classical styles imitating natural elements and such notions as organic architecture; the precedent to believe architecture is predominately the immediate representation of individual, social, and political values is well established. Further, the techniques used to communicate these ideas in film, and I argue in architecture, can be considered a system comprised of predetermined entities that are preloaded with good and bad meaning. The major error is to believe otherwise and think architecture is exempt from participating in subject formation. Although *Rear Window* appears to be a realist film – the story of a murderer discovered by a layman – there are certain unrealistic sequences to suggest otherwise. But how does the flat projection of images on a screen and the perception of images on a window determine a subjectivity in actual extensive space?

The philosopher Gilles Deleuze claims film is unique because although it is a flat projection, it (re)presents movement by a technological and

objective process.[20] Within a film movement is synonymous with reality because it forces the content of the film to appear to be realistic. This process reinforces our rational view of the world that is based on causes and effects. The problem, Deleuze claims, is that our impression of movement on film (or reality) as being unmediated leads a viewer to accept the underlying premise organizing the events in the film to be natural and unmediated. The endemic danger is the perpetuation of stereotypes, harmful political views, and fallacious information. The projection of film on a screen transforms imagistic information into concrete realistic ideas about actions and events. The realist film typology described by Bazin is based on the movement-image. The movement-image is apparent in *Rear Window* in the scenes that occur in Jefferies' apartment when he is NOT looking out of the window. In these scenes a viewer experiences the normal events of the story. But tension is created between these realist scenes unfolding in the spaces of Jefferies' apartment and the projection of the courtyard by Jefferies gaze occurring on the window. They are clearly two different worlds connected by some undetermined thing. The apartment scenes allow the viewer to see the action without thinking about Lisa and Jefferies' problems we just watch them unfold—we see their awkward discussions about Jefferies job and his rude comments concerning her extravagant clothing. How is the courtyard projection different?

Deleuze observes a counter to the "movement-image" (described above) in another type of image he calls the "time-image." Recall from above that the primary danger with the movement-image is the fact that it beguiles a viewer toward a tasteless subject position, such as Jefferies is a *real* man or that Lisa is a wealthy and snobbish socialite. One could make an analogy here to the methodology behind classical architecture that was criticized by Modernist architects. Is this not evident in Sigfried Giedion reflection on where he believes this critique began? He claimed there,

> are whole decades in the second half of the nineteenth century in which no architectural work of any significance is encountered," until moral "voices were raised in protest.[21]

Giedion's censures classists for ignoring the integrity of form, the freedom of space, and the emotional impact of industry and technology. In other words, they failed to address the true nature of individuality. One could also see an analogy to Modernist architecture and their reduction of humanity to a universal and abstract entity. In both cases we experience architectural spaces as sequences of movement as one perceives their own presence within them. Is this not a movement-image? But is this reality? To answer this question requires that we see what is really on the other side of the window in *Rear Window*.

On the other side of the glass are events occurring in the courtyard that appear to us as time-images. The time-image occurs, according to Deleuze, when we encounter events that cannot be accounted for with our current world view or symbolic network, thus time becomes a vehicle for different images to rearrange themselves. In other words, the time-image rests on the notion that subjectivity is a product of one's unique position in space and their experiences of temporality. For example, when Jefferies' thoughts are occupied by the rear window his notion of time becomes a series of disjointed experiences moving between events in other people's rooms and his own apartment. The neighbors are involved in actions that have no relation to others in the courtyard, but nonetheless they are "controlled" by the order implemented by Jefferies' random gaze. The time-image unlinks, or breaks, the sensory-motor connection to create new social ideas and relationships where everyone's point-of-view matters.

Deleuze claims time-images act as signs that continuously rearrange temporal experiences, create new images regardless of their causal relationship to a preceding or forthcoming image in a film.[22] The time-images that comprise Jefferies interpretation of the courtyard and its inhabitants displaces the social mandates prescribing how he is to act and what he is to think and re-*places* it with a new spectrum of free and indirect symbols. This new voice allows radically disparate images, such as the relationships between Jefferies and his neighbors to be considered together as the truth of his real relationship with Lisa. There is no logical reason for them to interact. Yet, in *Rear Window* the expected narrative is broken apart by extended depth of field and subjective camera movements. If we accept that the experiencing space is a visual phenomenon then a similar time-image process could be mapped onto

architecture. The window becomes the central locale where action (movement) is removed from its predetermined logical place (in reality) and is replaced within a fantasy projection that is not dependant on the logic of cause and effect. In *Rear Window* recall the gap between the two courtyard buildings where one can see the actual street held back by a visual threshold. Nonetheless, it seeps into the disjointed world of the architecturally designed courtyard. Is this not the paradigmatic model of architecture as that which determines a subjective fantasy space—museum, housing, or courtyard—by inserting itself into a gap opened up in reality through the projection of time images? The window/screen is experienced as the thing that indirectly reveals the real world by organizing an architectural space.

For Jefferies in *Rear Window* the unsymbolize is the difference between his desire for a contingent life adventure and the potential stagnant life with Lisa in his apartment. The obligations and rules that organize his spatial experience are identical, in form, to the rules that govern his actions: he must marry Lisa, find a local job, and succumb to the boredom of living. This difference is activated by the actual murder of Thorwald's wife when it is projected on his window. This does not become apparent until Lisa dramatically and unexpectedly enters the fantasy space on the other side of his window to investigate Thorwald's apartment. This rash and brazen action is completely antithetical to her subject position. Further, she is alien to the space created by the buildings of the courtyard. Nonetheless, Jefferies suddenly becomes interested in her and, unlike when she is in his apartment; he is fascinated by her actions. The conflation of the two worlds is further compromised in the dramatic conclusion when Thorwald discovers Jefferies "watching" him. Thorwald unexpectedly makes his way around the courtyard and enters Jefferies apartment. The final scene plays out in a strange slow motion and oddly lit battle between Jefferies and Thorwald. The striking conclusion releases the tension between the fantasy space and reality. In the final scene we see Lisa and Jefferies together, and although the original problem (his inability to consummate their sexual union) appears to be resolved, the camera once again repeats the opening sequence and magically travels through the window to confirm what is real in the courtyard. It suggests otherwise.

ENDNOTES

1. Robert A Scott explained that the "walls of Gothic cathedrals appear almost porous" because light filters into the "interior and merges with every aspect of it, as though no segment of inner space should be allowed to remain in darkness, undefined by light." The Gothic architect's intention was to "was to transform the interior spaces into a semblance of the Heavenly Jerusalem." *The Gothic Enterprise: a Guide to Understanding the Medieval Cathedral* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2003) 109-110.

2. Slajov Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, (New York: Verso 1998), 47.

3. See Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press), 2001.

4. Slajov Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, (New York: Verso 1998) 33.

5. Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1995), 25.

6. The best proof of this can be seen in documentary films that explain the different ways bees, flies, or dogs perceived reality. For example, bees experience a different light spectrum, thus bright colors appear in shades of purple that accentuates the shape of flowers while making the background disappear or become black.

7. Slajov Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, (London: Verso 1991) 197.

8. Mulvey, Laura, Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, and Leo Braudy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) 748-49.

9. Slajov Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, (New York: Verso 1998) 45.

10. John Britton and A. Pugin, *Illustrations of the Public Buildings of London: With Historical and Descriptive Accounts of Each Edifice* (London: J. Taylor, 1825), 70.

11. Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 22.

12. Ibid.

13. See *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann. trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2002).

14. Ibid., 38.

15. Mulvey, Laura, Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, and Leo Braudy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 754.

16. Slajov Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacque Lacan through Popular Culture*, (Cambridge: MIT Press 1998) 92.

17. Ibid. 93.

18. André Bazin, "De Sica Metteur en Scène," in *What is Cinema? Volume 2*, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray (Berkley: University of California Press, 2005), 68.

19. Ibid., 27.

20. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 156.

21. Sigfried Giedion, Space, Time, and Architecture, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 292.

22. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 156.265.