

Stephen Prince

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Narration and Point of View

Editing permits filmmakers to control the flow of story information and point of view as it is established through changing camera positions. Editing determines the way in which a scene's story information is conveyed.

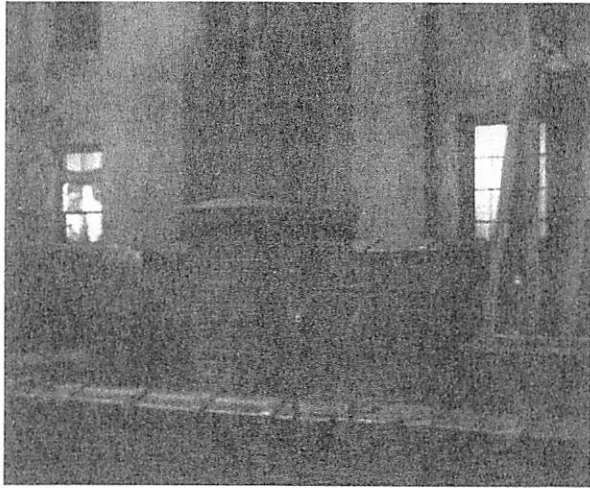
Case Study: *Rear Window*

A sequence from Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, edited by George Tomasini, demonstrates this relationship between editing, storytelling, and the control of point of view. Hitchcock designed *Rear Window* as an experiment. He wanted to restrict the physical scene and setting of the action, while maintaining dramatic interest. Most of the camera's positions are restricted to what the main character—a professional photographer with a broken leg who is confined to a wheelchair—can see from his apartment window. The photographer, Jeffries (James Stewart), begins to eavesdrop on his neighbors; from his window, he can see into the windows of their apartments across the courtyard. Jeffries comes to believe that a murder has been committed by one of his neighbors, a salesman named Thorwald (Raymond Burr). In the sequence to be examined here, Jeffries hears a mysterious scream during the night and then sees Thorwald mysteriously going in and out of his apartment carrying a large suitcase. Because this is a Hitchcock film, viewers are not surprised to learn that the contents of the suitcase turn out to be quite ghoulish. They are the dismembered pieces of Thorwald's wife.

Implying Associations between Shots. Throughout this sequence, the editing implies associations between the shots. This is an important principle of narrative filmmaking. Each shot means what it does by virtue of its surrounding context. Hitchcock and Tomasini cut back and forth between Jeffries's face and shots of what he is meant to be seeing across the courtyard. These latter are his point-of-view shots; they simulate what he can see out his window. Hitchcock and Tomasini want viewers to interpret Jeffries's facial expressions and reactions as responses to what has occurred in the point-of-view shots. Notice, however, that Jeffries and what he sees and reacts to are never shown within the same shot. It is the editing that creates the association.

The scene opens with a pan of the courtyard from Jeffries's point of view (a). A scream is heard on the soundtrack but its source is not visible. The film cuts immediately to a medium shot of Jeffries's face (b) as he looks off-frame left, listening. Then the image fades out. The fade serves to bracket the action and to provide a punctuation point following the scream. This emphasizes the importance of the scream both for the film's plot and for Jeffries's developing fascination with Thorwald.

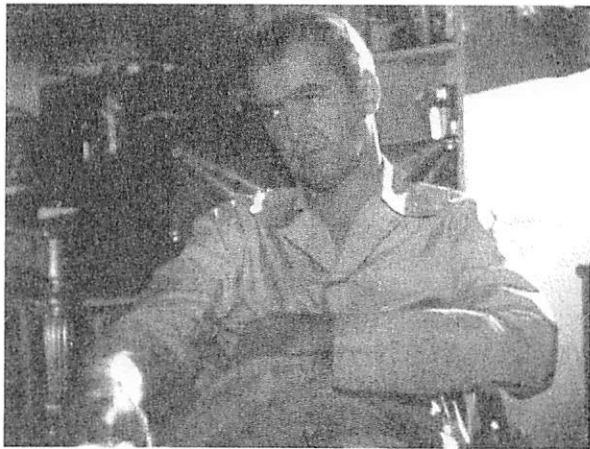
Shot three (c) fades in, a medium shot of Jeffries sleeping in his chair. Thunder rumbles on the soundtrack, and he wakes. Shot four (d) is a long shot of the courtyard and Thorwald's apartment. Notice the special subtlety with which Hitchcock



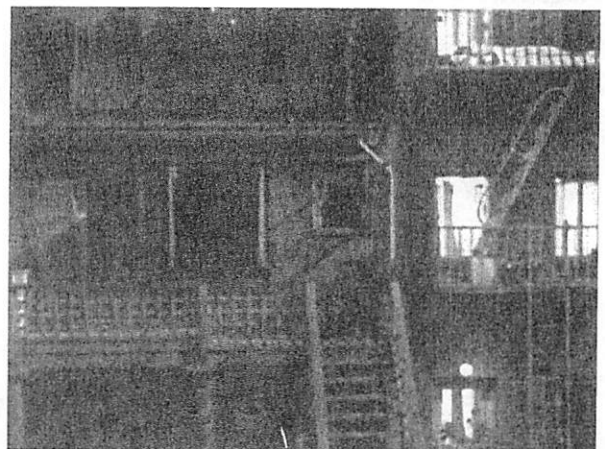
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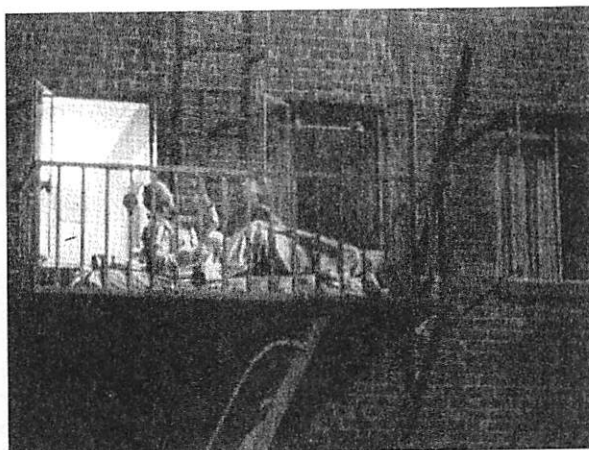
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and Tomasini are working. Nothing in the film has yet established that Thorwald is any kind of murderer or criminal. Viewers do not know who the scream belonged to or what caused it, but, on Jeffries's waking, the first image shown is a long shot of Thorwald's apartment. The editing thus focuses narrative interest on the Thorwald apartment.

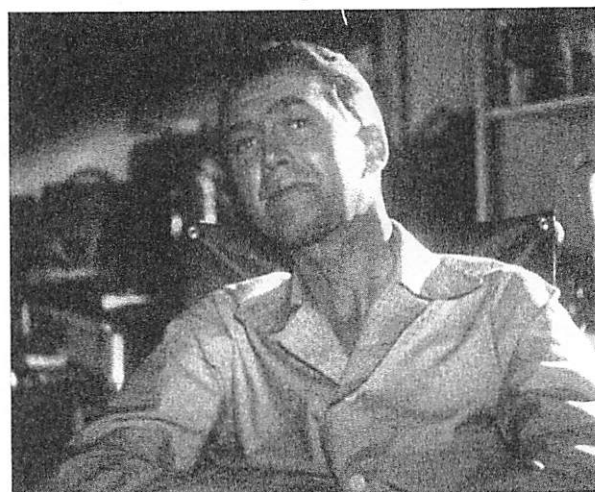
The next seven shots (e–k) show Jeffries watching a married couple sleeping on their balcony and laughing at them when they are caught in the rain. Here, as elsewhere, the cutting alternates between the point-of-view shots and Jeffries's implied reactions. Shot ten (j), for example, shows the fellow on the balcony tumbling head first into his apartment. Shot eleven (k) shows Jeffries laughing. Viewers make the narrative connections implied by the editing. By encouraging viewers to draw infer-



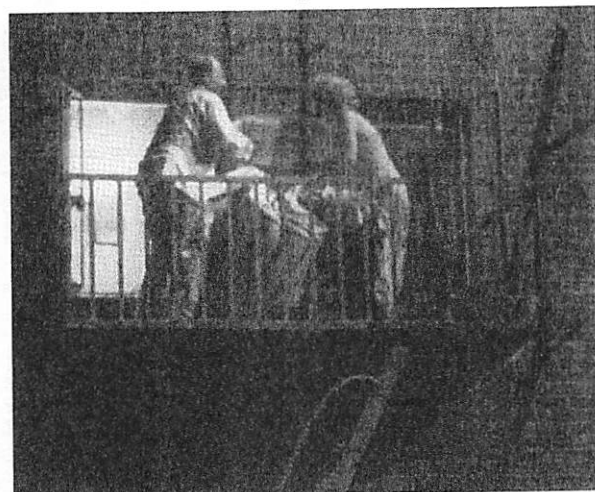
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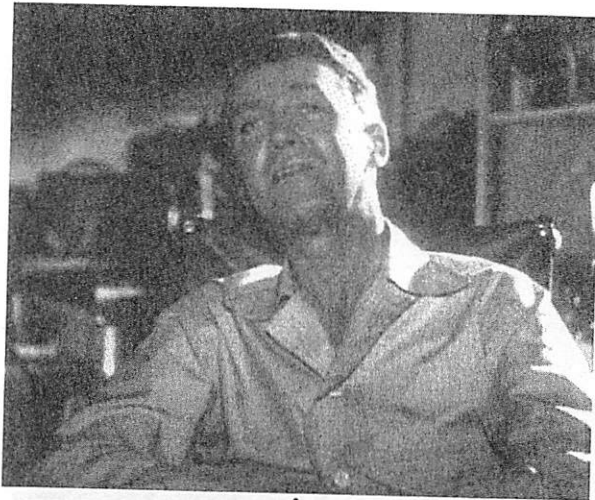
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h

ences across shots, the editing suggests the actor's performance. Viewers react as if James Stewart, as Jeffries, were laughing at his neighbor, even though this is not actually shown. (Nor did it exist at the time of filming. Stewart was not seeing any of the action across the courtyard. Hitchcock merely had him look off-camera and model different expressions.) This is one of the most powerful narrative effects that editing can create. It stimulates viewers to make associations and draw interpretations and connections from material presented in separate shots.

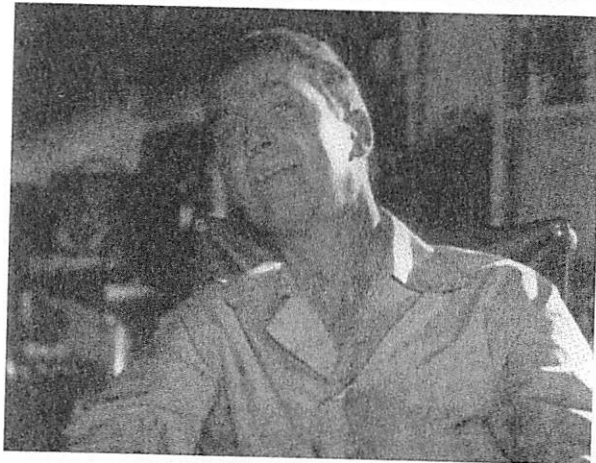
Establishing Geographic Consistency From shot to shot, the physical layout of the apartment complex where Jeffries lives is geographically consistent. The editing of the sequence carefully establishes this consistency.



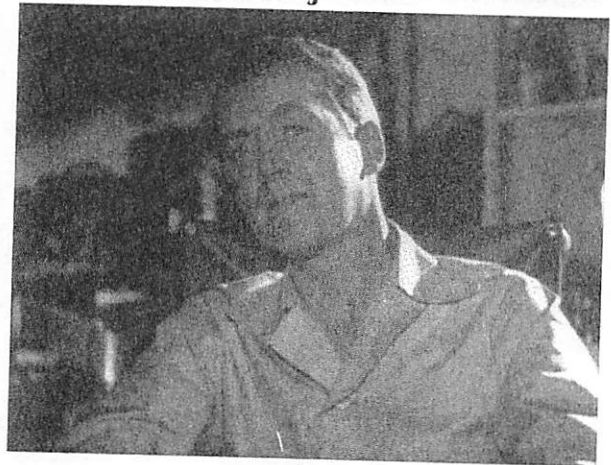
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j



k



l

As shot 11 (l) continues, Jeffries looks down, and his laughter and smile freeze. Shot 12 (m) shows Thorwald leaving his apartment carrying a suitcase, and then, in shot 13 (n), Jeffries looks off frame right at a more extreme angle than in shot 11. Shot 14 (o) is a long shot of the alley and the street beyond. After a beat, Thorwald appears and crosses the street. Notice how the more extreme angle at which Jeffries looks, in shot 13 (n), compared with shot 11 (l), serves to establish a different geographic location as seen by Jeffries—the alley and the street beyond it. These are positioned beside the edge of the building containing Thorwald's apartment.

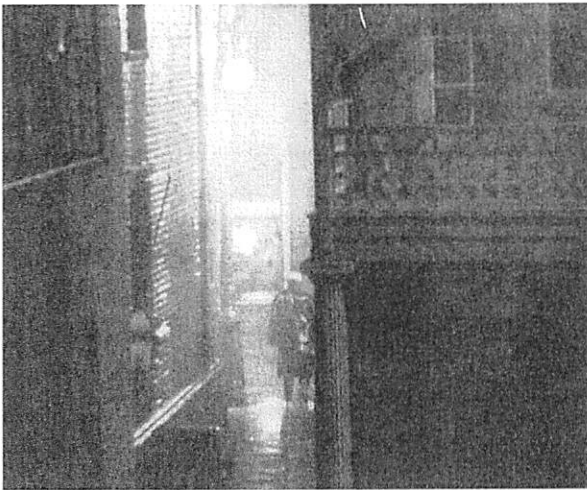
In keeping with the principle just discussed—the way that editing cues the viewer to make associations and draw interpretations across the cut—the extreme angle change of Jeffries's glance in shot 13 (n) provides a cue for the viewer to assemble the geographic layout of the apartment's courtyard, Thorwald's building, and the street in relation to one another. In each of Jeffries's reaction shots, Hitchcock has



m



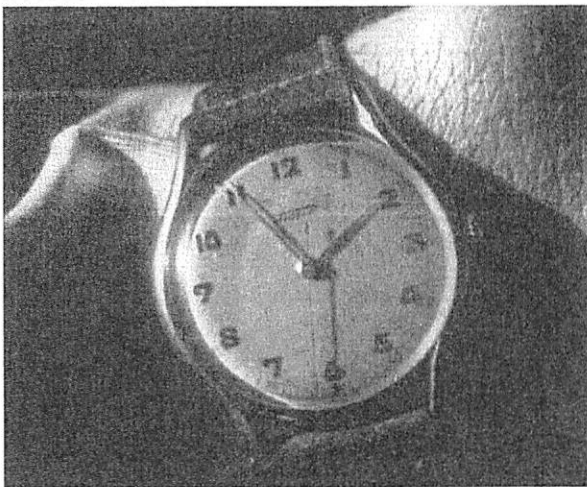
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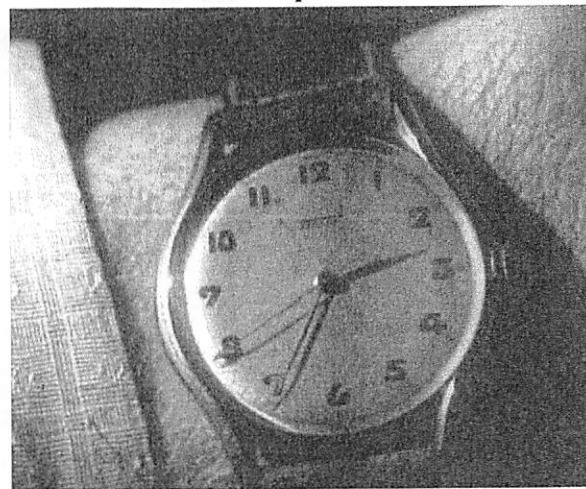
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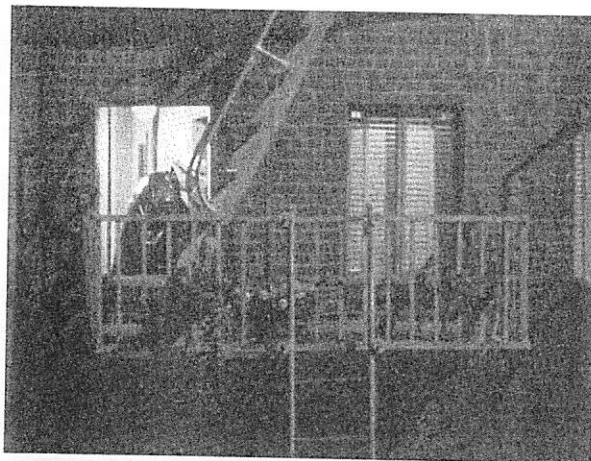
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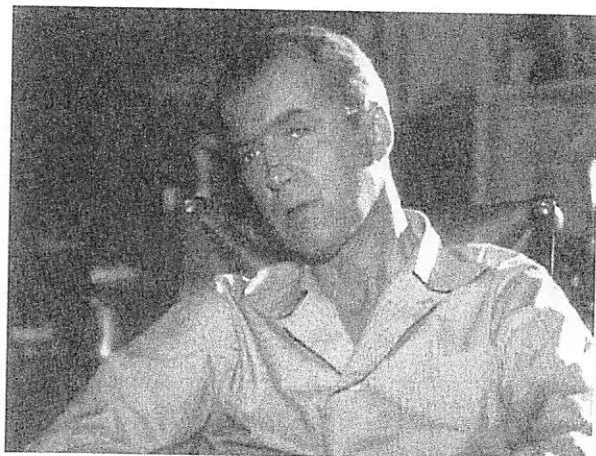
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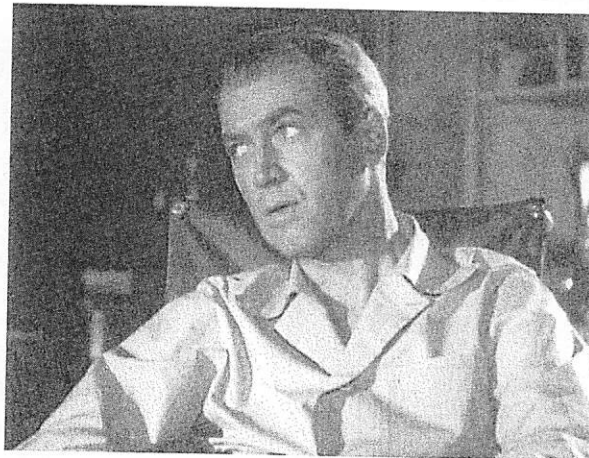
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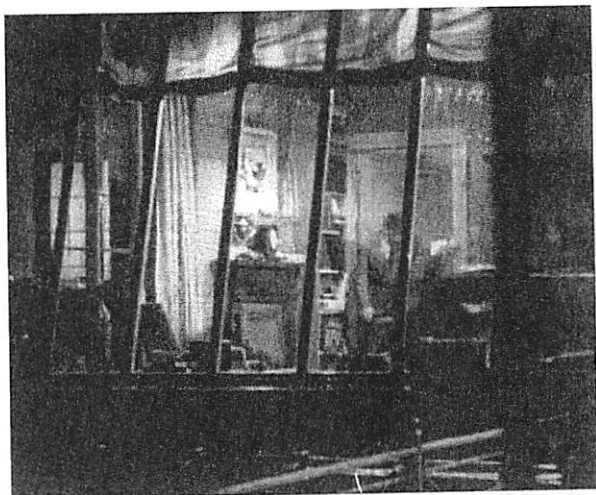
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v

carefully coordinated the angles at which he glances, relative to the camera, with the implied positioning of objects and characters across the courtyard. The relationship between the angles of Jeffries's glances and the physical positions of objects across the courtyard is so carefully and systematically worked out that the powerful illusion emerges in *Rear Window* that Jeffries is a spectator in front of his apartment window watching a coherent and stable world outside that window. Using the angles of Jeffries's glances, viewers can anticipate the objects or characters at which it is implied he is looking.

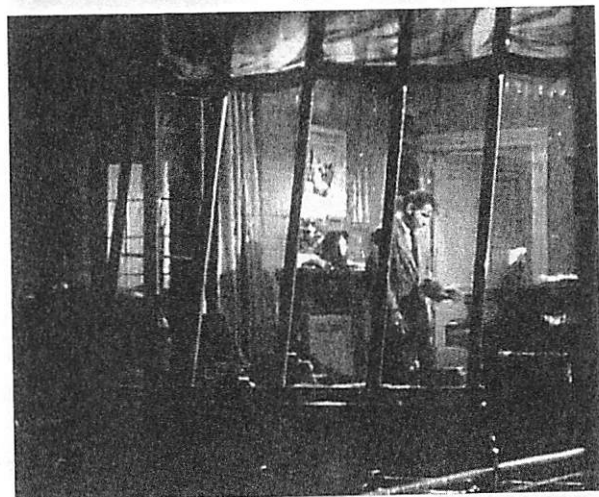
As the sequence continues, from shots 15–30 (p–ff), Jeffries continues to watch Thorwald come and go, carrying his suitcase, and the activities of his other neighbors. The coordination of Jeffries's angled glances with the views outside his window, and the repetition of previously established compositions and locales (shot pairs 13 and 29 [n and ee], 14 and 30 [o and ff], for example) reinforces the viewer's impression that the partial views of the apartment complex are part of a coherent and extended



w



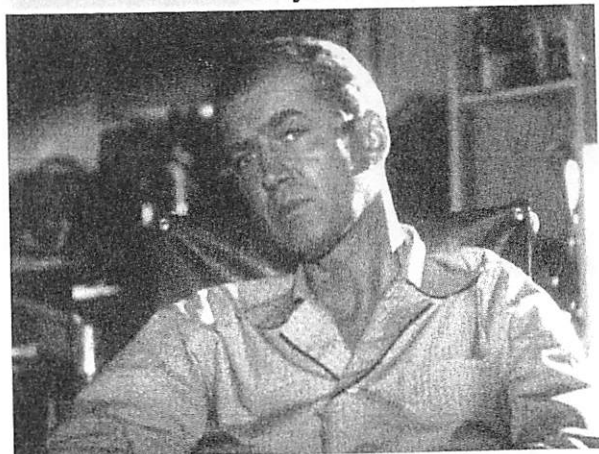
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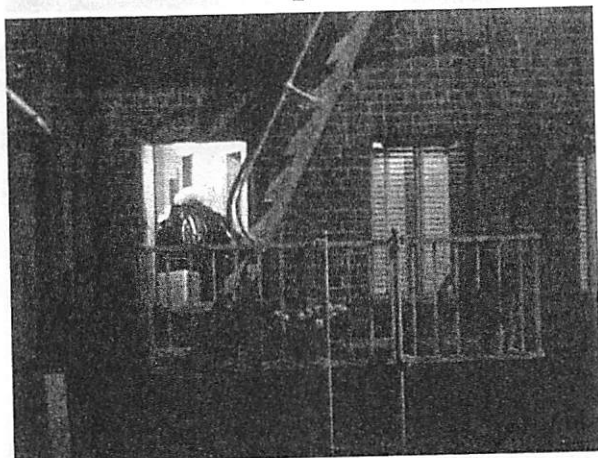
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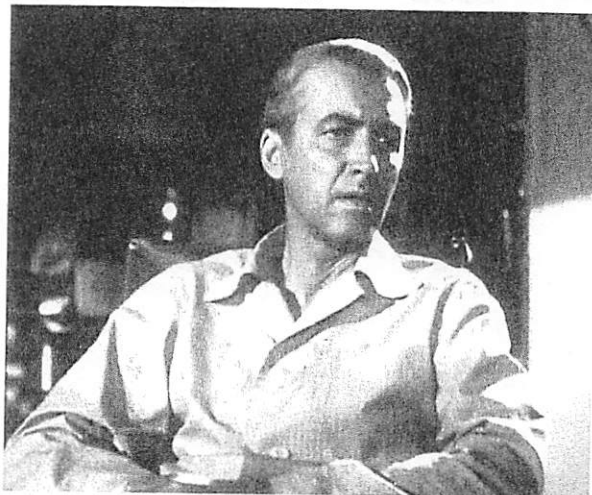
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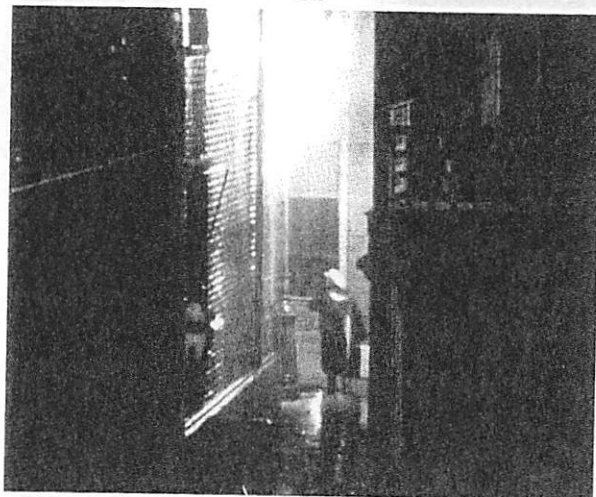
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dd



ee



ff

physical landscape. Viewers construct a general impression of the entire landscape—the courtyard and its apartment buildings—from the fragmentary close-ups that the editing presents. Viewers thus go beyond the information in the individual shots to build a larger mental image of the courtyard into which the locale shown in each individual shot can be integrated.

Schemas Perceptual psychologists refer to such a comprehensive mental image as a **schema**, a framework that helps organize new information by specifying where that information is likely to fit within an established structure or pattern. The structure here is the physical layout of Jeffries's apartment complex, about which viewers have formed a composite mental image based on the projective geometry—the matching of Jeffries's angled glances with particular views of the courtyard—established by

individual shots. By facilitating the viewer's creation of schemas pertaining to the layout of settings and locales, editing performs a powerful narrative function. It enables the viewer to form the impression of a coherent and stable physical world on-screen, independent of changes in the camera's angle of view from shot to shot. This is a very important point. By facilitating the viewer's ability to link shots together into meaningful patterns, and to infer larger relationships from the content of individual shots, editing helps the viewer connect and relate story information in ways that are essential for narrative comprehension.

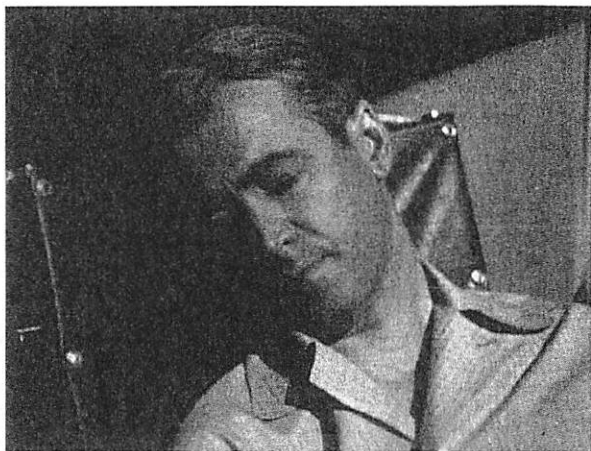
Altering the Pattern of Narrative Disclosure The next shots in the sequence maintain the pattern of narrative disclosure established thus far by the editing. Jeffries continues to watch Thorwald, Thorwald's apartment, and other neighbors, as the editing alternates, very precisely, between shots of Jeffries looking off-frame and shots that represent what he sees across the courtyard. No shot includes both Jeffries and what he sees across the courtyard. At the end of the sequence, however, Hitchcock and Tomasini change their pattern of narrative disclosure. The final shot of the sequence fades in, a close-up of Jeffries asleep in his chair. It is dawn, and the camera pans away from Jeffries, out his window, and across the courtyard to Thorwald's apartment where the viewer sees Thorwald leaving with a woman. The camera then pans left, back across the courtyard to Jeffries, who the viewer realizes is still asleep. The image fades out, and the sequence ends.

Hitchcock established a specific point-of-view structure—alternating in separate shots between Jeffries's implied views across the courtyard and his reactions—only to change this structure at the conclusion of the sequence by showing, in a single shot, a view of Jeffries and the events across the courtyard. In this last shot, viewers are given information that Jeffries does not have, the only time in the film that this happens. Viewers see Thorwald leaving the apartment with a woman. It could be his wife, and Jeffries could be wrong about a murder. This information undermines the viewer's desire to trust Jeffries's judgments and emphasizes the moral problem of Jeffries's rear window, peeping Tom behavior. Jeffries becomes increasingly convinced that Thorwald has killed his wife, but viewers cannot be so sure. Hitchcock emphasizes this information and the doubts it generates by bracketing the last part of the sequence with a fade and by changing the visual design. By using the panning camera movement—showing Jeffries asleep at the beginning and at the end of the shot—Hitchcock clearly establishes that Jeffries does not see what viewers have just seen.

The editing carefully regulates the flow of story information and point of view. The mood, tempo, dramatic focus, and continuity of the sequence are exceptionally strong. The sequence has no dialogue, and Hitchcock was especially proud of its purely visual design. He relied on the viewer's tendency to infer associated meanings between adjacent shots. He also relied on the viewer's ability to infer a comprehensive landscape from isolated details. He relied, in other words, on two essential narrative functions that editing performs.

Parallel Action

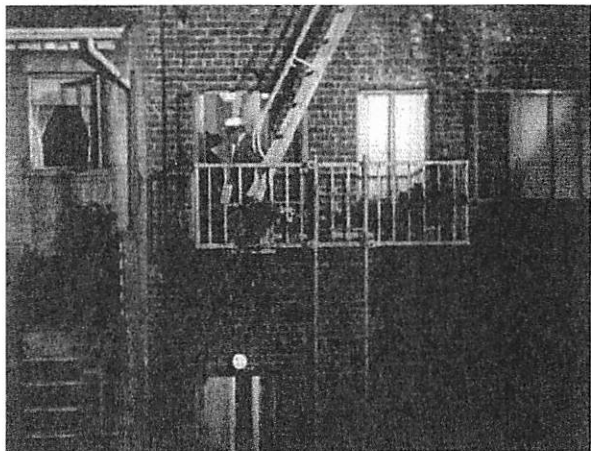
To tell sophisticated stories, filmmakers need a way of suggesting (simultaneous) parallel action, that is, that two or more things are happening at the same time. This enables



a



b



c



d



e

In this extended panning shot, Hitchcock shows viewers that Jefferies cannot possibly see Thorwald leaving with a woman who may be his wife (c). Frame enlargements.

them to weave together several lines of action in the telling of their story. **Parallel action** is achieved through editing. The sequence just examined from *Rear Window* manipulates multiple lines of action: Thorwald's trips to and from his apartment, the arrival home of the composer, the return home of Miss Torso, the comical response of the couple sleeping on their balcony to the rain, and Jeffries's surveillance of all this and his reactions to it. The editing references each of these lines of action to the others by establishing relationships of time and location. Without the use of parallel editing, that is, editing that interrelates multiple lines of action, filmmakers could not create complex narratives involving the actions of numerous characters, story lines, and subplots.