

Alfred Hitchcock, *Rear Window* and American Romance

DAVID KELLY

In 1954 Alfred Hitchcock released his adaptation of Cornell Woolrich's 1942 short story 'It Had To Be Murder', bringing it before the American public in the form of the claustrophobic and riveting thriller *Rear Window*. 12 years is a relatively short space of time from story to film but this was an extraordinarily eventful period in American national life and, as all adaptations are as much of their time as they are efforts to recreate in another medium something of the original text that inspired them, it is interesting to consider what sort of effects this might have had on the process of adaptation and any potential transformations of textual meaning that might have occurred. Such a consideration is especially appropriate with a filmmaker like Alfred Hitchcock, who never felt the constraints of fidelity when it came to the task of adaptation; as he memorably observed of his own approach in conversation with Truffaut: 'What I do is to read a story only once, and if I like the basic idea, I just forget all about the book and start to create cinema.' In this paper, then, I would like to look at Hitchcock's film from this perspective of unfaithful but inventive adaptation by considering *Rear Window* in the light of the generic background of Woolrich's story, the nature of generic transformation in adaptations of the classical Hollywood era, and the cultural dynamics of American intellectual, political and social life through the '40s and '50s.

The film dates from a period of peculiarly schizophrenic national self-absorption in the United States, divided as it was between the paranoid inquisitions of McCarthyist politics and the first shapings of a new American cultural self-consciousness consonant with its place as the dominant Western power in the post-war world. Each was to balance the other in a complex and fraught Cold War scenario: the political effort to root out and expel the un-American occurred simultaneously with the intellectual effort to more fully comprehend the peculiarity of Americanness, particularly as it manifested itself in cultural productions. Having shucked off its pre-war isolationism, the nation had now become fascinated both with its new-found

pre-eminence in world affairs and also with the potentially undervalued cultural history that might have played its part in bringing this about, giving rise to an intensification of interest in American Studies as a discipline. In this task, university English departments in particular were keen to begin the work of distinguishing the uniqueness of their native literature from the British heritage and a key concept in this development was the idea of romance.

Initially, the notion of romance enabled discriminations to be drawn between narrative modes familiar from the English novelistic tradition and those that came to prevail in what was being seen as the less novelistically congenial American context. With tongue firmly in cheek but critical eye nevertheless sharply peeled, Henry James had prefigured such a distinction the previous century in his biography of Hawthorne, observing:

It takes so many things, as Hawthorne must have felt later in life, when he made the acquaintance of the denser, richer, warmer-European spectacle—it takes such an accumulation of history and custom, such a complexity of manners and types, to form a fund of suggestion for a novelist... The negative side of the spectacle on which Hawthorne looked out, in his contemplative saunterings and reveries, might, indeed, with a little ingenuity, be made almost ludicrous; one might enumerate the items of high civilization, as it exists in other countries, which are absent from the texture of American life, until it should become a wonder to know what was left. No State, in the European sense of the word, and indeed barely a specific national name, no sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country-houses, nor parsonages, nor thatched cottages nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great Universities nor public schools — no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class — no Epsom nor Ascot!¹

With no raw novelistic material to work from, how was one to become what, from this view, might seem an oxymoron—an 'American novelist'? At

¹ Henry James, *Hawthorne* (<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/l/literature/english-men-of-letters/hawthorne/chapter2.html> accessed 1/12/17).

which point Henry James no doubt would have arched an eyebrow as if to say *quod erat demonstrandum*, but in fact Hawthorne himself had claimed that he was no novelist but rather a writer of romances. He distinguished the two by pointing out that the role of the romancer entitled him to a certain liberty as regards any mimetic or realist responsibilities,² and it was this that was to become a defining feature of critical reflections upon the American tradition as these ultimately came to give rise to the idea of a distinctive national literary genre: the American Romance.³

² Nathaniel Hawthorne, Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/h/hawthorne/nathaniel/h39h/preface.html> accessed 1/12/17):

When a writer calls his work a romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a novel. The latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience. The former--while, as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart--has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation.

If he think fit, also, he may so manage his atmospheric medium as to bring out or mellow the lights, and deepen and enrich the shadows, of the picture. He will be wise, no doubt, to make a very moderate use of the privileges here stated, and especially, to mingle the marvelous rather as a slight, delicate, and evanescent flavor, than as any portion of the actual substance of the dish offered to the public. He can hardly be said, however, to commit a literary crime, even if he disregard this caution.

³ James, of course, had much to say on his own use of the romance form in his Prefaces and was fascinated with the relation between realism and romance, most notably here in the famous Preface to *The American*:

The real represents to my perception the things we cannot possibly not know, sooner or later, in one way or another; it being but one of the accidents of our hampered state, and one of the incidents of their quantity and number, that particular instances have not yet come our way. The romantic stands, on the other hand, for the things that, with all the facilities in the world, all the wealth and all the courage and all the wit and all the adventure, we never can directly know; the things that can reach us only through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our thought and our desire...

The only general attribute of projected romance that I can see, the only one that fits all its cases, is the fact of the kind of experience with which it deals—experience liberated, so to speak; experience disengaged, disembroiled, disencumbered, exempt from the conditions that we usually know to attach to it and, if we wish so to put the matter, drag upon it, and operating in a medium which relieves it, in a particular interest, of the inconvenience of a related, a

As a treasured American value—virtually co-opted to Americanness in the national political discourse—this idea of liberty in the literary arena squared easily with reflections on other areas of American life, so the freedom of movement for the artist conferred by the romance form might have been seen as not only welcome but culturally congenial. Stretching back into a textual past comprising works charged with deep metaphorical and even mythical resonance—epic, pastoral, quest narratives and more recent gothic modes—it is a form less concerned with the world of actuality than one of potentiality. In Gillian Beer's famous formulation: 'Romance, being absorbed with the ideal, always has an element of prophecy. It remakes the world in the image of desire.'⁴ As such, the romance form came to be regarded as a natural idiom for a deeply optative nation, and Emily Miller Budick was to make the claim that American Romance is distinguished by a tendency 'to swerve away from the depiction of social reality toward the evocation of a country of the mind'⁵ in an effort to 'encode within language itself the specifically American features of the new sociopolitical and economic reality known as the United States.'⁶

The scholarly discussion in which the idea of a distinctively American Romance evolved began with the publication of the work that effectively initiated the modern discipline of American literary studies, F.O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. This was published in 1941, only a few years after

measurable state, a state subject to all our vulgar communities. The greatest intensity may so be arrived at evidently—when the sacrifice of community, of the 'related' sides of situations, has not been too rash. It must to this end not flagrantly betray itself; we, must even be kept if possible for our illusion, from suspecting any sacrifice at all. The balloon of experience is in fact of course tied to the earth, and under that necessity we swing, thanks to a rope of remarkable length, in the more or less commodious car of the imagination; but it is by the rope we know where we are, and from the moment that cable is cut we are at large and unrelated: we only swing apart from the globe—though remaining as exhilarated, naturally, as we like, especially when all goes well.

The art of the romancer is, 'for the fun of it', insidiously to cut the cable, to cut it without our detecting him.

Henry James, *The Art of the Novel* (University of Chicago Press: 1934, 2011), p. 33.

⁴ Gillian Beer, *The Romance* (Methuen: New York, 1970), p.13.

⁵ Emily Miller Budick, *Nineteenth Century American Romance: Genre and the Construction of Democratic Culture* (Twayne Publishers: New York, 1996), p12.

⁶ *Ibid.* p.20.

the formation of the House American Activities Committee in 1937 and not that long before HUAC began gearing up for a decade of paranoid anti-communist hysteria in the late '40s, beginning with its first foray into Hollywood in 1947 and going on to claim many victims from the worlds of the arts and the intelligentsia, including, possibly, Mathiessen himself.⁷ As that discussion evolved, however, it became evident from the centrality of texts such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Moby Dick* that, rather than simply celebrating the exceptional nature of Americanness, one crucial aspect of the American Romance was its capacity to ironically interrogate national values and the national self-consciousness. With its mystery structures, its epic journeys, its dreamlike scenarios, combined with its freedom from the trappings of realism and empiricism, the romance provided access to underlying currents of the social imaginary,⁸ and so opened the national psyche to deep and potentially unsettling questioning. In a structural sense, the recurrent use of the mystery or quest narrative to arrive at a stabilising truth upon which social order may firmly sit may be seen to reflect the aspirational ideology of the nation itself, which had come to understand itself as experimental, a quest within human history to arrive at a newer, more equitable and righteous order of human affairs, a revolutionary democratic order founded on self-evident truths. This understanding highlights the mythical function of the romance narrative, but also reveals its dark ambiguity: for when the mystery remains unresolved—like the meaning of

⁷ The Wikipedia entry for Mathiessen notes:

In a note left in the hotel room, Mathiessen wrote, 'I am depressed over world conditions. I am a Christian and a Socialist. I am against any order which interferes with that objective.' [23] Commentators have speculated on the impact of the escalating Red Scare on his state of mind. He was being targeted by anti-communist forces that would soon be exploited by Senator Joseph McCarthy, and inquiries by the House Un-American Activities Committee into his politics may have been a contributing factor in his suicide. (Accessed 1/12/2017)

⁸ To use Winfried Fluck's term. Fluck gives an extensive account of the development of the concept of American Romance in 'The American Romance and the Changing Functions of the Imaginary,' *New Literary History*, Vol.27, No.3, Summer 1996, 415-45. Regarding the term 'social imaginary' he notes:

As an agglomerate of diffuse feelings, images, associations, and visions, the imaginary needs fiction to be translated into a coherent, comprehensible, and culturally meaningful expression. It is thus part of the special attraction and usefulness of fiction that it articulates something 'beyond' its own means of representation, and the romance can be seen as the literary genre which makes the expression and articulation of that dimension 'beyond' its starting premise and its major rationale for existence. (423-4)

the scarlet letter, or the whiteness of the whale, or (for later generations in another medium) the significance of Rosebud, which seems to mean everything and nothing, or of the Maltese Falcon, which blurs the true and the counterfeit—when these ambiguities are raised a kind of existential instability is introduced, casting doubt upon the foundations and effective functioning of the social organism: the irresolution of the metaphorical order reflects fractures and contradictions within the national order. Similarly, when the quest fails—as in the hunt for the white whale, or Huck's quest for freedom (his adventure ends as it began with him intending to 'light out for the territory'), or, in a different register, when Gatsby's romantic quest for Daisy fails—the capacity for the nation to deliver on its promises of life, liberty and happiness is put in question. The implication is that some sort of national failing is at stake here—some departure from the original historical promise of the republic, some corruption of the 'fresh green breast' of the new world, as Nick Carraway saw it, has taken place. In the metaphorical figurations of that failure provided within the ironic patterns of the American Romance tradition a self-searching nation recurrently came to recognise its lapses from its original promise and its constant need for renewal through recourse to its founding spirit of rebellion in the name of democratic human values, and through a rededication to the individual and the felt truths of the human heart—truths like Huck's instinctive sense of human kinship with Jim on the raft, which make a claim on the imagination as self-evident, in the words of the Declaration of Independence, or intuitive, in the language of American Transcendentalism.⁹

In 1960 this understanding of America and its metaphorised self-reflections arrived at a significant point of articulation with the publication of Leslie Fiedler's encyclopaedic and wonderfully mischievous *Love and Death in the American Novel*, which was the first scholarly study to draw attention to the potentially subversive implications of the genre. If the American Romance could be seen as both invoking and interrogating the national dream, it was Fiedler who gave a psychoanalytic inflection to the discussion, crystallising this emergent but increasingly problematic sense of Americanness as one riven by fault lines of race, sex and gender and beset by a burdensome and contradictory historical legacy. In this way *Love and Death in the American Novel* opened the ground for later speculation on the nature of the American Romance of the kind that I have described above, conceiving of it as a metaphorically charged form peculiarly suited to the

⁹ Sacvan Bercovitch developed these perspectives fully in his study *The American Jeremiad* (University of Wisconsin Press: 1980).

purposes of a democratic, aspirational literature on the one hand that equally gave highly imaginative expression to profound stresses—and, in Fiedler's view, particularly sexual and racial stresses—which served to bring into view deep contradictions within national life. Offering a reading of the American literary imagination as absorbed with sexual and racial anxieties that unfolded in Gothic imaginings shaping themselves in romance forms, Fiedler's thesis was always meant to be provocative, and he memorably characterised the case in this way:

The figure of Rip Van Winkle presides over the birth of the American imagination; and it is fitting that our first successful homegrown legend should memorialize, however playfully, the flight of the dreamer from the drab duties of home and town towards the good companions and the magic keg of Holland's gin. Ever since, the typical male protagonist of our fiction has been a man on the run, harried into the forest and out to sea, down the river or into combat—anywhere to avoid 'civilization', which is to say, the confrontation of a man and a woman which leads to the fall of sex, marriage, and responsibility.¹⁰

Ironically, the one romance narrative that is not accommodated here is the sentimental love story—the one we think of most commonly today when we use the term 'romance'. These either fail (as in *The Scarlet Letter* or *The Great Gatsby*), or are avoided altogether in fantasies of masculine escape or, in Ernest Hemingway's phrase, worlds of men without women. Thus, in the search for Americanness that takes place between the scholarly perspectives of Matthiessen in 1941 and Fiedler in 1960, this trope of the womanless man on the run was becoming recognised as a mythic figure of the national imagination from which had evolved a familiar morphology of American masculinity: boundary riders of American civility perched on sexual, ideological, cultural, and racial liminalities and torn by the dilemmas thrown up by the competing stresses of these forces at play in the national life. This is the world of classic American literature understood as a homosocial, at times almost homoerotic domain, featuring a cast of vagabonds like Huck, adrift on his raft with Jim, borne down the river into the heart of American slavery in a fugitive escapade that will test the achievements of republican 'civilization' against its original promises of liberty and equality; or malcontents like Ishmael on the Pequod, a ship that seems an ironic reflection

¹⁰ Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (first published 1960; Illinois: Dalkey Archive, 1997), p.26.

of the ship of state in quest of the riddling leviathan, who becomes cured of his misanthropy in his bromance with the dark-skinned islander Queequeg; or—to choose a text closer to those of interest here—drop-out visionaries like Sal Paradise, on the road with Dean Moriarty to find the lost America of the dream (*On the Road*, 1951).¹¹

As to how far either of the two texts under consideration here consciously tap into this—who is to say? But conscious textual awareness of the unconscious currents of the social imaginary is hardly a requirement for critical speculation on the matter, since romance functions not by articulating and clarifying such currents but rather by putting them in play and at stake in texts that take their place within the metaphorical discourse of cultural self-reflection. Which is why, against this background of intellectual speculation and political inquisition through the '40s and '50s, it becomes particularly fascinating when one encounters salient points of connection between imaginative texts and this kind of psycho-cultural context, points of connection brought sharply into focus by questions of Americanness, the unAmerican, and the role of romance, race and gender in all of this.

What I would argue, then, in the case of the two texts I'm interested in here is that the ready figurations and narrative traditions of American Romance have made available constitutive elements that automatically engage with the cultural discourse of the form—its mythic reflections and refractions of American self-consciousness. In each case this engagement is heightened by a central image of secret surveillance, a covert, suspicious, and ultimately inquisitorial inspection of quotidian American life being carried out by the protagonists—Woolrich's Hal Jeffries and Hitchcock's L.B. 'Jeff' Jeffries. Ironically, neither Hal nor Jeff can be characterised as men 'on the run' because they have been immobilised, each having suffered a broken leg,

¹¹ Cf. Fiedler, *ibid.* p.27:

In our most enduring books, the cheapjack machinery of the gothic novel is called on to represent the hidden blackness of the human soul and human society. . . . However shoddily or ironically treated, horror is essential to our literature. It is not merely a matter of terror filling the vacuum left by the suppression of sex in our novels, of Thanatos standing in for Eros. Through these gothic images are projected certain obsessive concerns of our national life: the ambiguity of our relationship with Indian and Negro, the ambiguity of our encounter with nature, the guilt of the revolutionist who feels himself a parricide—and, not least of all, the uneasiness of the writer who cannot help believing that the very act of composing a book is Satanic revolt.

but this circumstance—that renders them spectators on life rather than the American men of action they otherwise would be—leads to their restless inspection of others in a central activity that seems to metaphorise either a cultural fascination with the state of Americanness or a cultural anxiety concerning it, or both.

In part, their surveillance activities are determined not only by personal but also by historical circumstance, and here the dates are certainly important. The bombing of Pearl Harbour on December 6, 1941 ended the era of American isolationism and Woolrich's mid-1942 hero Hal Jeffries clearly appears representative of the vigilance that was now essential to the maintenance of American life. It is likely no accident that the criminal threat to the social order here—unnoticed by the authorities, and unregarded by them when it is brought to their attention—comes from a Scandinavian, Lars Thorwald, recalling the treachery of Quisling less than a year before in forming the collaborationist wartime government in Norway. In this regard the story celebrates the moral alertness of the American public and the civic responsibilities enjoined upon and performed by the citizenry at large in time of war. The case of Hitchcock's Jeff, in time of Cold War, is not dissimilar, although there are other aspects to his surveillance which I will deal with later. But it is by fulfilling this civic responsibility of vigilance that Hal and Jeff find themselves precipitated within the mystery structure of romance. Each now shares something with and is co-opted to that evolving image of American masculinity that reaches back into 19th-century origins, but which at this time had developed into its modern urban form: the hard-boiled private detective.

At the closing of the geographical frontier in the 1890s the borderlines of American experience were redrawn along the foggy psychological and moral lines of an increasingly complex and claustrophobic modern urban life, which became the characteristic domain of the hard-boiled detective. 'Like the West of the 19th century,' Richard Slotkin notes, 'the modern city is a living entity capable of generating events (crime waves, scandals, new rackets) that may require incorporation with, and modifications of, the formulas of literary fiction;' and he goes on to suggest:

In the hard-boiled detective, the characters and roles of dime-novel outlaw and detective ... are fully combined, and their ideological opposition reconciled. The hard-boiled detective is both an agent of law and an outlaw who acts outside the structures of legal authority for the sake of a personal definition

of justice, which often takes the form of a private quest or revenge.¹²

From Marxist pulp writer Dashiell Hammett onwards (and he was another who would have his problems with HUAC), this peculiarly American version of the private investigator had become a characteristic but problematic feature of the mystery narrative in the United States. On the one hand, he is the figure who accesses intuitive truths of justice that an increasingly arthritic socio-judicial system has lost touch with, so in this sense he is a socially revivifying figure; but to do so he is obliged to become familiar with the criminal milieu and operate outside conventional mechanisms of the law. For this reason, his very existence implies an inability of conventional policing to do its job effectively, therefore highlighting that worrying incapacity on the part of the institutions of social order to provide security and justice for its citizens. It is this latter aspect in particular that features heavily in both Woolrich's story and Hitchcock's film,¹³ as the mainspring of the tension arises not only from the protagonist's immobility but equally from his inability to convince his policeman friend of the criminal and sinful acts taking place in the unprepossessing suburban apartments just beyond his rear window. Given these sorts of correspondences it is impossible not to be struck by other features of style, figuration and narrative element that tie this story firmly to the American Romance tradition.

To begin, there is the first person narrative form—Woolrich's Hal tells his story, in the style of other hard-boiled detectives of the period like Hammett's Continental Op and Chandler's Phillip Marlow, but this mode of narration reaches further back within the American tradition to narrators like Ishmael, Huck Finn and even the 'Walt Whitman' persona of *Leaves of Grass*. In instances like these, the first-person mode was employed by writers who were seeking consciously to develop a national literary tradition, and they used it precisely for its capacity to highlight the value of the individual perspective within the multitudinous democratic order, because it gives potent expression to the felt truths of the individual soul.¹⁴ In this, first-person

¹² Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (University of Oklahoma Press: 1992), p.219.

¹³ It is worth noting parenthetically that within two years Hitchcock would release two other films that specifically take up this theme, first in a European context in *To Catch a Thief* (1955)—scripted by John Michael Hayes, who also provided the screenplay for *Rear Window*—and then back in the United States, and in an unusually gritty style, in *The Wrong Man* (1956).

¹⁴ As Thoreau reminded his readers:

in American fiction becomes the narrative mode of personal conviction in defiance of any contrary personal, social or cultural pressure. This is how it operates for Huck Finn on his raft, allowing him to give expression to the worrying but irresistible feeling of his growing human kinship with Jim—a feeling that challenges all of the prejudicial structures of American social and racial life, structures that he has internalised as the voice of conscience and which leave him in a state of torment as he perceives his own actions to be sinful (in social terms) even as we perceive them to be admirable (in moral terms). What Huck feels, that is, is an intuited moral truth about the shared humanity of Jim and himself, so his first-person narration in this context is a mechanism for dramatising the distance between personal conviction and orthodox opinion, and for validating the former, and in a sense this is how the mode operates in Woolrich's story as Hal's conviction ('it *had* to be murder') overrides the authority of the official judicial view as given by his police inspector friend Boyne.¹⁵

In addition, like Huck, Hal has an African-American companion to help him in his quest to solve the mystery of the rear window, his 'day houseman' Sam. Hal has a peculiarly intimate relationship with Sam and they have shared ten years' companionship of a kind sufficient to embolden him to ask Sam to put himself in danger by taking his place and, when he does so, to fear for him in an intense and deeply personal way. In this version of the story Sam is the character dispatched to poke around the Thorwald apartment

In most books, the I, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference. We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking.

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*,

https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/t/thoreau/henry_david/walden/complete.html;
(accessed 1/12/2017).

¹⁵ The agitation of Hal's sense of conviction in the face of official complacency shows clearly in his account:

Guilty! Guilty as all hell, and the police be damned!

My hand started toward the phone, came back again. What was the use? They wouldn't listen now any more than they had before. 'You should have seen his face, etc.' And I could hear Boyne's answer: 'Anyone gets a jolt from an anonymous letter, true or false. You would yourself.' They had a real live Mrs. Thorwald to show me—or thought they had. I'd have to show them the dead one, to prove that they both weren't one and the same. I, from my window, had to show them a body.

Cornel Woolrich, 'It Had To Be Murder', <http://www.miettecast.com/woolrich.pdf>
(accessed 1/12/17).

to help confirm Hal's suspicions, but in doing so he also comes to stand in for Hal, implying a sense of equality and identity:

I called Sam in. 'I want you to do something for me that's a little risky. In fact, damn risky. You might break a leg, or you might get shot, or you might even get pinched. We've been together ten years, and I wouldn't ask you anything like that if I could do it myself. But I can't, and it's got to be done.'¹⁶

Sam is less than enthusiastic—'I'm just an easy mark for you,' he complains—but we learn of Hal's earnest concern for Sam's welfare as the story continues:

I watched him at it. There wasn't any way I could protect him, now that he was in there. Even Thorwald would be within his rights in shooting him down—this was break and entry.¹⁷ I had to stay in back behind the scenes, like I had been all along. I couldn't get out in front of him as a lookout and shield him. Even the dicks had had a lookout posted.

He must have been tense, doing it. I was twice as tense, watching him do it. The twenty-five minutes took fifty to go by. Finally he came over to the window, latched it fast. The lights went, and he was out. He'd made it. I blew out a bellyful of breath that was twenty-five minutes old.¹⁸

This is interesting in itself, referencing as it does the sense of black-white kinship that evolves in the American Romance quest narrative, but in addition, and similar again to Jim with Huck, Sam taps into the folkloric traditions of black wisdom which he passes on to Hal, who uses it to solve the crime.¹⁹ Here is the first intimation of something sinfully amiss out the rear window:

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ The likelihood of this consequence is heightened considerably when one considers that Sam is African-American, so he is putting himself at significant risk for Hal, just as Jim does for Huck at various times.

¹⁸ Op. cit.

¹⁹ Jim's connection to black folklore and superstition is evident in a comic manner in the episode with the prophetic hairball, and in a more ominous manner with the snakeskin on Jackson Island, where Huck learns to trust Jim implicitly on such matters ('I made up my mind I wouldn't ever take a-holt of a snake-skin again with my hands, now that I see what had come of it. Jim said he reckoned I would believe

A cricket chirped in one of the back yards. Sam came in to see if I wanted anything before he went home for the night. I told him no, I didn't—it was all right, run along. He stood there for a minute, head down. Then I saw him shake it slightly, as if at something he didn't like. 'What's the matter?' I asked.

'You know what that means? My old mammy told it to me, and she never told me a lie in her life. I never once seen it to miss, either.'

'What, the cricket?'

'Any time you hear one of them things, that's a sign of death someplace close around.'

I swept the back of my hand at him. 'Well, it isn't in here, so don't let it worry you.'

He went out, muttering stubbornly: 'It's somewhere close by, though. Somewhere not very far off. Got to be.'

The door closed after him, and I stayed there alone in the dark.²⁰

Later, when Hal's vague suspicions begin to crystallize into something more pointed, it is this conversation about the ominous insect that appears to be the unconscious metaphorical agent for his realisation:

For two days a sort of formless uneasiness, a disembodied suspicion, I don't know what to call it, had been flitting and volplaning around in my mind, *like an insect looking for a landing place*. More than once, just as it had been ready to settle, some slight thing, some slight reassuring thing, such as the raising of the shades after they had been down unnaturally long, had been enough to keep it winging aimlessly, prevent it from staying still long enough for me to recognize it. The point of contact had been there all along, waiting to receive it. Now, for some reason, within a split second after he tossed over the empty mattresses, it landed—zoom! And the point of contact expanded—or exploded, whatever you care to call it—into a certainty of murder. [My italics.]²¹

him next time.'—

<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/t/twain/mark/finn/complete.html#chapter29> accessed 1/12/17).

²⁰ Woolrich, op.cit.

²¹ Ibid.

Considered in the light of the American Romance tradition, narrative details like this can take on particular kinds of significance. For example, thanks to Sam Hal discovers that Thorwald lives on Benedict Avenue,²² a provocative name that might lead one to wonder, in this context, just how far this murderous husband will go to regain the desired state of bachelordom again, to be once more on the run from the 'fall of sex, marriage, and responsibility,' in Fiedler's phrase. Or one might wonder just how jaundiced an eye gay author Cornel Woolrich was bringing to this view of the hidden but violent misogyny of marital relations in everyday American life. The protagonist's suspicions about that life emanate from his own domain of homosocial and racial congeniality within his small apartment, and the truth he arrives at regarding the state of heterosexual union in the American scene is a darkly gothic one—the last time a husband murdered his wife and disposed of her within the fabric of the building itself in this manner was a century before in Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Black Cat', a perfect early example of suburban gothic that clearly seems to be referenced here.²³ And it's implications of this kind that lead one to suspect that the dark explorations of Americanness found in the American Romance tradition would have been more than a little concerning for authorities—had they read it—whose task it was to root out the un-American. But perhaps that's enough to go on with, and so I'd like now to turn to Hitchcock's view of the matter.

As I have tried to show, Woolrich's story falls easily within the American Romance tradition, specifically referencing figures and incidents from earlier texts and engaging with ideas of America, Americanness and the UnAmerican in such a way as both to affirm the national mythic belief in American maverick individualism (such as Hal displays here), but also ironically to interrogate aspects of the American imaginary and its pictures of sociality and masculinity. In adapting the story Hitchcock re-figures these elements by co-opting that tradition to the forms and styles of 1950s

²² This sly reference to homosociality was unfortunately changed for the film, suggesting either that the filmmakers didn't think the audience would get the reference or that they missed it themselves.

²³ In this version of the story Thorwald cements his wife into the kitchen floor of the apartment above, which is being renovated. For further discussion of Poe's use of the gothic mode to explore misogynistic pathologies see in particular Joan Dayan, 'Poe's Women: A Feminist Poe?' *Poe Studies*, 06/1991, Volume 24, Issue 1-2, 1-12; and Gerald Kennedy, 'Poe, 'Ligeia,' and the Problem of Dying Women,' *New Essays on Poe's Major Tales*, ed. Kenneth Silverman (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), pp.113-129.

Hollywood cinema.²⁴ The central requirement of that cinema was the inclusion of the sentimental romance narrative, which previously had been excluded from the American Romance tradition.²⁵ Nevertheless, if it was the business of this form to negotiate the ambiguous terrain of race and sexuality through gothic-inflected romance narratives, as Fiedler was to claim, then here Hitchcock might be seen as trading Woolrich's apparent interest in the former for his own in the latter by jettisoning the figure of the African-American offside and replacing him with female figures who will challenge the dominant cultural self-imagery of vigilant American masculinity, and wilfully reconfigure the mystery narrative of the American Romance as a power negotiation of gender and status.

In this Hitchcock seems to have approached his work in a spirit of real mischief, casting satirical perspectives on both the paranoid vigilance of the nation in time of Cold War and the sexual obsessions and anxieties of its mythic masculine figures as represented here by Jeff, seemingly beset by voyeuristic sexual yearning coupled with an almost pathological erotic timidity. Where Woolrich's protagonist puts American life under inspection, Hitchcock puts the vigilant American under observation by framing him in a way that the story's first-person narrator could not have been since, by definition, in literature it is the narrator who does the framing. Hal tells us about himself as an interested, alert, and suspicious observer of domestic life outside his rear window, and he is quick to point out that he finds himself in this situation through force of circumstance, just in case his actions might be taken the wrong way:

Sure, I suppose it was a little bit like prying, could even have been mistaken for the fevered concentration of a Peeping Tom. That wasn't my fault, that wasn't the idea. The idea was, my movements were strictly limited just around this time. I could get from the window to the bed, and from the bed to the window, and that was all. The bay window was about the best feature my rear bedroom had in the warm weather. It was unscreened, so I had to

²⁴ Again, this needn't have been a conscious intention on Hitchcock and screenwriter John Michael Hayes' part—it is simply the effect that takes place in this instance of adaptation at this cultural moment.

²⁵ Although it certainly had already figured in previous Hollywood adaptations of the form, such as Howard Hawks' film of *The Big Sleep* eight years earlier (1946), which grafted onto Chandler's hard-boiled detective story a romance narrative between Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall that successfully capitalised on their steamy off-screen liaison.

sit with the light out or I would have had every insect in the vicinity in on me. I couldn't sleep, because I was used to getting plenty of exercise. I'd never acquired the habit of reading books to ward off boredom, so I hadn't that to turn to. Well, what should I do, sit there with my eyes tightly shuttered?²⁶

Jeff, on the other hand, is offered to us as an object for our observation and takes his place within the scene of American life as presented. And that presentation is rich in ironic implication as the American Romance of Woolrich's story becomes co-opted by Hitchcock to an examination of the state of the union—both national and romantic—in 1950s America. Here, the vigilance that arises from Cold War political anxieties becomes subsumed within a larger voyeuristic watchfulness that arises from libidinous masculinity, compounded into a general salaciousness that is figured in that enormous camera lens which L.B. Jeffries will ultimately use to secretly pry into the doings of his neighbours. So, with no disclaimer such as Hal provides for his actions, we are clearly encouraged to read the prevailing vigilance and voyeurism figured in the person of Jeff as different aspects of a generalised American masculine sensibility at once sexually preoccupied but given equally to the paranoid suspicions of the culturally anxious—a paranoia keyed to the threats of romantic love as much as any activities that may be viewed as politically or criminally questionable. This is clear from the opening of the film where Jeff discusses his fear of matrimony as he ogles the cavorting Miss Torso across the backyard while helicopter pilots buzz female sunbathers on the roof, suggesting that this is no longer a story driven by the moral conviction of the inquisitive storyteller, it is about the attractions of the rear window and the drives that motivate the figure obsessed with looking out of it.²⁷

That's why, from the start of this crime mystery, there's a more obvious crime and, indeed, a more obvious mystery than the murder that will ultimately appear to be the narrative focal point, and both the crime and the mystery relate to Jeff. The crime is invasion of privacy, about which Jeff's nurse, Stella, warns him, taking the opportunity to make a pertinent observation on the general state of surveillance that seems to have arisen:

²⁶ Woolrich, op.cit.

²⁷ To be fair, when Jeff moves from the binoculars to the camera lens to pursue his inquiry the film is also implicating the viewer in this general vigilance that beset 1950s America, linking cinematic voyeurism with the anxious watchfulness of everyday life.

Stella: New York state sentence for a Peeping Tom is six months in the workhouse.

Jeff: Oh, hello Stella.

Stella: They've got no windows in the workhouse. You know in the old days they used to put your eyes out with a red hot poker. Are any of those bikini bombshells you're always watching worth a red hot poker? Oh dear, we've become a race of Peeping Toms. What people ought to do is get outside their own house and look in for a change.

But Jeff feels himself above such criticisms, and that's the problem with him—he habitually feels himself above the normal run of things, looking out on the world in rather a godlike manner, giving names to the characters within the human drama he witnesses and bestowing narratives upon them as if they existed for his own detached amusement. And he certainly is the detached type, although he thinks he is immersing himself in experience by running around the world taking photographs of mountaintops and remote villages. But, as we see when he looks out his own back window, his binoculars and his camera lens are really the means by which he distances himself from the world and shapes it according to his own view. Indeed, so detached does this make him that he appears to have stood in the middle of a motor racetrack, thinking he could photograph the cars without being touched by them, as we see from the photograph on his wall in the opening pan—



—which is why he is now in a wheelchair with a broken leg.

This gets us to the mystery I mentioned before, which is less of a mystery now, perhaps. That is, why is Jeff so resistant to the attractions of Lisa and the promise of domestic bliss she seems to offer? In fact, Jeff has an aversion to this kind of domestic happiness, as he tells his editor in that conversation I mentioned earlier: 'If you don't do something to pull me out of this swamp of boredom,' he says, 'I'm gonna do something drastic... I'm gonna get married, and then I'll never be able to go anywhere.' This is an issue that doesn't arise for Hal in the largely womanless world of Woolrich's story, but Jeff clearly represents that kind of rugged masculinity driven by physical excitement—which seems to be a surrogate kind of sexual drive—but not driven by mature romantic interest, which would result in that precipitous 'fall of sex, marriage and responsibility' that is to be avoided at all costs. However, Jeff's broken leg has now curtailed his 'man on the run' days and he finds himself an observer rather than an actor in the dramas of life, looking out on the day to day world of 1950s domestic America, and I think it is the irony of this situation that might have appealed the most to Hitchcock when he came to adapt this story—or, as he put it, when he came to 'forget all about the book and start[ed] to create cinema'. Coupled with his horror of boredom and thirst for adventure, there is something inescapably adolescent about this mixture of sexual longing and romantic timidity that we see in Jeff, and the film's interest in these aspects of his personality reveal Hitchcock's recurrent fascination with the American male and his sexual proclivities, inhibitions and anxieties.²⁸

So here, as American Romance meets Hollywood romance, we are given the opportunity to observe Jeff, immobile but ever-vigilant in his voyeuristic thirst for mystery, watching and responding to the varieties of

²⁸ Hitchcock seemed to delight in exploring the darker areas of Jimmy Stewart's screen persona for the purposes of deconstructing American masculinity—a persona that included the image of the man who had featured as the all-American Boy hero of *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (Frank Capra, 1939), who became a real life war hero in the air force in the Second World War, and who then returned to the silver screen as a more mature if slightly less optimistic all-American Boy reviving the American dream of democratic community in another Capra classic, *It's A Wonderful Life* (1946). Against this, Hitchcock was to cast him as Rupert Cadell, the patrician and deeply questionable mentor of the homoerotic murderers in *Rope* (1948), and then, a few years after *Rear Window*, as the sexually obsessed, broken-down police detective Scottie Ferguson in *Vertigo* (1958).

American heterosexual experience as Hitchcock surrounds him with a kind of laboratory of male-female romantic relationships. Thus, he can watch the first moments of physical attraction as admirers flock to gaze upon the pneumatic attractions of Miss Torso ('She's like a queen bee with her pick of the drones,' he tells Lisa)—



—or he can imagine the frenetic life of sexual passion playing out behind the closed blinds of the honeymooners²⁹—

²⁹ This is another significant departure from Woolrich's story, where the young couple are constantly out jitterbugging. Here, Hitchcock evokes all of the heat of newlywed sexual passion behind the closed blinds, but ironically follows the path of honeymoon passion through long enough for us to witness the beginnings of an exhausted indifference in the young husband that might set this pair on the familiar marital journey that begins with the re-opening of the blinds and ends with the bed on the fire escape for all to see.



—or he can observe a comfortable but jaded marriage where sex plays such a minor part that the couple can sleep in the open and affection has been transferred to the family dog—



—or he can look at the Thorwalds—



—where marriage appears to have broken down irreparably, to the point where he imagines the husband has murdered the wife. And this panorama gives us the clue that this is a film not so much about matters of crime and justice as it is about gender and romance in contemporary America, because all we know about the crime is that it relates to the nature of the relationship between a man and a woman, as does every drama playing out in the flats and balconies behind Jeff’s apartment, from the irresistibly passionate to the suicidal and the murderous.

The questions framed by this scenario are very different to any raised in Woolrich’s story. In particular, as Jeff surveys the scene outside his rear window we are prompted to wonder: in this world of male authority constructed around masculine values and the voyeuristic male gaze, just how do women negotiate their place? There are those who simply opt out, like the sculptress, perfectly content with the world of art and beauty—as we see at the end:



But then there are those who find such solitude unbearable, like Miss Lonelyhearts, a precautionary figure who shows the devastation suffered by those unable to establish a mature and fulfilling relationship.



The man she brings home one night turns out to be an oversexed adolescent and she is brutalised by the experience. What saves her from her despair is the music of the composer who is writing a song called 'Lisa', which plays at the end of the film. But earlier he and his friends had gathered together around the piano to sing about another Lisa—Mona Lisa, with these lyrics:

Mona Lisa, Mona Lisa, men have named you
You're so like the lady with the mystic smile
...
Are you warm, are you real, Mona Lisa?
Or just a cold and lonely lovely work of art?

This is the dilemma of Jeff's Lisa, caught between two extremes—on the one hand she fashions herself like a sculpture according to an ideal of beauty celebrated by the world of high fashion, but Jeff complains that she is 'too perfect'. She has to show him that she has a place and a value in his world, symbolised by the negative image of the woman in the frame Jeff keeps on his wall—



—because he looks for the opposite of the 'too perfect' magazine beauty.



So we are presented with a crime thriller seemingly more interested in the crime of Peeping Tomism and invasion of privacy than the murder its source story's title stressed with particular insistence was the focus of the matter, and a relationship that can't get started because the masculinity of the man and the femininity of the woman have been fashioned by romance codes that constitutionally cannot accommodate themselves to one another. And there is something about that femininity in particular that Jeff is particularly disdainful of—the woman's way of looking at things. We see this early on, when Stella explains her theory of economic forecasting, about which he is very unimpressed:

Stella: You know, I should have been a gypsy fortune teller instead of an insurance company nurse. I've got a nose for trouble—smell it ten miles away. You heard of that market crash in '29? I predicted that.

Jeff: Now just how did you do that, Stella?

Stella: Simple. I was nursing a director of General Motors—kidney ailment, they said. Nerves, I said. Then I ask myself—what's General Motors got to be nervous about? Over-production I says. Collapse. When General Motors has to go to the bathroom ten times a day the whole country's ready to let go.

Jeff: Well, Stella, in economics a kidney ailment has no relationship to the stock market—none whatsoever.

Stella: Crashed, didn't it?

Jeff puts his faith in masculine rationality and discounts the feminine, but as the mystery unfolds he is forced to acknowledge two things: first, that there might be a value in the feminine qualities he has long disdained, and second, that he has developed real and deep romantic feelings for Lisa.

This occurs at a point at which multiple genres shift and integrate, as Hitchcock skilfully weaves together the disparate interests of the various genres at play here. We begin with the American Romance mystery of Jeff's coolness towards Lisa and his maverick activity of illicit surveillance, which develops into the mystery of Thorwald and his wife, which begins to claim more and more of our attention. At this point Jeff as investigator is detached, but this detachment lessens as the investigation proceeds, particularly in that moment when Lisa puts herself at risk by combining Jeff's mystery plot with her love romance plot in a kind of wager in a scene that comically highlights Jeff's sexual squeamishness and her erotic intrepidity:

Lisa: It doesn't make sense Jeff.

Jess: What doesn't?

Lisa: Women aren't that unpredictable.

Jeff: Mmm. Well I can't guess what you're thinking.

Lisa: A woman has a favourite handbag; it always hangs on her bedpost where she can get at it easily. And then all of a sudden she goes away on a trip and leaves it behind. Why?

Jeff: Because she didn't know she was going on a trip and where she's going she wouldn't need the handbag.

Lisa: Yes, but only her husband would know that. And that jewellery. Women don't keep their jewellery in a handbag getting all twisted and scratched and tangled up.

Jeff: Would they hide it in their husband's clothes?

Lisa: They do not. And they don't leave it behind, either. Why, a woman going anywhere but the hospital would always take makeup, perfume and jewellery.

Jeff: That's inside stuff, huh?

Lisa: It's basic equipment. And you don't leave it behind in your husband's drawer or in your favourite handbag.

Jeff: I'm with you sweetie, I'm with you, but Tom Doyle has a pat answer for that.

Lisa: That Mrs Thorwald left at 6 a.m. yesterday with her husband?

Jeff: According to those witnesses.

Lisa: Well I have a pat rebuttal for Mr Doyle. That couldn't

have been Mrs Thorwald, or I don't know women.

Jeff: Oh. Well what about the witnesses?

Lisa: We'll agree they saw a woman, but she was not Mrs Thorwald. That is, not yet.

Jeff: [*Impressed*] Is that so?

In giving Jeff the 'inside stuff' on feminine behaviour Lisa has begun to reveal to him the narrowness of his own perspectives, but his composure is more seriously shaken by what comes next:

Lisa: I'd like to see your friends face when we tell him. He doesn't sound like much of a detective.

Jeff: Oh don't be too hard on him, he's a steady worker. I sure wish he'd show up.

Lisa: Don't rush him—we have all night.

Jeff: [*Puzzled*] We have all what?

Lisa: Night. I am going to stay with you.

Jeff: Well you'll have to clear that with my landlord.

Lisa: I've got the whole weekend off

Jeff: Well that's very nice but I only have one bed.

Lisa: If you say anything else I'll stay tomorrow night too.

Jeff: I won't be able to give you any pyjamas.

Lisa: You said I have to live out of one suitcase. [*Fetches bag*] I bet yours isn't this small.

Jeff: This is a suitcase?

Lisa: Well, a Mark Cross overnight case anyway—compact but ample enough. [*Removes negligee*]

Jeff: Looks like you packed in a hurry. Look at this—isn't that amazing.

Lisa: I'll trade you my feminine intuition for a bed for the night.

In offering to 'trade you my feminine intuition for a bed for the night,' Lisa is proposing to trade her desire for romance for his desire for mystery, and it's at this point that the two plots cross as the mystery shifts gear and becomes a thriller. The point of difference between the two is that the mystery is no longer a puzzle to be solved but rather a threat to be negotiated, and as Lisa enters Thorwald's apartment to carry out the crucial search she becomes an object of real romantic interest for Jeff because her intrepidity here shows him that there is so much more to her than a beautiful surface.

This is the point at which thriller and romance meet and merge: when Lisa finds the ring and places it on her finger, pointedly showing Jeff through the open window, she both solves the mystery and confirms her desirability in his world. Her action of pointing at the ring thus has a double significance: on the one hand she is indicating to Jeff that she has solved the crime by finding the ring, but on the other she is effectively saying to him: 'You have underestimated me: I'm bold enough and clever enough to take my place in your world, and now I've earned the right to have you place your ring on my finger.'





But menaced by Thorwald, Lisa the investigator is now at stake in the mystery, not detached and removed from it, and just as she is drawn into this world of danger, so she draws Jeff after her because her actions have awoken his romantic feeling for her. In this way Jeff is now drawn out of the shadows of his own apartment into the light of the world where he can be seen by Thorwald, put at stake in the game and threatened by the world of mystery he once simply observed from afar.

So while accessing many of the constituent figurative and narrative elements of the American Romance form, and by exploring the ironies and implications of these to probe aspects of the national self-consciousness in that subversive way literary scholarship was discovering to be a feature of the tradition, Hitchcock here also transforms Woolrich's source story through a series of character changes (from Afro-American offsider to feminine love interest) and generic shifts (from mystery to thriller to love romance) in order to render it as a highly effective if idiosyncratic Hollywood thriller. Hitchcock himself said of the film:

Rear Window was structurally satisfactory because it is the epitome of the subjective treatment. A man looks; he sees; he reacts. Thus you construct a mental process. *Rear Window* is entirely a mental process, done by use of the visual.³⁰

³⁰ Donald Spoto, *The Art of Alfred Hitchcock, Fifty Years of His Motion Pictures* (First published 1976; Anchor Books: New York, 1992), p.224.

Indeed, but what is Jeff looking at and reacting to? A mystery, or a woman, or both, because mystery and desire have become one in the thrill of this particular kind of romance. We have moved from a position where women are in the negative in Jeff's world to one where they are in the positive as all romantic relations are resolved throughout the apartment block. The trick here is that, unlike typical crime dramas, this state is achieved not through the solution to the crime but through the process of criminal detection that solution requires, in which Jeff is surprised to discover that the female perspective, which he had originally disparaged, is more than equal to any male view.

Traditionally with the mystery narrative the moral order of things is made unstable by criminality, and if left unpunished our comfortable sense of security in the world in which we live, our faith in the justness and fairness of that world, can be deeply threatened. Consequently, the solution to the mystery should create order where there was chaos and disorder. Here, however, it is the playing out of romantic desire that ultimately creates order in the apartments—the crime is simply incidental to this, although it has been integral to the romantic journey for Lisa and Jeff. That is one of the principal effects of Hitchcock's adaptation here: to relocate the traditional metaphorical and ideological functions of the mystery romance plot within the love romance plot. The other, I think, is the introduction of comic and satiric elements into an otherwise taut mystery narrative in order to underscore the range and character of the film's observations about the state of the union—national and romantic. These might well have been out of place in a tale of this kind in 1942, but as a film of its time *Rear Window* comments archly upon the fevered state of suspicion and paranoia that beset national life in the '50s, metaphorically drawing associations between this and prized cultural values like rugged individualism which, in the generic light of American Romance, can be seen as implicated in a chauvinist view of the world and a hyperactive vigilance arising from a libidinous and adolescent masculine sensibility. The film then moves on to ironically explore other issues pertinent to the times, like the questionable role of institutional authorities, the complexities of masculinity and femininity in the coded realms of an increasingly media-saturated post-war society, and the constrained and problematic opportunities for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness in the claustrophobic world of modern urban America.

At the end of the film it's still a masculine world, but if at the beginning the woman in the negative indicates the degree to which Lisa will have to modify her nature and desire to accommodate herself to Jeff's world, in the final

image we get a clear sense that that world will now be affected by her influence and Jeff will need to meet certain expectations that she has. And we note too that if Jeff had paid the cost of a broken leg for living that romantically detached but rugged masculine life at the opening of the film, precisely the same cost is ironically exacted by his entry into the world of mature human relations represented by his romantic relationship with Lisa when he breaks his other leg in a fall from his balcony, literalising the metaphorical 'fall of sex, marriage and responsibility' as the American Romance hero lands with a thud in a world of dull, bourgeois routine and, like Rip Van Winkle, he falls asleep.



Which is a very wry take on the American tradition by a very artful British director, and indeed if it weren't for the fact that somewhere in the middle of it all a woman is murdered and dismembered by a psychopathic husband, I'd almost be inclined to call this brilliantly conceived thriller a romantic comedy. Or perhaps, given the characteristic elements at play here, it would be better simply to call it a Hitchcock film.

David Kelly teaches American literature and literature and cinema in the English Department at the University of Sydney.