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**Rear Window: Polio as a Cultural Ambience**

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In the 1950's, the question of polio as a disease that could be eradicated was still unanswered and the struggle to develop a vaccine was the frenetic backdrop for the biomedical field. Culture and daily life was infused with narratives and metaphors that attempted to control and understand the illness. "Rear Window" directed by Alfred Hitchcock was an example of a product of this ambience and though it never explicitly names polio it is infused with concepts and elements of the disease. The themes that course throughout the film reinforces and reflects certain archetypes developed to solidify the flexible and mutable nature of this feared health problem.

Primarily, polio is depicted through the main character, Jeff, whose situation of immobility becomes the catalyst of the conflict and provides the direct visual and tangible link between the actuality of polio. Paralysis became the visual indicator of "victims" of polio. Jeff with his cast and wheelchair throughout the entirety of the film epitomizes this sense of inability to move freely as someone who was formerly active and traveled frequently. Stagnancy frustrates Jeff throughout the film and he voices this sense of physical imprisonment. Trapped in his apartment, Jeff begins to become a "Peeping Tom" by spying into the windows of other tenants. Lisa remarks on this behavior saying, "Jeff if you could only see yourself ... it's diseased". This language clearly attempts to medicalize Jeff's condition as more than an accident but a chronic ailment that has penetrated his system. Polio's specter also appears in Jeff's care-taking. Every day, Jeff has the nurse covered by his insurance plan come and help him rehabilitate. The procedures of massaging, stretching, and testing his temperature reflects the methods utilized frequently to mitigate the symptoms of polio. This is furthered by the suggestions of the nurse, especially in terms of Jeff's temperature, the nurse states, "bathing beauties have not raised your temperature". Polio often was believed to lower libido and sexual

desire implying this for Jeff's only strengthens a connection between his current predicament and the epidemic that seems to be spreading fear across the American populace. Not only this but Jeff's cast can also be read through the lens of a reference to polio and the desire to not address the reality of the illness. Jeff wears a cast throughout the film that impedes his movement. On the cast someone has written, "Here lies the broken bones of Nathan Jeffries", demonstrates the equation of constant and unchanging condition of his "broken" state. As almost a eternal sentence, the phrase proposes the main phobia surrounding polio which was permanent disability, a stagnancy of physical state.

Atmosphere and setting indicate references to polio in the film, in the opening scene it is a balmy summer which is witnessed by the thermometer, couples sleeping outside, close ups of sweating foreheads, and children playing in the spray of fire hydrants. Polio was often viewed as a seasonal ailment that occurred during the summer months and particularly contracted by the young. The opening scene constructs this environment which remains the same only until the final scene of the film. Hence, context for the action allows for the film to be constantly permeated by polio as a thematic element in Hitchcock's tapping into the fears of the American public. For example, it is not only Jeff's that seems to be limited in terms of movement or impaired. Mr. Thornwalt's wife, the victim of the murder that propels the plot, is constantly in bed and referred to as "an invalid". Her lack of physical mobility makes her an easily covered up case. Thornwaldt is able to construct his alibi around her condition by sending her to "the countryside" as an excuse for her disappearance. This practice of sending the sick away has often been used as an attempt to control disease. Polio victims often were sent to locations where they could be more easily cared for by staff than by family members who worked. Virtually everyone in the film initially does not discredit this alibi which hints at the normality of this occurrence

within this place and time. Therefore, polio once again figures in as the current narrative that propels the thriller.

The antagonist in the film, Mr. Thornwald, acts as another reflection on the polio epidemic as a pertinent cultural narrative. Thornwald, on the eve where Jeff observes him leaving and returning multiple times to the apartment mirrors the depiction of polio in newsreels. Dark, trench coat wearing, and shadowy specter who comes and goes without any sense of predictability appeared through film throughout the era in order to stir up concern for protecting children from polio. eerily set in the dead of night, the sense that this occurrence could happen anywhere is remarked upon by Jeff and it is furthered by the the incredulity that the others have when Jeff tries to convince them that a homicide has happened in this neighborhood. Narratively, this coincides with the metaphors of polio as this silent unseen threat that has not been monitored or controlled to be able to be conquered by the surrounding community.

Overall, the thematic elements that harken to the general cultural phenomena attached to polio. Stagnancy versus mobility acts and echoes across all the subplots and actions of the characters. Jeff's fear of Lisa not being able to be a suitable wife for she is stagnant in her social status and does not have the ability to travel to exotic locales and risk her life on his expeditions as a freelance photographer. ironically, when it finally comes to the point where the necessity to break in and enter into Mr. Thornwald's apartment, Jeff is immobile and must allow for Lisa, the gendered female, to have agency. This tension is heightened in the scene and demonstrates once again how Jeff's handicap robs him of the volition and movement to carry out his mental machinations. Polio gains a phobic quality because it does happen to have this element of marring the body physically but leaving the mental capabilities intact. "The prison" of the body that Jeffs constantly complains about reinforces the reading of his ailment as a reference to

polios. Built around this key issue, "Rear Window" gains its powerful impact by reconstructing the ambient fears of the American public at this time in regards to the polio disease and uncertainty of vaccination. Hitchcock pulls from this context to explore what troubles and disturbs the American psyche yet, as Shell mentions seems to address the reference in a circumspect and veiled manner. The facade or veneer that allows the distance between the actual conditions of the culture and narrative to the specific disease seems to be a common response at this time to the unknown. To mitigate fear, people avoided directly identifying and naming polio and this similar approach appears in Hitchcock's filming. What seems to be the ambiguity in Hitchcock is whether this is a critique of how fear and terror are relegated and dealt with or is it a manifestation of Hitchcock's own desire to not confront polio head on when it happened to be at the height of contention. Hitchcock's film only furthers this phantom tangibility in the American society in regards to a disease that now escapes the public eye and has become the illness of a developing world. The vocabulary utilized during its height obscured its ability to be dealt with properly and this has made the situation slightly more difficult as the world tries to find the language to continue a dialogue that has left modern Western society.

### **Works Cited**

Rear Window. DVD. 2001. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. University City: Universal.