Rear Window Scene Analysis

I chose to look at the scene that begins when Jeffries calls Mr. Thorwald to get him out of his apartment and ending when the police come to Mr. Thorwald’s apartment after he has caught Lisa sneaking in (TIME MARKER). Hitchcock’s use of spacing, lighting, setting, props, and interactions between characters all allow Hitchcock to establish Jeffries’ powerlessness in the situation and develop important themes such as the opposition of male and female perspectives and peoples’ preoccupation with lives other than their own.

The scene begins with Lisa and Stella crossing over into Mr. Thorwald’s courtyard. This action represents the initial step in the merging of Jeff’s personal and romantic life with the mystery that is unfolding. This merging is central to the theme of the “terrible incompatibility of the male and female positions,” a theme that Hitchcock deals heavily with (Rear Window Ethics). In the movie, there is a contrast between the romantic life that Lisa wants to lead and the mystery that Jeff is preoccupied with. When Lisa climbs up into Thorwald’s apartment, she begins to “actively take control of the situation,” (Baker) and the barrier between Jeff’s romantic and mystery lives begins to dissolve.

When Lisa is in Mr. Thorwald’s apartment, Jeff and Stella look into Ms. Lonelyheart’s window and then into the musician’s window. These two apartments reveal another important theme that Hitchcock deals with, which is the isolation of people (Rear Window Ethics). The musician’s window has vertical bars going across it, and Ms. Lonelyheart’s has pulled the blinds down over her windows but Jeff and the audience can still see through the spaces between the bars. The bars in this scene could be seen as the
bars of a prison. The setting of the film, a courtyard where the audience can only see into people windows, especially lends itself to the prison theme in this scene because it portrays the characters trapped in “his or her own little prison.” Mrs. Lonelyhearts tries to escape her prison by committing suicide but eventually decides not to.

Once Thorwald has caught Lisa in his apartment, the camera angles that Hitchcock uses reveal Jeffries’ powerlessness in the situation. Hitchcock uses close ups when the camera is focused on Jeff’s reaction and long shots when it’s focused on Lisa and Thorwald’s interaction in the apartment. This technique puts the audience in Jeff’s situation, far away from Lisa and Thorwald and unable to help her get away from him. Jeff must simply watch the fight unfold from a distance, but is completely helpless. This sense of helplessness creates suspense because the audience has no idea what will happen to Lisa and knows that Jeff is unable to help her.

Lighting is also an important component of this scene, when Mr. Thorwald turns off the light as he is about to attack Lisa. Up until this point, Mr. Thorwald’s apartment has been illuminated and Jeff, Stella, and the audience are able to clearly see what is going on. However, when he turns off the light, he takes away Jeff’s ability to see into the apartment, further emphasizing his powerlessness in the situation. Jeff’s only source of power in the entire movie is the knowledge that he has from looking inside his neighbor’s windows, so turning the lights off deprives Jeff of his only power and prevents him from seeing exactly what is happening. This effect also creates a sense of suspense among the audience because it takes away our power to see what is going on. We become as unsure of what is about to happen as Jeff.
The camera is also a very important prop in this scene. Jeff uses the camera throughout the scene, including when he is watching Lisa and Mr. Thorwald interact with the police after they enter the apartment. Jeff’s camera is his primary tool for viewing his neighbor’s lives. In this scene, Jeff uses the camera to view everything happening in Thorwald’s apartment, thinking that he is the only one who can be doing the watching. The scene unfolding across from him is purely for his entertainment. When Thorwald realizes he is being watched and looks into Jeff’s apartment, his “reciprocal look would negate the power of Jeff’s voyeurism by converting Jeff from subject to object” (Howe). The camera plays a similar role to light in this scene. Jeff uses the camera as a source of power to gain knowledge over what is happening across from him, while Thorwald is completely ignorant of him. However, Thorwald takes away his upper hand when he looks at Jeff, and his camera lens no longer has the same power.

Hitchcock uses several techniques in the scene in Mr. Thorwald’s apartment in order to portray Jeff as powerless, convey several important themes, and build suspense.
Works Cited

Baker, David. “Seeing is Believing Detective and Romance in Rear Window.” 

Howe, Lawrence. “Through the Looking Glass: Reflexivity, Reciprocity, and 
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“Rear Window Ethics: Remembering and Restoring a Hitchcock Classic.” 