

**A STUDY OF HITCHCOCK'S FILM *THE REAR WINDOW***  
**ON HOW WE INTERPRET SOCIAL ACTIONS**

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**INTRODUCTION**

In commonsense knowledge, we usually take for granted that, with the appropriate evidence, we can understand the purposes and meanings of other people's actions. After all, social life is based on this. At the same time, we know that the purposes of these actions are not always revealed to us, and we explain this limitation in terms of insufficient information. However, these subjects are very complex and have been extensively studied. It is not at all easy to answer questions such as those that follow. How do we proceed when we try to understand other people's purposes? What is the nature of the evidence that we have about them? What are the functions of observation and interpretation that make it possible to understand them? What are the limits and problems of our understanding? These questions posit basic problems that are related to the debates on the scientific status of the social sciences and to the discussions concerning qualitative and quantitative methods. The answers to these questions have a direct bearing on many of the criteria for accepting or rejecting research papers and doctoral dissertations.

The film *The Rear Window* offers an outstanding example for the study of the problems of how we understand social action. The reason for this is that, in this masterpiece of suspense, Hitchcock undertook an important experiment about the processes of interpreting visual images and stories. He imposed the following conditions: the scene

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*Observer*", final part, introduced under the heading *To See and to Believe*. One of the main aims of this book is to show that the spectators are not passive recipients, who merely accumulate images of the film, but engage in an important cognitive and affective activity in the course of attempting to understand the story. Bordwell analyses how Jeff, and the spectators with him, interpret what they see. His approach is based on the theory of perception that is offered by cognitive psychology, which emphasizes that, when we see an object, we interpret the visual stimuli in accordance with our previous experience. These interpretations involve many forms of reasoning which we are not usually aware of.

In this paper we will follow up many research ideas of Bordwell, to whom we are deeply indebted, and, at the same time, we will resituate the study of *The Rear Window*, introducing other research questions, conceptual frameworks and approaches. In relation with the research questions, our main objective, as we have already mentioned, is to study what we can learn from this film of Hitchcock's in relation with the basic theories and problems concerning the interpretation of people's actions. The conceptual framework is organised in the following way:

The first part of the paper will discuss the classical theories of Max Weber (1864-1920) on understanding social action, creating social types and constructing specific methods for the social sciences. He claimed that we can directly observe the immediate purposes of people's actions, but not their deepest purposes and meanings.

The second part will study how Alfred Schutz (1899-1959) developed Weber's ideas and tried to ground them on the teachings of the philosophical school of phenomenology, which was founded by his professor, Edmund Husserl (1858-1938). Schutz focussed on the nature of the objects that are in our consciousness, on the analysis of intentional actions, and on the methods of the social sciences. He defended the position that we can never directly observe the purposes of other people, but we can interpret some of them by introducing types of actions. From these results, he drew important methodological conclusions. Against this background, we will discuss the points on which Weber and Schutz differ and will show that their differences depend on the concepts of what it is to observe, to interpret and to give meaning.

The third part of the paper will present a short introduction to the making of the film and the strategies used by Hitchcock in creating the thriller. The fourth part will closely examine the process that Jeff goes through when he interprets what he sees and when he looks for arguments to underpin his beliefs. This process is similar, with some exceptions, to the cognitive interpretation engaged in by the spectators in order to make sense of the narrative. This part will approach these subjects from the point of view of the previous theoretical concepts.

## **MAX WEBER'S APPROACH TO THE UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIAL ACTION**

### **Introduction to Max Weber**

Max Weber (1864-1920) is, with Emile Durkheim (1857-1917) and Karl Marx (1818-1883), among the most influential thinkers in the consolidation of sociology as a science, previously conceived by Auguste Comte (1798-1857) in the first half of the nineteenth century as a social physics. Weber is especially known for his essay *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930), which he completed in 1905, and

for his ideas on the bureaucratic stage of society as a form of legitimating power. We will situate his contributions in relation with the main debates in the social sciences.

In the debate on the relationships between beliefs and structures, Max Weber held that our beliefs can influence the social structure. *The Protestant Ethic*, with its ambiguities and problems, is a clear manifestation of this idea. On that point, he opposed Marx's claim that the social structure determines our institutions, culture and beliefs. In the debate on the individualistic or holistic approach to sociology, Weber held that the basic unit of research in the social sciences is always the individual, because only people can carry out meaningful actions. At this point, these ideas differentiate him from Durkheim's principle that the collectivity is the only valid unit in sociology.

The use of interpretative methods in social sciences, as opposed to the tradition that only accepts the methods of the natural sciences, which are supposed to be based on objective observations, raises the problem of their legitimacy. This subject has been debated since the last decades of the nineteenth century. Wilhelm Dilthey (1838-1910), in his analysis of the status of historical research, pointed out that the natural sciences study, by means of external observations, phenomena that are external to people, but the sciences of the spirit (*Geisteswissenschaften*) involve internal observation and require concepts such as meaning, purpose and value, which are foreign to the natural sciences. Building on this line of thought, Max Weber considered that interpretative methods constitute the basic instruments of sociology, without rejecting statistical methods, which he used in much of his research.

### **A method for understanding social actions**

Max Weber proposed the method that he called *verstehen* for understanding the meaning of people's actions. It consists of a certain kind of empathy between the actor, who is the subject of the research, and the observer, who is the researcher. The observer must be able to put himself in the place, in the skin, of the people he studies and try to identify himself with their motivations. Weber distinguished two kinds of *verstehen*.

The *aktuelles verstehen* or direct observational understanding allows us to understand what is happening when we observe an action. To take an example of Weber's, all of us are able to recognize that a person is angry, simply by looking at the expression on his face.

The *erklärendes verstehen* or explanatory understanding allows us to recognize the subjective motivations and meanings of action. This understanding takes place when we relate the act that we observe with a large context of meanings, which is based on our previous knowledge and experiences. In this way, the explanatory understanding tries to interpret the motivations and purposes of the action that we have previously recognized in the direct observational understanding.

This distinction introduces two levels of understanding actions and sheds light on the limitations of the first. In this respect, Max Weber analyses an example in the following way: When we observe a man in the countryside with a shotgun aimed at an animal, the direct observational understanding allows us to recognize that he is hunting. However, we cannot understand the meanings of his action, if we do not know if he is hunting for sport, for food, or whatever purpose is leading him.

With Alfred Schutz, we would criticise the idea that direct observational understanding does not involve interpretation. However, we retain the Weberian distinction in terms of

immediate and final purposes, which will be a basic instrument in our study of *The Rear Window*, where the immediate understanding is clear but the final purposes are problematic for our interpretations. In fact, they constitute the theme of the thriller. For a general introduction to Weber's ideas and a careful criticism of them, we recommend the book *Max Weber* (1982; 1997), by Frank Parkin.

Weber completed his analysis of how we understand actions by introducing the concept of typifications or "ideal types". Social phenomena are very complex and we introduce ideal types of social groups and patterns of behaviour in order to simplify them. The construction of these types is arbitrary, in the sense that they do not possess a real essence. In our study of *The Rear Window* we will emphasise that the people and actions that we see on the other side of the courtyard are highly typified. In this way Hitchcock facilitates our cognitive task and we can quickly get a superficial but sufficient understanding of them.

## **HUSSERL'S PHENOMENOLOGY AND SCHUTZ'S INTERPRETATION OF SOCIAL ACTION**

### **Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology**

Phenomenology and existentialism. As phenomenology has an important influence on the social sciences, qualitative methods and management research, we will introduce some ideas about it. This philosophical school was founded by Edmund Husserl (1858-1938) and one of its developments led to existentialism, espoused by philosophers such as Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980). If we were asked to perform a double intellectual somersault and to explain phenomenology and existentialism in a few lines, we would say that they focus on what we are thinking, or, in other terms, on what is in our consciousness. Mental objects present themselves in different forms, such as imaginations, fantasies, recollections and perceptions in the continuous experience of our personal life story. Phenomenology critically examines these objects in order to establish a solid base for philosophy and science, and existentialism looks at them with the idea of finding the subjective meanings of our life. So they are less interested in the real things in themselves than in our views about them. In this line of thought, G. Marcel and J.P. Sartre influenced some major novelists, such as Marcel Proust and Albert Camus, who tried to present the flow of consciousness of their characters.

From psychology and logic to phenomenology. Husserl studied mathematics, completed his PhD dissertation in 1883, and, after it, changed his research interests. In 1891 he published "*Philosophy of Arithmetic*" in which he tried to establish the foundations of the concept of natural numbers. He considered that this concept cannot be defined by more elementary notions, but can be approached using the mental operations of counting. G. Frege (1848-1895), who was working on the same problem from the logical point of view of set theory, criticised this psychologist approach and pointed out its circularity and limitations. Husserl accepted this criticism. We think that this intellectual experience influenced the creation of phenomenology and that it is a third way between logic and psychology, which has its own problems, approaches and methods.

Facts, essences and eidetic intuition. Contingent facts are not necessary, in the sense that they could happen or not happen. We know them by experience and our knowledge begins with experience. When we perceive a fact or an object, at the same time our consciousness captures its essence. With these ideas Husserl tried to solve

the following problem: Aristotle claimed that we generate or discover universal concepts by abstraction, which means that our mind separates and compares properties of objects. For instance, the experience of seeing many round objects, such as balls, leads us to separate the size, the colour, the matter and other properties and to generate the concept of sphere, whose essence is defined in geometry. Husserl asserted that this explanation is not acceptable because when we separate properties we need criteria for doing so, and these criteria already constitute the concept that we are trying to generate. He pointed out that, for instance, when we see a triangle, we perceive it as a contingent individual object and, at the same time, we capture the necessary universal essence of triangleness. For Husserl, we possess two kinds of intuition: with the first we capture individual objects, and with the second, which he called *eidetic* intuition, the essences or meanings of universal concepts.

The basic phenomenological method for the study of a general concept is to start with one of its objects and mentally modify its properties. For instance, if we try to understand the concept of table, we can think of a particular one and then mentally introduce small variations in its form until we reach a point at which the modified object is no longer a table. We repeat this process for each property of the initial table. This example is trivial, but phenomenology engaged in extremely long and meticulous reflections about basic concepts. For instance, the concept of time was divided into physical time, which we measure with clocks, biological time, which regulates our biological functions and psychological time, which is related to our perception. If we integrate the relationships of time with the meanings of our life and death, the subject is very complex. Heidegger, in his *magnum opus*, "*Being and Time*", pursued this line of thought.

Natural attitudes, evidence and *epoché*. Husserl pointed out that the natural attitude of people in everyday life is to take their beliefs for granted and to use them for guiding their actions, even if they have not any evidence of their truth. However, we cannot uncritically accept these beliefs in the foundations of philosophy and science. We have to bracket them, or, in other words, suspend our judgement about them and submit them to a rigorous criticism. This process, which Husserl called *epoché*, has some similarities with the Cartesian doubt. Descartes, looking for a solid foundation for philosophy, doubted everything, including the existence of the world that we perceive, till he found something that he considered indubitable: he could not doubt that he was doubting, and this led to the famous sentence "*Cogito ergo sum*", "I think, therefore I exist". Husserl's expression "to suspend judgement" expresses his distance from sceptical or methodological doubt, in the sense that in everyday life we take our beliefs for granted, but in philosophy and science we have to submit them to the criticism of the *epoché*.

Husserl, in the book published posthumously in 1954 "*The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*", claimed that normal science is a science of facts and, in the misery of our life, it has nothing to tell us about the problems of meaning and lack of meaning of human existence. These ideas have been very influential in the social sciences and management research. We hope that the intellectual somersault of this exposition of ours will not cause any harm.

### **Alfred Schutz and the interpretation of social action**

A. Schutz (1899-1959), who was a disciple of Husserl, tried to ground in phenomenology the ideas of Max Weber about the interpretation of human action. In his paper "Common Sense and Scientific Interpretation of Human Action" (1953) he begins with the claim that the objects of our consciousness are very complex mental

constructs, even if they seem simple. They are formed in the experience of living our lives and involve meanings, abstractions, idealizations and formalizations. To make his point clear he commented that the objects of our visual perception, which common sense considers mere representations, emerge from visual inputs that are completed by our fantasy. In his own words, "Even the thing perceived in everyday life is more than a single sense representation. It is a thought object, a construct of a highly complicated nature, involving not only particular forms of time successions in order to constitute it as an object of one single sense... but also a contribution of imagination of hypothetical sense presentations in order to complete it" (pgs. 302 – 303).

The interpretation of objects is complex. We can illustrate these ideas with an example. I am looking at the shelves of a room and perceive books. In fact, of each of them I see only a small part of the surface and my imagination completes the other parts and supposes that it has printed pages. Usually, these kinds of interpretations work without problems, but they can be wrong. Some supposed books could be secret boxes and the James Bond films present a lot of these kinds of delusions. Our interpretations of visual inputs are based on our previous experience, in which we got knowledge about typified objects. For Schutz, experience is always subjective and personal and, since it is largely socially shared, he tried to explain how we socialise our personal meanings. Even so, each of us has meanings in some areas that differ from those of other people. For instance, in surgery we have similar reactions to an anaesthetic if we are not allergic to it. However, we recall a terrible case that exemplifies the subjective character of experience and meanings: a Jewish lady undergoing surgery was reminded, by the anaesthesia, of the gas of the extermination chamber that she had survived. Because of that experience, she had a terrible reaction.

The interpretation of human intentional action is more complex than the perception of objects. For Schutz, the term "action" refers to human behaviour previously projected, or, in his own words "behaviour based on a preconceived project". In the action he distinguished three elements: the purpose of the action, the mental plan that designs and rehearses the act, and the execution of the plan in an act. Given this analysis, it is clear that, for Schutz, the purposes and the plan of an action are activities in the mind of the actors that cannot be directly observed by other people. Only the act, if it is a physical performance, can be seen by others. The mere visual inputs that we receive from other people's acts have no meanings for us in themselves, even if we videotape them and give their physical equations. To make sense of them, we have to interpret the purposes of the actors.

For the interpretation of actions, Schutz introduced the concept of subactions, whose purposes, plans and acts are a part of a complete action. For instance, I can ask for a pen in order to write. This is a subaction, which has its specific or immediate purpose, of a more general action, which has a final purpose. For instance, I handwrite an application for an academic position that is one of the main ideals of my life. Other people can interpret my act of asking for a pen, assigning to it my immediate purpose of writing, even if I often use pens as pointers and the normal interpretation may be wrong. However they cannot interpret the relationship of my act with my life ideals. Applying these ideas, Schutz introduced a large range of levels for typifying actions and people. These levels go from anonymous or superficial types of standard actions and professions, to deep intimate personal types. "*The Rear Window*" displays a large number of superficial typifications.

Comparing Max Weber's and A. Schutz's theories. As we have already mentioned, Schutz tried to ground the interpretative approaches of Weber in phenomenology. Now we can compare their differences. On the subject of interpretation and science in the paper we are discussing, Schutz established two levels of interpretation. First, there

are the commonsense interpretations of social action by the actors in their everyday life situations. In fact, Schutz was one of the first philosophers and sociologists who focussed on commonsense knowledge. Second, there are the scientific interpretations of human actions, produced by social researchers who follow scientific methods. In this way, he made clear that the social sciences involve a double hermeneutic: people interpret the social world and these interpretations guide their actions, and scientific observers interpret these actions.

We think that this paper by Schutz provides excellent arguments for the use of qualitative-interpretative methods in the social sciences. Max Weber introduced, at the level of the social sciences, the postulate of subjective interpretations, which claims that researchers can use interpretations in their works. Schutz extended it with pride to the level of everyday life situations, claiming that, in them, the actors need to give meanings to things and interpret other people's actions in order to undertake their own actions. We think that Max Weber would agree with the position of Schutz, which, perhaps, is implicit in Weber's ideas.

On the subject of observation and interpretation, as we have commented, Weber claimed that we can directly observe the immediate purposes of an action, not the final purposes. Schutz corrected the first statement in the sense that immediate purposes, too, need to be interpreted. We think that Schutz is right in this criticism. Schutz's examples, in which we see the act but we are not able to typify or interpret it, constitute very convincing arguments for Schutz's point of view. However, we can also understand why Weber took up his position: it is clear that observations always require that visual inputs be completed by our fantasy with ideas, models or types that result from our previous experience. The complex structure of the objects of our consciousness and the mental constructs of perception misled Weber. He did not realise that observation involves interpretation.

In overall comparison of Weber and Schutz on the interpretation of the purposes of human action, we can emphasise that when Schutz made use of phenomenology to ground this subject, he introduced an impressive base of concepts and views that has strongly influenced the development of the social sciences.

### **MAKING THE FILM *THE REAR WINDOW*: FROM A SHORT STORY, TO THE FINAL SCRIPT**

We will focus on that stage of the making of the film, considering it as a process of knowledge and learning creation, in which we can see how ideas evolve and problems are solved. For this purpose, the information provided in the appendix to the DVD version of the film is highly relevant. In it, Hitchcock's daughter, Pat, explains that *The Rear Window* was inspired by the famous English case of Dr Crippen. He fell in love with his secretary, killed his wife and buried her in the backyard. He then boarded a boat with his secretary, in order to get away, and both of them dressed up as sailors. They were caught because the captain had wondered why these two supposed sailors were so friendly. This incident led Cornell Woolrich to write a short story entitled *It had to Be Murder*, which was published in 1942. This narrative was only about the Dr. Crippen case, and did not incorporate other elements that appear in the film.

John Michael Hayes, the scriptwriter of *The Rear Window*, adapted this short story for Hitchcock and, as a result of his work, the final script is significantly different from the initial narrative. In the film, the action is transposed from London to Manhattan and

everything either happens in Jeff's (James Stewart) apartment or can be seen through the rear window of the title. Some minor characters are also incorporated into the story: Stella, the nurse, Doyle, the detective, and the neighbours. Finally, the romance between Jeff and Lisa (Grace Kelly) is included as one of the key points of the film. The reason was that Hitchcock wanted to enrich the original plot, which was too simple for a film.

Hitchcock selected Grace Kelly to play the character of Lisa Fremont, but he wanted her to be more flexible and to move more easily than in her previous films. So he asked Mr. Hayes to work hard on that character and that part of the story. The final result was really satisfactory. As Mr. Hayes recognizes in his own words "Grace Kelly's performance in *The Rear Window* was a reflection of two things: one, of her natural temperament and her natural style, and [two] what I borrowed from my wife, on whom I based the Grace Kelly character. My wife had been a professional model and I knew the world and the jargon." In other words, he constructed the Lisa Fremont character on the basis of his wife and that contributed to making the performance by Grace Kelly very convincing and brilliant.

It must be admitted that the final story is highly unlikely, but Alfred Hitchcock follows some interesting strategies to make it seem very plausible. We will point out some of them. His decision to convert Jeff into a professional photographer who is highly qualified for his work and has an extraordinary capacity of observation is really interesting. That decision makes it believable that a person like him, who has been in his apartment for three weeks and is curious by nature, begins to observe his neighbours and to focus on facts of no interest in normal situations. This gives credibility to the Jeff character, but also adds some doubts about his interpretations, because he is bored and he is looking for action. In fact, at the beginning of the film he claims that he would do anything to escape from that apartment.

The various minor characters that appear in the film but did not feature in the short story also give credibility to the main character of Jeff. He simply begins to observe all the neighbourhood through his window, and, as time goes by, he focuses on a Mr. Thorwald. The neighbours also enrich the whole film and make it more interesting by living through some other very short parallel stories inside the main one. The credibility of the murder and of the murderer's motivations are also highly questionable. But Hitchcock doesn't seem really bothered about that point, and doesn't use any special strategy to make it appear more plausible. He only presents generic situations and suggests some motives, for instance showing what seems to be a quarrel between the couple. Maybe he relies too much on the fact that the film was inspired by a true story.

As the movie is a thriller, in the line of Hitchcock's films, he has to maintain his audience intrigued. However, his strategy is not one of discovering who has committed a crime but about whether Jeff's suspicions are true. We guess that Thorwald has actually murdered his wife and Jeff wonders what he has done with the corpse. Later on, to keep the spectators on the edges of their seats, Hitchcock has to focus their attention on the possibility that the murderer is going to escape and on the dangerous situations in which Lisa and Jeff are involved.

## **A STUDY OF *THE REAR WINDOW***

In this part of the paper we will present the screenplay of *The Rear Window* and, at the same time, we will analyse the way in which the characters and spectators interpret the

objects, as well as the situations and the social acts that take place in the movie. In any case, we recommend the readers to see the film, if they have the opportunity to do so, before they engage themselves in the study of the film.

*The Rear Window* follows a clearly structured scheme. The action starts on a Wednesday morning and finishes on the following Saturday. During all this time Hitchcock shows very precisely to the spectators on which day and at what time, approximately, the action is taking place. In fact, all the lighting was designed to change automatically, for instance from sunrise to daytime. We will emphasise this temporal structure in our presentation. As we have already said, in the movie Jeff is a famous professional photographer, who has to stay in his apartment as a consequence of his broken leg. That is the reason why he requires a daily attention from Stella, who is his nurse. He also receives, every afternoon, the visit of Lisa, a model who is his girlfriend. But their relationship is about to break up because of their different life styles. He is an adventurer and she is a sophisticated woman.

### **Wednesday morning**

The film begins with a shot in which there appears a man who is sitting in a wheelchair, dressed casually and with a broken leg in plaster. A close-up shows the following phrase, which is written on the plaster, "Here lie the broken bones of L. F. Jeffries". Then Hitchcock shows a broken camera. A first inference seems plausible: maybe the broken leg has something to do with this broken camera. In the following sequences some action photos are shown, as well as another camera, which is in perfect condition, and some photographs. This shot finishes with a close up of a negative in which there appears a woman, who we later see on the cover of a magazine. Every sequence reinforces our interpretation that Jeff is a professional photographer who probably reports risky news. In a later conversation between Jeff and his editor this supposition will be confirmed. Hitchcock uses these first sequences to let us know the narrative strategy that he will follow throughout the film. First he will give some visual inputs and then, after the audience have interpreted these inputs, he will give additional information that will confirm or disprove their interpretations. He will usually present this additional information in the form of dialogues between the characters.

Hitchcock's strategy also consists in presenting really typified characters so that the spectators can easily interpret the sense of their actions. In the movie these typifications are presented at relatively superficial levels, mainly at the level of professional prototypes. In the next scene, for instance, Hitchcock shows us Jeff, who is observing the neighbourhood through the window of his apartment. A scantily-clad young girl catches Jeff's attention, who smiles. While she is preparing her breakfast she is doing some exercises, such as stretching her legs, that denote that she is an excellent athlete. All these visual inputs allow the spectators to interpret that the girl is possibly a ballet dancer.

We are wont to think that the simple fact of grasping some visual inputs allows us to see the objects, in this case a ballet dancer. But it is more complicated. In fact, we interpret these inputs according to a typified form, which is usually socially shared. Schutz defends the thesis that the objects of our consciousness are extremely complex constructs formed through our personal experience and our personal history. Our mind not only grasps sensorial inputs but also completes these inputs by typifying them. In the scene that we have just commented on, the girl's movements are really close to those that we have all seen when ballet dancers exercise their muscles. This previous reference, which is in our mind, allows us to typify the images that Hitchcock shows us and also allows us to interpret that the girl is a ballet dancer. In another scene the same girl will appear dancing inside her apartment. This new visual information will

reinforce the inferences that were already made by the spectators. Later on, Jeff will fix his attention on a man who is sitting in front of a piano. He is playing a brief melody repetitively. Suddenly he stops playing, writes something in the score and again plays the initial melody, with some little modifications. These audiovisual inputs also correspond to a typified action. We can all conclude that the man is a composer.

In the following scenes Hitchcock introduces to us the love story of the film using a really ironic and vivid dialogue between Jeff and his nurse, Stella. In this dialogue Jeff expresses, in a really clear way, his main motives and intentions, so in this case the audience does not need to interpret them, because they are already made explicit: While Jeff is observing his neighbourhood, Stella comes into the apartment to give him his daily massage. They begin to talk and Jeff tells her that he is worried because Lisa expects him to marry her, but he is not ready for marriage yet. Stella argues that every man is ready for marriage when the right girl appears, and Lisa Fremont would be the right girl for any man. Jeff recognizes that Lisa is marvellous, but he believes that she is maybe not the appropriate girl for a man like him. She is too sophisticated for a photographer who is accustomed to spending long periods of time in foreign countries, at times living dangerously. He needs a woman who is willing to go anywhere and do anything, and Lisa belongs to Park Avenue. So Jeff is thinking about ending his relationship with Lisa.

Hitchcock next shows us one of the multiple very short stories that complement the plot of the film, and which is extraordinarily interesting for the purpose of our study, in order to analyse the way in which we interpret human actions and the role of the characters that perform them: When Stella leaves, Jeff observes through the window two men and a woman entering into an apartment. Once they are inside the older man gives a key to the younger one and, afterwards, leaves the young man and the woman alone. The audience and Jeff infer that the old man is probably the owner of the apartment and that the young couple possibly are renting it from him. But, something suddenly happens that Jeff cannot understand. The young couple look at each other with complicity and then they leave the apartment. Jeff moves his eyebrows in a way that expresses his astonishment. He does not understand the motives for this action. But in a few moments everything makes sense. The couple appears again and the man is carrying the woman in his arms. Hitchcock shows us Jeff again. Now he is smiling. This new visual information has given to him the key to understanding the situation. He has just seen an extremely typified action that we all understand, and that allows us to interpret that the couple has just got married. Also, the fact that the supposed bride is wearing a nice white dress now takes on a fuller meaning.

A reasonable action is one whose motivations can be easily understood. These actions are really typified. When an action is not typified enough, then it is possible that we cannot understand what is going on. But in order to understand the motivations existing behind the acts performed by a character the clues are not unique and are not all given at the same time. So, our interpretation can be gradually broadening. In the case of the couple that Jeff is observing, some spectators could easily conclude that they have just married, because she is wearing a nice white dress and a man is giving them the keys of an apartment. But quite possibly that interpretation would not be so obvious to some other spectators, as was the case of Jeff, until the man carried the bride 'over the threshold'. Hitchcock goes on with his strategy of presenting to us highly typified characters that can be easily interpreted.

### **Wednesday night**

On Wednesday night there takes place the first personal encounter in the film between Lisa and Jeff, when she visits him in his apartment. Hitchcock uses these scenes to

emphasize the differences that are separating the couple, and that were previously commented on by Jeff to Stella: Lisa wears a new dress that makes her look really pretty. She has arranged a romantic dinner with Jeff in his apartment because she wants to convince him to open his own studio in New York. But Jeff does not like this proposition at all. He wants to travel all over the world taking photos instead of spending all day inside a studio. So it seems clear that they have a problem in their relationship.

At a certain moment they look through the window and by observing Ms Torso they can compare their situation with what is happening in their neighbour's apartment. They observe that Ms Torso is having a party with three friends and Jeff tells Lisa that she is similar, in some way, to her neighbour, because both are really popular among men. At that moment the dancer kisses one of her friends on the mouth and Jeff expresses his opinion that the girl seems to have chosen the most prosperous one. But Lisa responds that the girl is not in love with that man. When Jeff asks Lisa how she can know that, she reminds him the he has just said that she resembles her neighbour. The interesting point here is that the interpretation made by Lisa is not obvious and that it is really difficult for the audience to grasp the details that have led her to that conclusion. It is a really personal interpretation.

Later on, a row between the Thorwalds, a married couple of the neighbourhood, attracts Jeff's attention to them for the first time. Through the window he observes that Mrs Thorwald seems to be ill, because she is in bed. He also observes that her husband makes some phone calls when she cannot see him. But he still does not show much interest in the couple. That night he is too preoccupied arguing with Lisa about their relationship. He tells Lisa that she has to face the fact that she is not prepared for the kind of life that he wants to live. And, in the words of Lisa, their problem is that he will not stay there and she cannot go with him. They arrive at the conclusion that it seems that neither of them could ever change. But the thing is that they are in love. After the discussion Lisa leaves the apartment really affected, but indicating that she will come back tomorrow.

A few moments after Lisa has left the apartment, Jeff hears a brief scream through his window that intrigues him. At this point of the film there appears the first significant element of suspense that shows that something strange is happening. In the following scenes Hitchcock offers to Jeff and to the audience the main events in the film that will have to be interpreted to understand what is going on. After the scream, Jeff's expectation grows when he observes Mr Thorwald leave his apartment several times in the middle of the rainy night. Every time that Mr Thorwald leaves, he is carrying a suitcase that seems really heavy, but every time that he comes back, the suitcase seems quite light. Such strange behaviour, which does not correspond to any common typified action, awakes Jeff's curiosity to interpret it and he does so by using the information that he has gathered in previous scenes.

During all the sequences that take place during that night Jeff and the audience receive the same visual information, except for a short period of time when Jeff falls asleep and Hitchcock lets the spectators see Mr Thorwald leaving his apartment with a woman who is wearing a black dress. This asymmetry of information will lead to some suspense. As the filmmaker Curtin Hanson puts it in the 'making of' that can be found in the DVD version of the film, "Everything we see in that story is told from either James Stewart's point of view or there's that very dramatic moment where Hitchcock takes the audience into his confidence, and says, 'I am now showing you something that James Stewart, who's asleep, is not seeing'. It lets us ahead of James Stewart. That's Hitchcock's recipe for suspense, because now we are going 'Oh, my God. What's

gonna happen when James Stewart, who, up till now has been us, finds out what we know?"

### **Thursday morning**

On Thursday morning Stella comes to Jeff's apartment to take care of him and she gets angry when she realizes that he has slept all night in the wheelchair, sitting in front of the window, instead of resting in his bed. The dialogue that takes place between Stella and Jeff enables him to express the interpretations that he and the spectators have made, but that have not been verbalised yet. We should emphasize that, as well as making his interpretations explicit, he also gives reasons to support them and in this way we can know something about his mental processes. These interpretations rest on a twofold foundation: his knowledge of common people's behaviour, and the events that he has observed through his window and that he has interpreted.

Jeff explains to Stella that that night Mr Thorwald went out several times in the rain carrying his case. Stella, however, does not seem to be really interested in that, because she knows that the man is a salesman. Anyway, Jeff is perplexed, because he wonders what Mr Thorwald could be selling at three o'clock in the morning. He expresses his suspicion that Mr Thorwald was taking something out of the apartment. Then Stella replies that maybe he was taking out his personal effects because he wanted to leave his wife. That seemed to be the simplest explanation, because as Jeff observed the day before, the couple had had a quarrel. Jeff seems to accept Stella's arguments. But when she leaves, something happens that increases Jeff's perplexity. Using the long-distance lens of one of his cameras he observes Mr Thorwald cleaning the suitcase that he was carrying the night before. The strangest thing, however, is that he afterwards meticulously cleans a big knife. All these visual inputs encourage Jeff's belief that Mr Thorwald may have killed his spouse.

When we read a narrative which belongs to a specific genre we always have expectations that derive from the specific character of this genre, expectations that we call metainformation. From the moment that Jeff thinks that Mrs Thorwald may have been murdered, the spectators will begin to use this metainformation, that is, information that goes beyond what they have observed in the film. As the audience knows that it is a Hitchcock film, they are predisposed to surmise that something strange is happening, even when they have more information than Jeff, because Hitchcock showed them Mr Thorwald leaving his apartment with a woman, while Jeff was sleeping.

### **Thursday night**

Following the pattern of the film, in which the morning and the night episodes are easily recognized, Jeff receives Lisa again on Thursday night. In this scene the interest of the dialogue is not centred on their love affair. The dialogue between Jeff and Lisa focuses on what Jeff saw the previous night, on his interpretations and on the arguments that support them. This is the strategy that Hitchcock follows to verbally contrast Jeff's interpretations with those of the spectators. Another interesting point is that it is possible that their interpretations differ because of the asymmetry of the information that they have.

In this sequence Lisa and Jeff seem really affectionate, in spite of the quarrel that they had the last time they were together. Then, at a certain moment, Jeff explains to Lisa what he saw the night before and asks her why a man would leave his apartment three times on a rainy night with a suitcase. He also tells her that he is perplexed because

the salesman has not gone to work and has spent practically the whole day in his wife's bedroom, while she seems to have disappeared. He thinks that Mrs Thorwald should be at home, because of her illness and he does not think that she is in hospital, because her husband is at home. Neither can he understand why the man was cleaning his suitcase, a carving knife and a saw. So, he does not know where the woman could have gone. Lisa still does not pay much attention to Jeff's inquisitions, but he insists on his arguments. He has seen quarrels, mysterious trips at night, knives, and saws and rope. And, since the previous evening, no sign of the wife. All these visual inputs reinforce Jeff's interpretations and help him to infer that maybe Mr Thorwald has killed his wife.

In the following scene Lisa also expresses her arguments and her interpretations, which do not agree with the inferences made by Jeff. She points out that Jeff has been able to see everything that Mr Thordwald has done, simply by observing through his window. She asks Jeff if he thinks that a murderer would let someone see all that. The normal thing for a murderer would be to pull the shades down. A murderer would never parade his crime in front of an open window. Here, we can emphasize two main points. One is that Lisa's arguments are based on what a murderer would normally do, which is a way of associating a typified action and its motives. The other point is that her argumentation decreases the verisimilitude of Jeff's interpretations. Here it is also important to point out that the conviction with which we hold beliefs can increase and decrease.

But suddenly, Lisa can see, through the window, Mr Thordwald packing his wife's luggage. That disconcerts Lisa, because she thinks that a woman would never leave her home without her personal things. So she begins to accept Jeff's beliefs. In fact, she says, verbatim, "Let's start from the beginning again Jeff. Tell me everything you saw, and what you think it means". This request also shows that Hitchcock understands really well that human beings interpret the meanings of the social acts that they see.

### **Friday**

On Friday morning, additional information collected by a detective will once more decrease the likelihood of the interpretations that were made by Jeff and Lisa: Jeff phones Doyle, an old friend, who is a detective, because he wants him to investigate Mr Thorwald. He firmly believes that this man has killed his wife. Doyle does not believe Jeff's suppositions, but he agrees to investigate Mr Thorwald because of their friendship. On Friday afternoon Doyle visits Jeff again, to let him know what he has found out. According to his information the Thorwalds left their apartment the previous evening at 6.00. The superintendent spoke with Mr Thorwald and he said that he and his wife went to the railway station. Jeff acknowledges that at that time he was sleeping, so he could not see that, but he wonders if anybody actually saw the wife getting on the train. Then Doyle tells Jeff that there was a postcard in Thorwald's mailbox which was mailed at 3.30 the previous afternoon from Merritsville. It was a message from Mr Thorwald's wife confirming that she had arrived at her destination. That new information destroys Lisa and Jeff's hypothesis.

One more time, when the inferences made by the main characters lose plausibility Hitchcock introduces new elements that will again increase their suspicions. That night Jeff observes Thorwald extracting some jewellery from a handbag. When he tells Lisa about this, she says that something does not make sense to her, women do not hide their jewellery inside their handbags. Furthermore, a woman going anywhere would take at least make-up, perfume and jewellery. So she thinks that the woman that was seen going out of Thorwald's apartment the night before was not Mrs Thorwald. Lisa's

reasoning is based on what she typifies as the habitual behaviour of a lady. After this interpretation Jeff looks at Lisa with admiration and kisses her. For the first time in the film, she is acting like him, with the spirit of an adventurer.

When Doyle comes back to Jeff's apartment, Lisa and Jeff tell him that Mr Thorwald has his wife's jewellery hidden in the bedroom. They also express their opinion that it was not Mrs Thorwald who left with Mr Thorwald the previous morning. Women simply do not leave their jewellery when they go on a trip. Doyle does not give any importance to these arguments. He argues that we all do things in private that would be difficult to explain in public. That means that our personal behaviour in private can lie well outside general typifications. He also expresses his opinion that everyone has knives, so that does not mean anything either. Finally, he reveals that he went to the train station and verified that Mr Thorwald bought a ticket for his wife. Lisa argues again that the woman could not be Mrs Thorwald, but Doyle responds that this is simply a female intuition without any basis. Quite likely, the couple quarrelled and decided to finish their relationship. He is absolutely convinced that nothing strange is happening. In fact, even the police at Merristville also confirmed that a woman called Anna Thorwald arrived there and picked up her luggage.

During all these scenes, Jeff and Lisa's beliefs acquire greater consistency through their observations and then lose their strength when Doyle brings additional information that contradicts their interpretations. Jeff and Lisa's inferences are plausible, but are not logical proofs. Hitchcock masterfully plays with the characters' inferences and suppositions, progressively revealing new information that reinforces or disproves their interpretations. This strategy is highly effective and maintains the suspense throughout the film.

Once Doyle has discouraged Lisa and Jeff by refuting their interpretations, something will happen that will increase their suspicions again. Hitchcock still has some final surprises for the characters and the audience, which will lead to an extraordinary ending of the story. However, we will not spoil the fun for you, dear readers, by telling you the ending of the movie. This is not correct in thrillers. We think that you will have no difficulty in finding the processes of interpretation involved in the continuation of the film, but, with your permission, we would like to make a final reference to the last scene of the film, a really brilliant and ironic one, which has a huge value for the purpose of our study. The movie finishes on Saturday morning with a last shot in which, while Jeff peacefully sleeps, Lisa, who is, for the first time, casually dressed, reads a book entitled "Beyond the High Himalayas". This visual information leads us to interpret that she is ready for undertaking another kind of life with Jeff. But, in the last close up, Lisa looks at Jeff and when she realizes that he is asleep, she closes the book and begins to skim the pages of the latest issue of a fashion magazine. So, Hitchcock leaves the love story between Jeff and Lisa open to many interpretations.

## CONCLUSIONS

Hitchcock did not have an academic training in philosophy and the social sciences about the interpretation of human action. He did, however, have an extraordinary capacity for understanding how we do so. As a film director of thrillers, on the one hand he was extremely attentive to the ways in which spectators could interpret visual images and narratives, and on the other hand, he knew very well how to give and hide information with the aim of creating and maintaining suspense. With the mentality of a researcher, he undertook many experiments, among which "*The Rear Window*" is an outstanding example. Spectators can readily enjoy this film and even discover the main

strategies of Hitchcock. Our interest was to go further, beyond the commonsense and natural skills. Pursuing this line of thought, the present paper combines theoretical issues of intentional action with the analysis of the film and it offers a clear introduction to the fields which study how we interpret the intentions of people by looking at their acts, both in everyday life situations and in scientific research, and what the limitations of these interpretations are.

We have worked out this study in two contexts. The first context is the firm created by Bigas Luna, a leading Spanish director, in which the co-author of the paper, Catalina Pons, has important responsibilities for management, creation of ideas, production of multimedia materials and training people. The firm produces major films, visual stories for television and companies and devotes much time and effort to training professionals. Our workshops presenting and commenting on this study have facilitated the process of understanding problems and ways of making films. This is not an easy task because people learn through observing how professionals work and they acquire tacit knowledge. To give them useful theoretical frameworks is always important.

The other context is the ESADE-EUDOKMA PhD Programme in Management Sciences. The three co-authors of the paper have worked in it in seminars on knowledge creation and organizational learning as an introduction to the subject of qualitative-interpretative methods in management research. Our main interest is the study of the industries that create, at one and the same time, art and knowledge. We consider that because of their ways of management, production and learning, they are advanced models of the knowledge society, which can inspire other kinds of intensive knowledge- using companies, such as those in advanced communication technologies. This research experience, which introduces a conceptual framework and applies it to specific situations, has revealed many aspects of interpretation in knowledge creation, learning and problem solving. It emphasises important aspects of the relationships between theory and practice and basic processes in which we create theories out of practical situations.

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