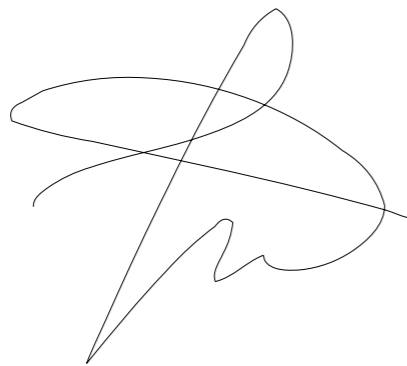


ALFRED HITCHCOCK REAR WINDOW 1954 PEDRO ALMODOVAR VOLVER AUGUST 2006 GRETA GERWIG BARBIE 2023
INDIGO HANCOCK I.E AWARDS JANUARY 19 2025 DISSERTATION ARCH

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Indigo Hancock

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Research Question

How do film interiors, through the works of Hitchcock, Almodovar and Gerwig, reflect the evolution of the image and agency of women from the patriarchal 1950's to contemporary feminist?

Key Definitions

Femininity - A set of attributes, behaviours, and roles generally associated with women and girls.

Voyeurism - The sexual interest in or practice of watching other people engaged in intimate behaviors, such as undressing, sexual activity, or other actions of a private nature.

Agency - The capacity of female characters to act independently, make their own choices, and have control over their lives and the film narrative.

Spectatorship - Based on a division between active looking, a position occupied by men, and the passive nature of being looked at, a role assigned to women (Mulvey, 1989).

Social Ideologies - A coherent system of beliefs, values, and ideas that shape how individuals understand and interact with the world, often serving to explain social arrangements and guide political or social action. Allowing the understanding of issues like power, and inequality, which can be used to either promote change or maintain the status quo.

Image - The visual portrayals that shape societal perceptions of womanhood, femininity, and women's roles

Passive - The condition in which the feminine subject is primarily positioned to be seen rather than to act, with agency constrained and a limitation of the subject's ability to act in or control the space she occupies.

Introduction

This dissertation examines the evolution of how women are represented in film, and how cinematic interiors reflect the evolving cultural views and attitudes towards femininity. Through an architectural lens, it analyses how interior set design reflects and shapes the changing image of a woman in film, from Alfred Hitchcock's sexualised representation influenced by the patriarchal frameworks of the 1950s (Fig.3), to Pedro Almodovar's celebration of female solidarity and sisterhood in the early twenty first century, reflecting post-Franco Spain, to Greta Gerwig's redefinition of womanhood through contemporary feminist discourse.



Fig.2: A view of the Dreamhouse revealing dining area and walk in closet on the first floor



Fig.3: Lisa Fremont leaning forward with chest and cleavage in view in Rear Window

A key principle to this research is the concepts of image and agency through the lens of the representation of women in cinema. 'Image' is understood here as the visual construction of femininity; how women are displayed and portrayed within the film interiors. 'Agency' will refer to the level of autonomy female characters are afforded, in relation to the movement and self- authorship within their environment and the narrative itself. Rather than treating image and agency as two distinct elements, this dissertation explores how they interconnect, and how in each film, the image restricts, enables or reinforces women's autonomy within the narrative.

Since its beginning, cinema has placed women at the centre of visual pleasure and desire (Mulvey, 1989). From Hitchcock's voyeuristic framing of women in domestic spaces (Fig.4) to Gerwig's hyper-stylised pink display (Fig.2), the way in which women are seen is directly linked to the places they inhabit.

Both architecture and cinema share a language of framing and visibility (Magnusson, 2021). This crossover provides a lens through which we can understand how femininity is spatially produced, and challenged in film. By understanding this evolution from interiors that control, to ones that empower, this dissertation argues that interior architecture is not just a background in film, but an active participant in shaping femininity and the representation of women.



Fig.4: Miss Torso being watched from her window by Jeff

Whilst feminist theorists including Laura Mulvey, unpack the politics of the gaze and spectatorship, there has been less insight into the architectural frameworks that structure these relations. This dissertation proposes that cinematic space, more specifically the interior, plays a significant role in shaping, or challenging femininity. By building on the work of Mulvey and John Berger, who first revealed the dynamics of gendered spectatorship, as well as spatial theorists such as Doreen Massey, Beatriz Colomina and Guiliana Bruno, this dissertation combines feminist film theory with architectural and spatial discourse. This approach allows cinema to be positioned as not only a form of artistic representation, but also as an architectural form, one that can construct, confine or liberate femininity and women's agency through interior space, mapping the progression from voyeurism and sexualised representation, to solidarity between women, to feminist self-empowerment.

The three films that have been selected; *Rear Window* (Hitchcock, 1954), *Volver* (Almodovar, 2006) and *Barbie* (Gerwig, 2023), all represent distinct cinematic and social times that reveal how interiors moderate women's agency. Hitchcock's voyeuristic apartment set (Fig.5) reveals the spatial designs of control, Almodovar's vibrant domestic setting (Fig.6) rewrites the home into a place of solidarity and sisterhood, while Gerwig's exaggerated Dreamhouse (Fig.7) redefines femininity as a form of spatial empowerment. Together, these films demonstrate how the design of film interiors reflect and represent evolving cultural and social ideologies surrounding gender, from confinement to self-expression. Through close visual and architectural analysis, focusing on interior composition, colours, framing and movement, and shaped by feminist and spatial theory, this dissertation shows how film interiors become an active participant in shaping the image and agency of women.



Fig.5: Woman in dressing gown seen through her bedroom window



Fig.6: Bedroom in Volver



Fig.7: Barbie Dreamhouse interior furnishing

Literature Review

The concept of the gaze provides a framework for understanding how women are represented within visual narratives and spatial systems. Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative* establishes that patriarchal power is embedded in cinematic form, positioning women as passive objects for male desire. Her argument that women are defined by their 'to-be-looked-at-ness' (Mulvey, 1989, p.19) reveals the gendered structure of spectatorship, and how cinema regulates agency. This lens positions film interiors as active participants in the gaze by framing, containing, or liberating women within filmic settings (Fig.9). Through this framework this dissertation examines how each film's interior either reproduces, or challenges patriarchal structures within the representation of women.

Berger's *Ways of Seeing* extends Mulvey's argument further by positioning the gaze within spatial dynamics. His notion that 'men act, women appear' (Berger, 1972, p.47) establishes how environments stage and regulate how women are seen and positioned (Berger, 1972). Therefore exposing how architectural settings are not neutral, but active participants in shaping spectatorship. This perspective is key for the readings of cinematic interiors, where set design determines how women are viewed, and granted, or denied agency (Fig.10). Through this lens, Berger materialises Mulvey's visual theory, situating the gaze within spatial form.

Whilst Mulvey and Berger focus more closely on spectatorship, David Bordwell's *The Art of Cinema* provides a vocabulary for understanding how meaning is instilled in film form.

Bordwell argues that the elements in cinema, such as mise en scene, framing and sound, function in guiding the audience and 'advancing the narrative' (Bordwell, 1985, pp.560). This framework is valuable for analysing interiors, as it positions space as an active participant in the narrative rather than a passive backdrop. In this dissertation, Bordwell provides an understanding of close scene analysis by showing how interior and spatial design shape audience perception and narrative power (Bordwell, 1985). When aligned with feminist theory, this allows interiors to be read as active environments that structure visibility and control how women's image and agency are produced in frame.

Building on Bordwell's structure of cinema, Gillian Rose's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative* establish the method through which may be used when exploring visual materials, and aid in creating a critical understanding of images (Rose, 2023). Rather than treating images as neutral, Rose argues that visual material must be analysed through its compositional, social and technological conditions (Rose, 2023)(Fig.8). One of these aspects 'social' is a valuable mode that this dissertation uses to understand each film and the social ideologies that surround them, as it enables a language for analysing how the interiors, framing, colour and arrangement shape the image of a woman and communicate agency (Fig.11). By placing visual analysis and interpretation as a critical method, Rose's methodology supports the reading of cinematic interiors as images that participate in social and political ideologies that shape the narrative of female image and agency in film.

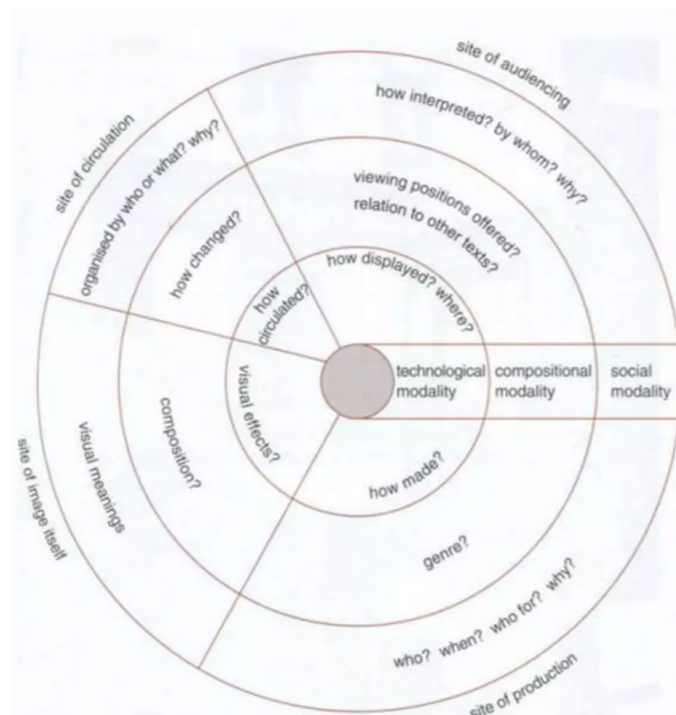


Fig.8: The sites and modalities for interpreting visual materials



Fig.9: Framing and containment of the female figure within the domestic interior in *Rear Window*

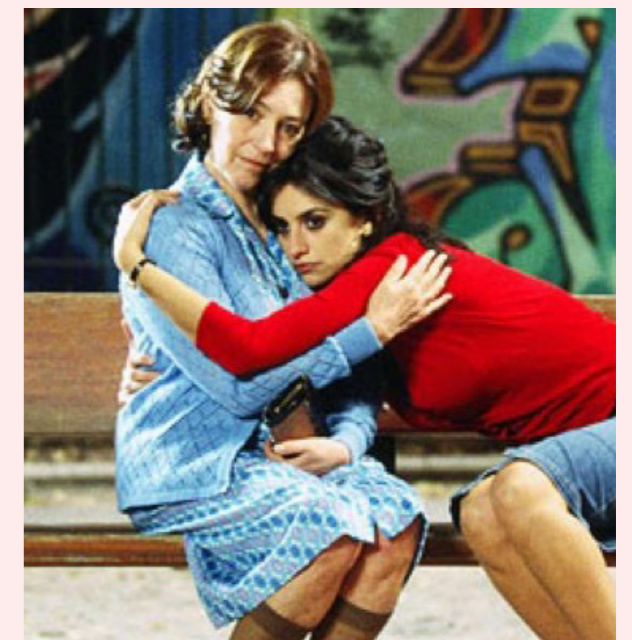


Fig.10: Intimacy and shared female agency in *Volver*



Fig.11: Hyper-stylised interior as a performative space shaping the feminine image in *Barbie*

Whilst Mulvey and Berger frame the gendered dynamic of the gaze, Bell Hooks critiques their generalisation by emphasising different experiences. Her concept of the 'oppositional gaze' (Hooks, 1992, p.116) shows a limitation to their arguments of a singular female experience under male control, instead arguing that women navigate and experience the gaze in different ways. This perspective is especially relevant for *Barbie*, where the film represents many feminine identities, in contrast to Hitchcock's monolithic lens.

Tania Modleski challenges Mulvey's narrative, by revealing, through her analysis of Hitchcock, how women can have active roles in the storyline, but are eventually absorbed back into the male narrative (Modleski, 1989). Modleski uses the 'dollhouse' metaphor, stating how women are visually contained in the carefully arranged environment, the 'dollhouse world of the apartment buildings' (Modleski, 1989, p.79)(Fig.12).

This notion of the domestic 'dollhouse' world, translates Mulvey's concept of visual surveillance into spatial context, providing an understanding of how control operates through not only the camera, but the composition of interiors. Modleski's work enables a spatial reading of interiors, against which later films by directors Almodovar and Gerwig can be compared, revealing progressive dynamics of female agency and representation.

Jane Rendell's concept that art and architecture intertwine through acts of performance and practice, strengthens this dissertation by establishing the relationship between fictive interiors and political structures that shape the image of women (Rendell, 2006). Her notion of critical spatial practice challenges the separations between public and private space, instead arguing that interdisciplinary practices can 'transgress the limits of art and architecture and engage with both the social and the aesthetic, the public and the private' (Rendell, 2006, p.6). This connection between art and architecture mirrors the relationship between design and film, where cinematic interiors become a site in which social ideologies surrounding the image of a woman are reflected or contested. Rendell's framework offers an understanding of how film sets work as active spaces, not only as aesthetic environments, but as something that reflects women's agency and image spatially, within the cultural and social context of that time.

Film Architecture and the Transactional Imagination historicise Rendell's idea of spatial practice in film, revealing how cinema has long been reliant on architectural design to visualise social ideological structures. Their argument being; the built environment and cinema act as a site where identity, class, and gender are embodied through design and style (Bergfelder et al, 2007). This perspective aligns with this dissertation's focus on the representation of women, positioning politics as something embedded into the mise-en-scene and design of interior sets. Together, both Bergfelder et al and Rendell place filmic space as an active participant in making meaning, becoming a tool through which femininity is spatially constructed, reflecting social ideologies around femininity over different cinematic contexts.



Fig.12: Rear Window apartment buildings panorama photograph.

To provide a better understanding of how interiors can shape the image and agency of a woman, feminist spatial theorists such as Massey, Colomina and Bruno are crucial. Massey's *Space Place and Gender* argues that spaces are never neutral, 'they both reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood' (Massey, 1994, p.179). Her argument that spaces uphold an active part in gender relations grounds this dissertation's reading by positioning film interiors as political structures that reproduce or challenge how a woman is seen. In particular, her notion of the 'home' being historically interpreted as feminine (Massey, 1994) will enable the comparative analysis between Hitchcock's domestic confinement, to Almodovar's reinterpretation of the home as a place of camaraderie and Gerwig's hyper-stylised *Dreamhouse*, which transforms domestic space into a place of self-expression and celebration of hyper-femininity.

Colomina strengthens this understanding by defining architecture as a tool of visual and spatial control. Colomina's chapter 'Interior' is critical in understanding how the 'home' does not simply provide security for its inhabitants, but it also puts them on display, particularly women, acting as a 'viewing mechanism' (Colomina, 1994, p.250). The next chapter, 'Window' builds upon this by showing the link between architectural framing and cinematic spectatorship (Colomina, 1994), this exploration aligns cinematic and domestic design with spectatorship, enabling a deeper understanding of Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, where the interiors become stages of both voyeurism, and regulation of women's agency.

Shifting this discussion from control to emotion, Bruno theorises filmic space as an 'emotional map' (Bruno, 2018, p.207), where spaces are instilled with feeling and movement. Bruno's framework informs a closer reading of *Volver*, where the domestic spaces facilitate women's solidarity and autonomy (Fig.13), illustrating how interiors can also function as places of care and expression. Together Massey, Colomina and Bruno build the foundations of the architectural side of this dissertation's argument, providing tools to interpret the ways in which interiors negotiate the image and agency of women in film.



Fig.13: Daughter comforting Raimunda in *Volver*.

Having established that cinematic spaces are politically and socially charged, this dissertation now looks to the interior, where femininity can be contained or performed. In *Rear Window*, *Volver* and *Barbie*, the domestic, the home and the hyper stylised set each portray different functions in shaping women's autonomy and how they are seen; from places of control to expressiveness (Fig 14.).

Imma Forino's analysis of cinematic interiors argues that designed spaces act as elements through which identity and power are communicated. Her analysis of *The Apartment* (1960), demonstrates how interior design and spatial organisation act as extensions to character psychology and cultural/contextual ideology (Forino, 2021). She argues that 'the mise-en-scene (...) provides a subterranean dialogue (...) indispensable to the narrative of the film' (Forino, 2021, p.181). Forino's framework positions interiors as both aesthetic and ideological structures, providing an understanding how *Rear Window* and *Volver* represent autonomy, domesticity and the image of women in the home differently.



Fig.14: Hyper-stylised interior as a space of expressive femininity in *Barbie*.

Situated within the mid twentieth century Hollywood age, Hitchcock's films reflect a cultural shift from the wartime order of secrecy and suspicion, to the post war order of desire (Steritt, 2011). This transition saw many women confined once again back to the domestic sphere under the patriarchal social ideologies still dominant in the 1950s (Fig.15). With the 'eclipse of the 1930 production code' (Leitch, 2011, Ch 1), Hitchcock gained the freedom to express repression, desire and voyeurism more explicitly (Leitch, 2011). In *Rear Window*, the apartment complex becomes a stage where women are sexualised under male spectatorship, within this setting, the agency of women is both framed and controlled. Through this exchange between spatial design and spectatorship, Hitchcock shapes the domestic interior into a site of visual pleasure.

Almodovar's cinema shows a dramatic shift from the patriarchal confinement of Hitchcock's era to a colourful celebration of female agency and solidarity. This was shaped by Spain's own struggle for identity during the cultural and political transition following the end of Franco's Regime (1939-75), to the beginnings of political freedoms and democratic rule in the 1980s (Acevedo-Munoz, 2019). Almodovar emerged during the rebirth of Spanish popular art that reinvented previous makers of fascism into the kitsch aesthetic of bull fighting, flamenco and catholic imagery, signifying change, tolerance, political and sexual liberation, and artistic freedoms (Acevedo-Munoz, 2019)(Fig.16). Almodovar became a symbol of this new and liberated culture, representing the new 'Spanish Mentality' (Acevedo-Munoz, 2019). In *Volver* for example, the home is rewritten, from being a symbol of repression, to one of empowerment, becoming a place of camaraderie and emotional healing. This political shift, where interiors symbolise liberation and not control, mirrors Massey's notion that space and gender are socially produced (Massey, 1994).

Gerwig represents feminist contemporary film making that both critiques and celebrates femininity. Known for her work promoting gender equality and female empowerment (Tasnim, 2023), she challenges traditional social ideologies, advocating relentlessly for gender equality in Hollywood, and for more female voices (Tasnim, 2023). Released in 2023, *Barbie* reflects contemporary feminist concerns, using hyper-feminine aesthetics to challenge patriarchal ideas about womanhood, while highlighting current issues of gender representation and equality (Fig.17). Gerwig's interiors act as spaces where women's identity and representation are rewritten, demonstrating how the traditional domestic interior can be challenged, becoming a place of self-expression and empowerment.



Fig.15: 1950's poster representing a housewife in the kitchen and a male coming home from work



Fig.16: Kitsch aesthetic of flamenco, an example of the new 'Spanish Mentality'



Fig.17: Photograph of 2020's protests surrounding Women's rights

Methodology

This dissertation takes on a qualitative, interpretive methodology, which combines both close visual analysis of film interiors, with theoretical readings, taken from feminist film theorists and architectural dialogue. The aim being to examine how the interiors of filmic spaces reinforce or challenge the representation of women. Through this lens, this research will look at film not only as a backdrop to visual narrative, but as an active environment that shapes, restricts or empowers the image and agency of women through spatial organisation and visibility.

Paramount to this research is the relationship and interplay between image and agency. For each film, this dissertation analyses both the representation of women's image, established here by how women are visually conveyed, and displayed within interior spaces, and their agency, defined within this dissertation as the level of spatial autonomy granted to female characters, including their affordance of movement, privacy and control within their interior environment. Rather than look at image and agency as separate entities, this research explores how they intersect or contradict one another, allowing the question of whether agency is enabled through visibility, or constrained by it.

This approach is anchored in feminist film theory and spatial theory. Across this dissertation, Mulvey and Massey act as key concepts used to analyse the spatial design of interior film sets and how this reflects the representation of women. Whilst feminist film theory provides the tools for understanding the visual portrayal of women, spatial theory is used to analyse how agency is produced or restricted through architectural conditions, such as openness, framing and movement. For each film, this dissertation then integrates a third theorist, who strengthens the analysis and understanding. For Hitchcock's chapter on *Rear Window*, Colomina is used to analyse the home as a viewing platform, where interiors function as a system of visual control, and portray a sexualised image of women. Next for the chapter that explores Almodovar's *Volver*, Bruno provides an understanding into how movement and colour within the interior express emotional repair and comradery between women, allowing for agency to be granted through shared inhabitation. Finally, Gerwig's *Barbie* analysis uses Rendell to help frame how the *Dreamhouse* acts as a critical space that challenges the representation of women through hyper feminine elements, and positions agency as political and self-aware within the space.

To implement these theoretical frameworks into discourse, this dissertation utilizes close scene analysis; aiming the focus on set design, interior composition, colour palette, privacy and movement within the interior. Each element is then analysed for how it shapes and represents the image of women and femininity. These elements are also looked at in relation to agency, evaluating how film interiors enable or restrict women's movement, privacy and capacity for self-authorship within the narrative.

This method of analysis treats the film sets interiors as an architectural space; which can be read in terms of its structure, visibility and movement, rather than simply a fictitious setting, revealing how both architecture and cinema shape how women are portrayed.

Each of the three films are analysed as case studies to exhibit how cinematic interiors construct differing representations of women and spatial politics. *Rear Window* acts as an example of the voyeuristic, male gaze, where the woman is confined to spaces of surveillance, and agency is conditional upon being seen. *Volver* is an example of post-modern film, with a perspective of sisterhood, which redefines the 'home' from a setting of oppression into one of self-agency and empathy, through shared inhabitation and solidarity. *Barbie* represents a modern feminist gaze, which uses hyper-femininity in *Barbieland* to reclaim women's agency and self-expression, whilst revealing limits to the empowerment of image, where spatial autonomy remains performative. Together, these three films show how film interiors represent social and cultural ideologies surrounding the representation of women. By exploring how both image and agency are shaped across the three films, this dissertation maps how women's roles shift from visual confinement, to emotional endurance to self-aware spectacle. This chronological structure allows the dissertation to trace how the spatial design of interiors evolves from a place of patriarchal control and spectatorship, to feminist self-awareness, within both spatial and visual conditions.

Chapter 1:

Interiors of Control - Hitchcock's Rear Window and the Spatial Construction of the Gaze

- *Rear Window* (1954)

Hitchcock's interiors provide the foundations for which the later films within the dissertation build upon. Using *Rear Window* as the case for analysis, this chapter argues that cinematic interiors function as tools that construct the representation of femininity, by determining visibility, surveillance and control. Hitchcock's apartment complex is not only a backdrop for the narrative, but an active system that positions women as spectacles within a contained domestic sphere.

Using Mulvey's theory of the gaze as a framework, Hitchcock's women are positioned as passive objects of looking, and the men as spectators. Her notion of a woman being 'displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men' (Mulvey, 1989, p.21), provides the lens through which this argument reads the framing of the interiors as viewing mechanisms, that expose the female image to the male gaze. Also, drawing upon Massey's concept of space being socially produced, and Colomina's analysis of domestic interiors as a tool for viewing, this chapter explores how *Rear Window* uses interiors to expose the image of the woman and the agency to spatial surveillance. Whilst women are framed through windows and balconies as objects of desire, the film also provides times where said visibility becomes autonomous rather than imposed.

This chapter will therefore explore the argument that *Rear Window* does not simply objectify or sexualise women, but it creates an interplay between image and agency. Whilst women are spatially confined, they have agency in wanting to be seen. Determining this interplay is critical, as it provides the foundation for how *Volver* and *Barbie* can be read as reconfigurations of the domestic space, and how this in turn affects the image and agency of the woman.

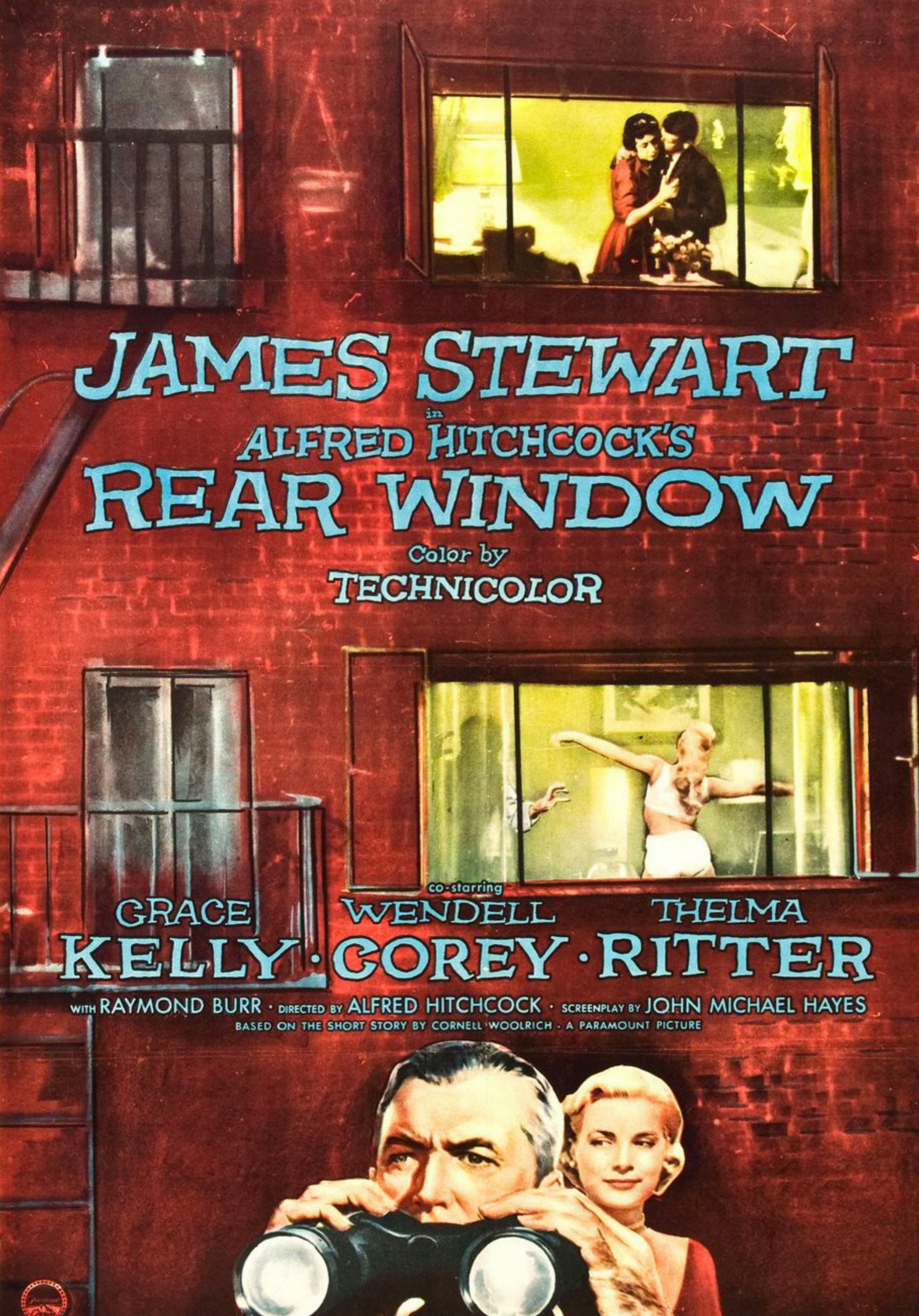


Fig.18: Rear Window 1954 movie poster

Premiering in 1954, *Rear Window* materializes from a period of Hitchcock's career that is noticeably concerned with voyeurism and the relationship between morality and looking. Hitchcock's later films, particularly *Rear Window*, restrict the narrative, aligning the audience with a single viewpoint, in this case almost 'wholly to what Jeff knows' (Bordwell, 1985, p.66). This narrative and spatial restriction reflect the 1950's post war context, marked by heightened suspicion, domestic containment and voyeurism, where women had to return to the home following wartime independence. This reflects Hitchcock's broader post-war interests in privacy, domesticity and surveillance.

In his interviews with Francois Truffaut, Hitchcock normalises the act of spectatorship, that 'we're all voyeurs to some extent' (Hitchcock in Truffaut, 1983, p.216) if only when focused on cinema. When discussing *Rear Window*, Hitchcock describes Jeff as 'a real peeping tom' (Hitchcock in Truffaut, 1983, p. 216), but argues that this behaviour only mirrors the human impulse to watch the private lives of others (Hitchcock in Truffaut, 1983). He also talks of the apartments across the courtyard presenting 'little stories' (Hitchcock in Truffaut, 1983, p. 216) that encourage attention, reinforcing his notion that spectatorship can be considered as simple curiosity, rather than scopophilia. As suggested by Hitchcock, the refusal to 'pull down the blinds' (Hitchcock in Truffaut, 1983, p.216) is representative of the way women are represented, where the interiors function as open displays rather than private shelters.

Within Hitchcock's essay *The Enjoyment of Fear* (Fig.19), he explains that suspense and surprise is created in cinema by carefully curating what and when both the audience and characters see, shaping their experience (Hitchcock, 1949), this logic is apparent in *Rear Window*, where suspense shapes the interiors into places of staged spectatorship.

This framework allows the reading of the interior as a tool that carefully controls image and perception. Later feminists reinforce this idea, by arguing that cinematic space builds the way a woman is looked at, structuring the female image as desirable and passive to the male gaze (Mulvey, 1989).



The enjoyment of FEAR

Most people like to have the daylight scared out of them. Actually, there's a reason for it. A Hollywood expert explains it

Fig.19: Hitchcock's article 'The enjoyment of fear'

In *Rear Window*, each apartment interior is thoughtfully staged through its window, transforming the private domestic sphere into a framed set for spectatorship. As Colomina argues, domestic spaces do not simply protect or shelter the user but operate as a 'viewing mechanism' (Colomina, 1994, p.250). Hitchcock's interiors mirror this idea, where the women across the courtyard are confined within domestic rooms that encourage observation, and designed to facilitate the act of looking (Fig.20).

The colour, lighting and interior arrangement further reinforce this notion. For example, Miss Torso's apartment is lit brightly, with little clutter, pale walls and minimal furnishing that encourages the attention to lie with her body and movement.

The interior therefore becomes a backdrop that emphasises the eroticism of her image, aligning with Mulvey's notion of women occupying a 'traditional exhibitionist role' (Mulvey, 1989, p.19). Her movements within the interior, her dancing and entertaining, reinforces Mulvey's argument that cinema shapes how a woman is looked at, 'for the gaze and enjoyment of men' (Mulvey, 1989, p.21) where both within the film narrative and the external male spectator, the interior becomes a staging device that limits her agency to performance, that 'primarily satisfies (...) due to the erotic connotations of the sequence' (Panners, 2010).



Fig.20: Miss Torso being watched dressing in her apartment by Jeff in *Rear Window*

In contrast, the male interiors are darker, more private and enclosed, with more functionality (Fig.21). Jeff's apartment, though also a place of confinement due to injury, grants Jeff agency with encouraging the act of spectatorship. Although he does not have full freedom over his movements, Jeff is still granted authority over the narrative, because his space is not staged for display, but for observation. This contrast between the male and female interior, exemplifies how power is afforded. Women are granted visibility and movement within the interior, but denied agency, the importance of their role reduced to their 'to-be-looked-at-ness' (Mulvey, 1989, p.19), whilst men maintain agency through the active role of looking.

However, whilst *Rear Window* is often read through Mulvey's frameworks as a site of voyeurism and spatial control, critics argue that Hitchcock's use of interiors has a more complicated explanation of the women's agency than this allows. Modleski, for example, argues that the film does not simply reduce the women to objects of looking, but that they can have active roles in the storyline (Modleski, 1989). Not only this but she also argues that although the women are subject to being looked at, there is agency within the knowledge and desire to be seen (Modleski, 1989).



Fig.21: Jeff's Apartment in *Rear Window*

Through Massey's lens, the interiors in *Rear Window* can be understood as socially produced spaces that mediate agency through spatial containment, shaping not only how women are seen, but also what they are able to do, therefore not only a tool of 'spatial control' but 'social control on identity' (Massey, 1994, p.179). Whilst women are active within the interiors, their movement is anchored by visual exposure and voyeurism. As discussed by some reviewers, the film's construction of looking is organised around windows that rewrite private, domestic spaces into display cases and exposing private lives to observation (Fig.22). Therefore, impacting movement and visibility of the female characters for both Jeff and the external viewer, positioning voyeurism at the 'heart of the narrative' (ACMI, n.d.). This spatial reading represents femininity as an expressive and sexual image, whilst also limiting agency through the women's confinement to taking the role of the spectacle.

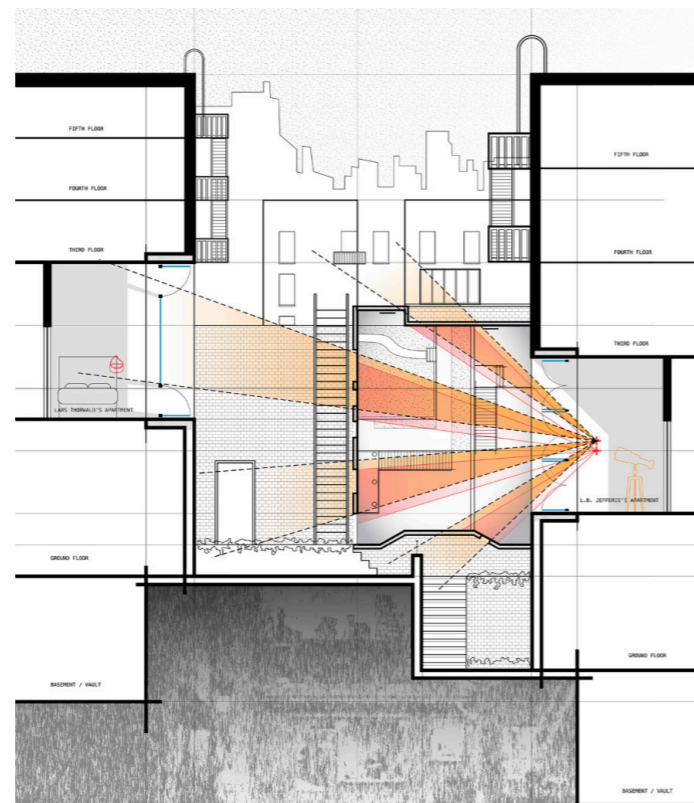
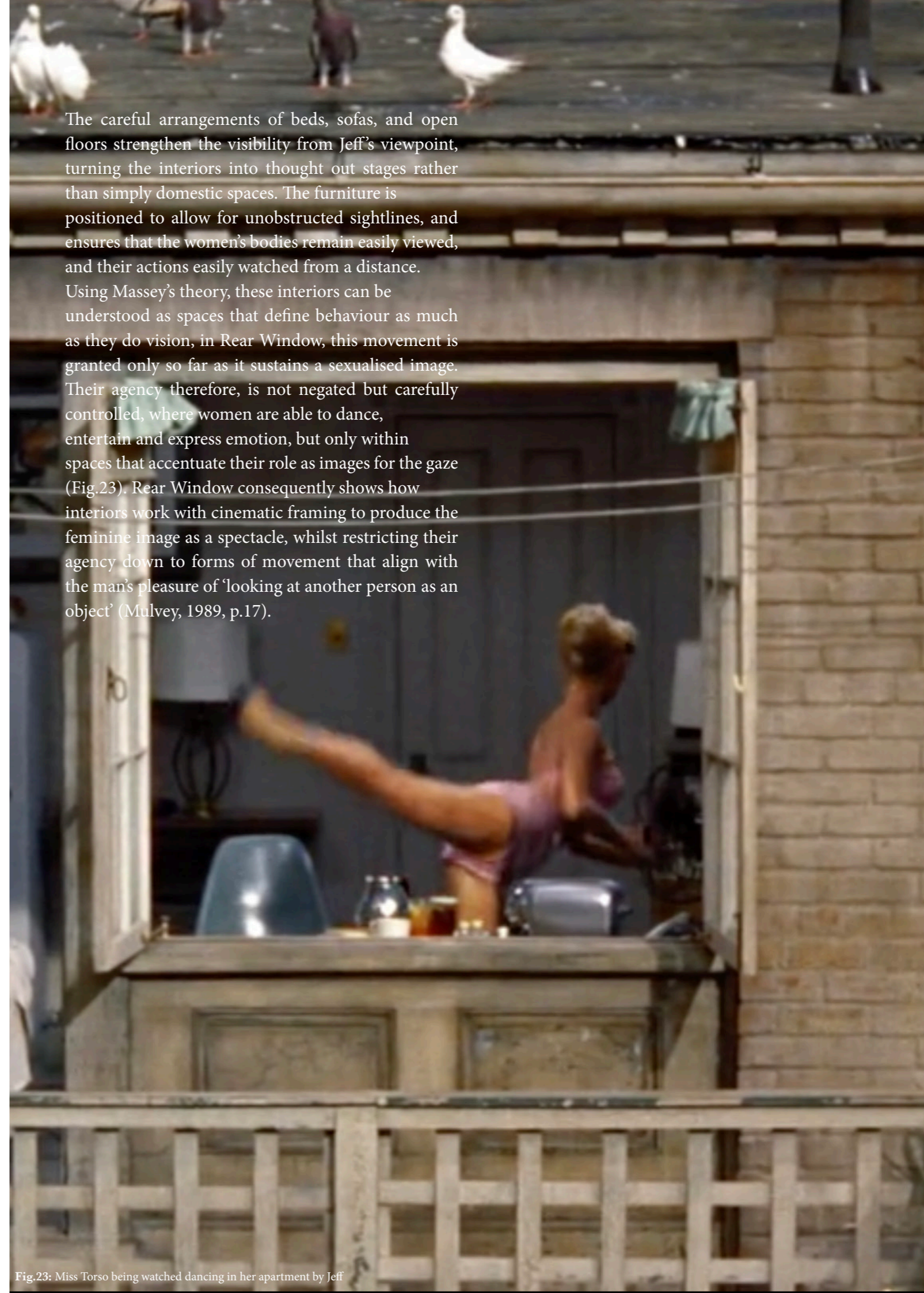


Fig.22: Section mapping Jeff's viewpoints from his apartment in *Rear Window*



The careful arrangements of beds, sofas, and open floors strengthen the visibility from Jeff's viewpoint, turning the interiors into thought out stages rather than simply domestic spaces. The furniture is positioned to allow for unobstructed sightlines, and ensures that the women's bodies remain easily viewed, and their actions easily watched from a distance. Using Massey's theory, these interiors can be understood as spaces that define behaviour as much as they do vision, in *Rear Window*, this movement is granted only so far as it sustains a sexualised image. Their agency therefore, is not negated but carefully controlled, where women are able to dance, entertain and express emotion, but only within spaces that accentuate their role as images for the gaze (Fig.23). *Rear Window* consequently shows how interiors work with cinematic framing to produce the feminine image as a spectacle, whilst restricting their agency down to forms of movement that align with the man's pleasure of 'looking at another person as an object' (Mulvey, 1989, p.17).

Fig.23: Miss Torso being watched dancing in her apartment by Jeff

When compared to *Volver* and *Barbie*, *Rear Window* acts as the foundation of traditional gendered roles and representation, from which later films respond. Hitchcock's interiors demonstrate the cinematic framework in which domestic space is intentionally designed for looking (Fig.24), and where women are framed and arranged within interiors that prioritise visibility over autonomy (Mulvey, 1989). Where it occurs, agency is mediated through the female performance, this notion of spectatorship provides the groundwork through which Gerwig and Almodovar respond to, and contest.

In contrast to *Rear Window*, *Volver* humanizes Hitchcock's interiors of surveillance, by rewriting them as places of care and emotional repair, however, this transformation doesn't quite reach the spatial limitations built around agency. Whilst Hitchcock's women are visually contained, it can be argued that they have more awareness over their visibility, whereas, Almodovar's women are spatially contained, with no control over the 'crisis' they face.

From Massey's perspective, both films exemplify how interiors are socially produced to regulate women's roles, with Hitchcock's interiors managing visibility and desire, whilst Almodovar's forces endurance. In this sense, *Rear Window*'s women, although at first glance uphold a passive agency within the narrative, arguably grants women more agency through the desire to be seen, as Mulvey herself writes 'there is pleasure in being looked at' (Mulvey, 1989, p.17).

Barbie establishes the most contrasting model from Hitchcock by reinventing the male centred concept of spectatorship altogether. Where *Rear Window* grants the most power to the spectator, with the feminine image eroticised for enjoyment, *Barbie* represents the image as excessive, overpowering and self-aware (Fig.25). This contrast reinforces Hitchcock's voyeuristic influence, both interior structures negate privacy, but have very different implications of this on the women's agency. In Hitchcock, the exposure is forced, whereas in Gerwig, it is played with and performed.



Fig.24: Domestic space designed for spectatorship in *Rear Window*



Fig.25: Collective performance and excess in *Barbie*

Conclusion

Overall, *Rear Window* is a fundamental film in understanding how cinematic interiors moderate the relationship between the image and agency of women. Hitchcock's domestic interiors function as spatial mediums that actively construct femininity as a visible, desirable, and objectified image, whilst strictly regulating the settings where agency is granted. Through the windows, furnishings, lighting and framing, women are vividly and erotically represented, yet their capacity of autonomy is confined by the same interiors that produce their image. By challenging Mulvey's theory of the gaze, the woman doesn't simply take the passive role and the man the active. The relationship between the image and agency here is extremely dependant on one another, where visibility does allow for a form of agency in the awareness and desire of being seen, it still remains tied to the desirability of

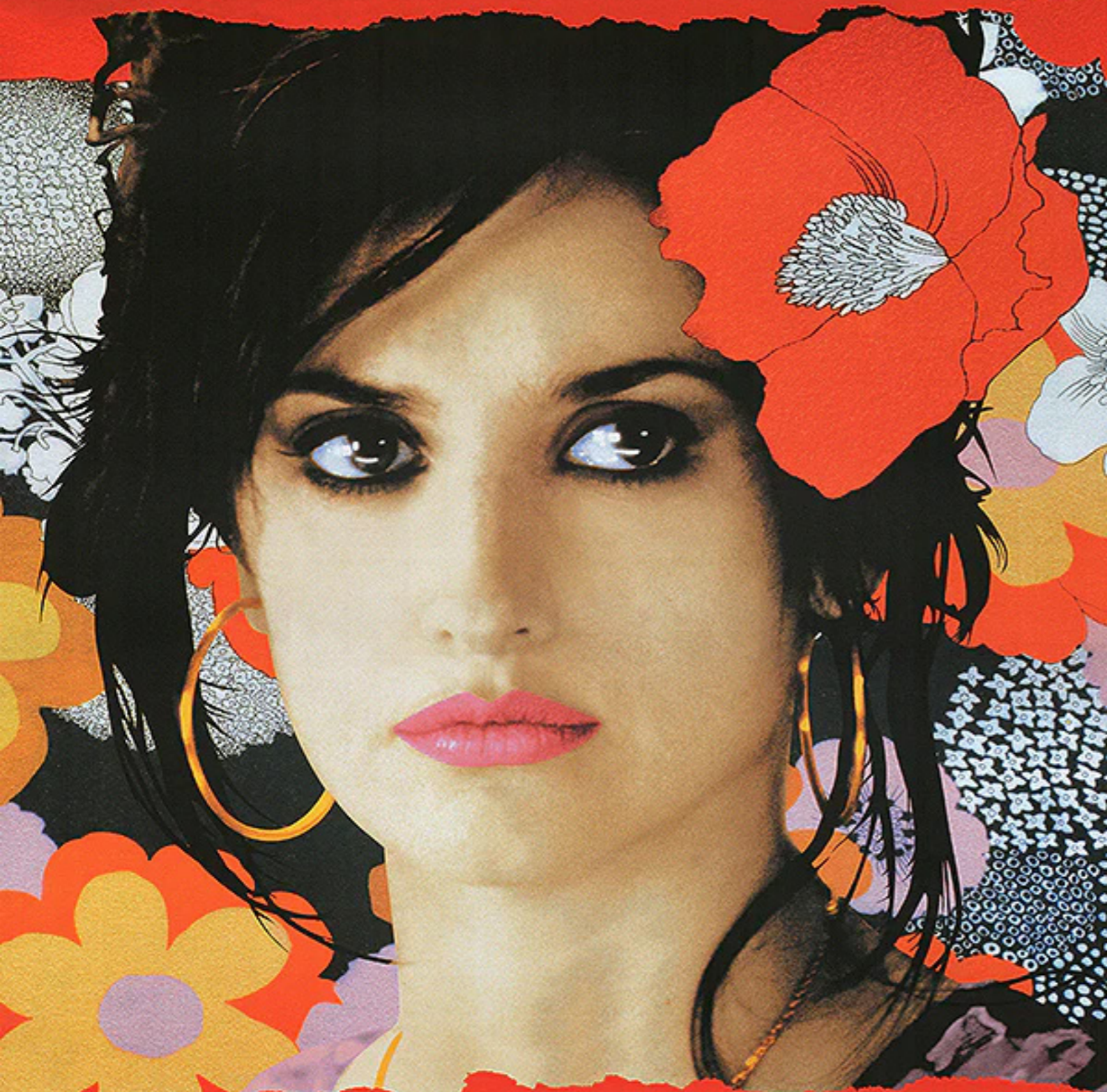
their image and the notion of spectatorship rather than full autonomous freedom (Fig.26).

Ultimately, *Rear Window* does not present women's agency as entirely passive, but instead establishes how agency can become present within a constrained image, even though the interiors remain obligated in creating maximum visibility and eroticism. This interplay between an amplified sexual, objectified image and restricted agency creates the framework through which the later films can be explored. This structure of controlled visibility and restricted agency becomes the baseline against which *Volver* reconfigures the domestic interior, shifting from a site of surveillance and spectacle to one of shared inhabitation, changing the way female agency is granted spatially.



Fig.26: Lisa's conscious display of desirability for Jeff within the domestic interior in *Rear Window*

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Chapter 2:

Spaces of Solidarity - Almodovar's *Volver* and the Reclamation of the Domestic Home

- *Volver* (2006)

Building from Hitchcock's interiors of surveillance and control, this chapter explores how Almodovar rewrites domestic space as a site of female solidarity and emotional repair. *Volver*'s kitchen, the colour and materiality are all significant in how the image of the woman is represented. This chapter also tests to what extent Almodovar's interiors truly offer agency, or whether he simply reshapes constraint through emotion.

Drawing from Mulvey's theory of the gaze, Massey's idea of socially produced space and Bruno's Atlas of Emotion, this chapter argues that *Volver* exaggerates the image of femininity through colour and excess, whilst redefining agency as restorative and fragile, rather than autonomous. Paul Julian Smith's reading of Almodovar's cinema as emotionally excessive and stylised, and engaging with identity, grounds this analysis by positioning *Volver*'s interiors as a place where the women take lead, but still endure crisis (Smith, 2014).

Through close analysis of the kitchen as a central spatial and emotional site, as well as the colour and materiality of the interiors, this chapter explores how *Volver* presents a powerful representation of the image of femininity and emotional endurance, as well as the limitations it has in producing spatial freedom. With this, the chapter marks another point in this dissertation's trajectory, with Almodovar taking place in the middle ground between the two extremes of Hitchcock's sexualised image and passive agency, and Gerwig's exaggeration and self-autonomous spectacle.

Almodovar's cinema has long been affiliated with the exaggerated image of femininity, melodrama and high emotion. Emerging from post-Franco Spain, Almodovar's work reflects a time defined by cultural and political change and a progression of gender roles, following decades of oppression under dictatorship. As argued by Smith, Almodovar does not position women as passive figures, instead he challenges an earlier view which 'read narrative cinema primarily as the sadistic or voyeuristic gaze which the male exercises over a passive female object' (Smith, 2014, p.5), by putting women at the forefront of the narrative. In *Volver*, this model of looking contends classical cinema's voyeurism, by replacing the sexualised image with one that is emotionally charged. The women are no longer framed purely for male pleasure, but for solidarity and resilience (Fig.29).

Through Mulvey's frameworks, this change adds a new light to the gaze. *Volver* manages to resist the traditional 'to-be-looked-at-ness' (Mulvey, 1989, p.19), regarded with classic cinema, and instead focuses the attention towards female relationships, and celebrating 'defiant femininity' (Betancourt, 2016). The setting where much of the film takes place is domestic, reinforcing an image of femininity as strong rather than desirable.



Fig.28: Visible female endurance and sacrifice within *Volver*'s domestic space

As explored by Manuel Betancourt, Almodovar's 'commitment to exploring women's stories, or rather, women's suffering' (Betancourt, 2016) reads the visibility granted to the women as self-authoritative whilst also keeping them centred around roles of obligation and sacrifice (Fig.28).

This mode of looking aligns closely with Massey's argument that space is socially produced, as well as providing an interesting standpoint on her argument that 'the attempt to confine women to the domestic sphere was both specifically spatial control and (...) social control on identity' (Massey, 1994, p.179). In *Volver*, the women dominate the interiors, yet their agency remains tied to the spaces they inhabit and the events they are confronted with within them, reinforcing Massey's claim that spatial freedom is essential to power. Zaya Rustamova's analysis of *Volver* as a film centred around the 'longing for return' (Rustamova, 2020) reinforces this idea, by positioning the domestic interior as a site of the 'incessant circle with no beginning or end' (Rustamova, 2020), that the women in the narrative face. Almodovar here represents the feminine image as strengthened and exaggerated, but still spatially confined, demonstrating that *Volver* reclaims the female image, but isn't able to go as far as to reclaim agency.



Fig.29: Solidarity and comfort between women in *Volver*

The kitchen in *Volver* functions as the emotional and spatial centre within the film, becoming a site where female relationships are formed and repaired, therefore reflecting and affecting 'the ways in which gender is understood' (Massey 1994, p.179). Drawing from Bruno's concepts of cinematic space as an 'emotional map' (Bruno, 2018, p.207), the kitchen works as a setting of intimacy and labour, showing domestic labour not as overlooked work, but as something that binds women together (Fig.30).

The colour and materiality of the kitchen and living areas further intensify this spatial effect. For example, the saturated reds, warm yellows, busy textiles and worn surfaces create an interior that feels lived in. These materials function as emotional anchors, that embody memory and trauma (Rivero, 2010). The chairs, countertops and patterned fabrics become an archive of female experience throughout the film, reinforcing Bruno's claim that spaces are felt as much as they are seen (Bruno, 2018).



Fig.30: Kitchen setting showing collective labour and partnership in *Volver*

This exaggerated spatial display strengthens the image of femininity, whereby Almodovar's interiors employ warmth, texture and excess, representing femininity as lively and visually dominant. As Smith argues, the stylisation of interiors in *Volver* can be understood as deliberately linking to serious concerns and politics, which are often ignored, rather than dismissed by critics as being 'kitsch', a label that 'arises from a disrespect for a register coded as feminine' (Smith, 2014, p.2). In *Volver*, the excess within the interior does not act as a site for political or social change, instead it rewrites the kitchen as a place of solidarity, where women collectively manage trauma through care and shared labour. The domestic interior therefore functions less so as a site of transformation than as one of survival.

However, *Volver*'s interiors also reveal the limitations of women's agency within the film's domestic architecture. Whilst the kitchen enables a space of care and emotional endurance, equally it is a site of crisis reaction and management, rather than self- authorship. Raimunda's continuous labour within the kitchen, her cooking, cleaning, and caring for family suggests that her agency is enacted through necessity rather than choice, representing cultural traditions where the 'housewife is still common' (Rivero, 2010)(Fig.31). Unlike spaces that allow complete freedom of movement or change, the kitchen in *Volver* anchors the women to the same cycle of crisis, survival, and repair,

where the women's freedom is constricted by obligation. Through Massey's lens, this interior can be looked at as socially produced to sustain support, rather than complete self-agency; it enables solidarity and repair, but not escape. This perspective however, is challenged by some who argue that the kitchens become a refuge for the women, and a central life force for their spirits, used as a feminist tool to highlight sisterhood and trust in the 'brutishly patriarchal universe' (Dhar, 2023).

Mulvey's theory allows for further exploration, whilst women are no longer sexualised, they remain highly visible and vulnerable to 'masculine forces' (Dhar, 2023), within interiors that are defined by crisis. In this sense, visibility does not equal liberation, instead, it reinforces the idea that 'the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form' (Mulvey, 1989, p.14). Rustamova's reading of *Volver* as a longing for return, reinforces how these interiors pull the women back into cycles of 'repeated aggression', a 'recurrence of events' and 'ongoing suffering' (Rustamova, 2020, p.239).

Therefore, whilst *Volver* reclaims domestic space as emotionally vibrant and powerful, it does so at the expense of agency, whereby it is experienced collectively through sisterhood and solidarity, but when personal it is threatened and vulnerable.



Fig.31: Female obligation and domestic labour in *Volver*

When placed between Hitchcock's *Rear Window* and Gerwig's *Barbie*, *Volver* acts as a significant moment in the cinematic evolution of the representation of female agency and image. Similar to *Barbie*, Almodovar's visual language of interiors exaggerates the image of femininity through colour and texture (Fig.32). Expressive domestic interiors, with their vivid reds and patterned fabrics, although different in style to *Barbie*'s hyper-stylised plastics and pink, both represent femininity as self-owned and dominant. Women in *Volver* inhabit the interiors with confidence, suggesting a contrast to Hitchcock's surveyed female image. However, this image does not transcribe into the powerful agency seen in *Barbie*, instead *Volver* suggests a constricted and more passive agency, that mirrors more closely to that of *Rear Window*.

Where Hitchcock's women gain power through performance under surveillance (Fig.33), Almodovar's women gain agency through dependence and care, where their strength is collective rather than personal. Through Massey's framework, this difference of agency can be read spatially, whilst *Barbie*'s spaces are open and self-expressive, *Volver* anchors women within spaces that prioritise protection rather than that same freedom. The kitchen space functions as emotional restoration, supporting emotional wellbeing during crisis, but does little in offering the same freedom of movement that is represented in *Barbie*. Much like Bruno's concept of emotional geography suggests, *Volver* maps feelings and repair, rather than social change.

Therefore, *Volver* takes place as a middle ground, its image of femininity is bold and lively, aligning more closely with *Barbie*, whereas its agency relates closer to *Rear Window*, shaped by obligation and necessity rather than choice. With this, *Volver* shows that exaggerating the image of femininity does not automatically ensure agency, which remains tied to spatial conditions, containment and labour.



Fig.32: Exaggerated colour and texture constructing a dominant feminine image in *Volver*



Fig.33: Female agency mediated through performance under surveillance in *Rear Window*

Conclusion

Through saturated colour, excess of objects and materials, Almodovar builds a powerful image of femininity that progresses Hitchcock's voyeuristic confinement, and provides groundwork for Gerwig's exaggerated display. Using Bruno's theory of spaces being emotionally instilled, the interiors function as sites of care, memory and endurance, where women support each other through crisis (Fig.34). However, Massey's argument of space as socially produced reinforces the idea that the agency women are granted within the interior remain constructed by obligation, and limits the chance of freedom. Ultimately, the image of Almodovar's women is exaggerated and powerful, yet the agency is dependent and fragile, rather than autonomous.

In *Volver* the domestic interior provides a setting for emotional repair, but does not aid in challenging the conditions that require this need for support, or freeing the women of this repetitive cycle. The women are resilient and intelligent, yet within the film the majority of their actions are reactive, caused by circumstances they are forcefully confronted with. Overall, Almodovar's domestic interiors suggest that whilst the image of a woman can be reclaimed visually, their agency remains determined by the possibilities and limitations imposed by the interiors' spatial design. This situates *Volver* within a middle ground, where the conflict between image and agency creates the foundation for which *Barbie* builds upon, radicalising this trajectory by rewriting the interior as a political feminist space, shaped by the exaggerated image and self-authorship.



Fig.34: The domestic interior as a site of care and endurance between women in *Volver*

Margot
Robbie

Ryan
Gosling



She's everything.
He's just Ken.

WARNER BROS. PICTURES PRESENTS
A HEYDAY FILMS PRODUCTION A LUCKYCHAP ENTERTAINMENT PRODUCTION AN NB/GG PICTURES PRODUCTION A MATEL PRODUCTION MARGOT ROBBIE RYAN GOSLING "BARBIE" AMERICA FERRERA KATE MCKINNON
ISSA RAE RHEA PERLMAN AND WILL FERRELL COSTUME DESIGNER JACQUELINE DURRAN MUSIC BY MARK RONSON ANDREW WYATT MUSIC SUPERVISOR GEORGE DRAKOULIAS EDITOR NICK HOUY, ACE PRODUCTION DESIGNER SARAH GREENWOOD
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY RODRIGO PRIETO, ASC, A.M.C. EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS GRETA GERWIG NOAH BAUMBACH YVON KREIZ RICHARD DICKSON MICHAEL SHARP JOSEY McNAMARA COURTENAY VALENTI TOBY EMMERICH CATE ADAMS
BASED UPON MATEL TOYS AND CHARACTERS CREATED BY MATEL WRITTEN BY GRETA GERWIG & NOAH BAUMBACH PRODUCED BY DAVID HEYMAN, P.G.A. MARGOT ROBBIE, P.G.A. TOM ACKERLEY, P.G.A. ROBBIE BRENNER, P.G.A. DIRECTED BY GRETA GERWIG

PG-13
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Chapter 3:

Femininity as Performance - Gerwig's Barbie and Spaces of Empowerment

- *Barbie* (2023)

Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* shows a significant shift in the representation of femininity, transforming domestic interiors into a site of feminist critique and empowerment. In contrast to Hitchcock's interiors which objectify, and Almodovar's which nurture emotional repair, Gerwig's *Dreamhouse* exaggerates the image of femininity, using it as a political tool. Rather than reducing women to a 'spectacle', Gerwig deliberately stages the feminine image as exaggerated and dramatized whilst still allowing their agency to be autonomous. Using hyper-stylised and artificial interiors, a world is created where femininity and the role of a woman is not simply displayed, but reconstructed and challenged.

This chapter argues that *Barbie's Dreamhouse* operates as a place of critical spatial practice, mirroring Rendell's theory, where space can be both aesthetic and political, questioning rather than simply representing social and cultural ideologies (Rendell, 2006). Through deliberate and elaborate design; plastic furnishings and surfaces, and voyeuristic interiors, Gerwig exposes the ways in which femininity has long been constructed through visual culture, whilst also imagining how it might be reclaimed.

In this sense, the exaggerated feminine image does not oppose agency, but is the tool through which Barbie's self-authorship is expressed. With this, Massey's theory that space is socially produced further signifies *Barbieland* as an expression of femininity, something that is actively performed, constructed and negotiated.

Whilst Mulvey's concept of the gaze is still apparent within the *Dreamhouse's* open facades, Gerwig opposes this framework by granting her female characters self-awareness and autonomy within the spaces they inhabit. Visibility does not position Barbie as an object of spectatorship, but instead becomes a way of self-agency and critique rather than submission. In contrast to *Rear Window*, where visibility confines women to a sexualised image, *Barbie* constructs visibility as a chosen condition, that further signifies the characters self-awareness and control.

Fig.35: Barbie 2023 movie poster

Gerwig's Barbie is a product of feminist ambitions, where Gerwig herself has called it 'a feminist (...) stepping into the negotiation of what women need to be, and how to give them something other than a tightrope to walk on' (Gerwig, 2023). Released in 2023, the film represents modern feminist context, shaped by heightened awareness around gender representation, equality, and the commodification of politics and empowerment within media. Through this, Gerwig rewrites femininity to being self-aware and expressive, with the message throughout the film insisting that the gaze must be challenged and re-claimed, not by rejecting the traditional female image, but by intensifying it.

When viewed through Laura Mulvey's concept of the gaze, Barbie both recognizes and critiques the impact of the tradition of female spectacle (Mulvey, 1989). The characters within the narrative inhabit a world built for display, however, unlike traditional cinema, they assert awareness and control over how they are seen. Through this viewpoint, agency is not created through hiding the image from spectacle, but through a self-conscious performance of the feminine image. Scenes like Gloria's monologue for example, attempt to reclaim autonomy from objectification and create 'an atmosphere of acceptance' (Gerwig, 2023). However, this empowering display is staged within interiors saturated with brand aesthetics and marketing, limiting the idea of full liberation.

The film therefore tests Mulvey's framework, but isn't able to fully escape the notion of the objectified female image that it critiques.

Similarly, Massey's theory of space as socially produced is significant to this analysis. The Dreamhouse, with its glossy, pink surfaces and open thresholds (Fig.36), is a thoughtful expression of gendered ideologies, drawing attention to not only the representation of women but also the systems that produce and reinforce this representation. Whilst agency appears completely self-defined, the image remains tied to commodification and traditional social ideologies. This raises a significant question, does Barbie truly protest the oppression within the feminine image, or does it simply repackage this representation for a new consumer? From the perspective of Rendell's concept of critical spatial practice, Barbie uses architecture and decor to stage femininity as performance and critique, rather than a natural identity. In this sense, Barbie is less so a celebration of femininity, and more a commentary on its construction.

However, this intention has its constraints. Some critics argue that Barbie relies on a narrow, white-feminist viewpoint, suggesting that Barbie's reversal of the patriarchy into a matriarchy simply inverts power systems, without unpacking the underlying systems of inequality (Okunoren, 2024).



Fig.36: Barbie's cul-de-sac with openly visible interiors

Barbie's dreamhouse is designed as a hyper-stylised space that dismisses traditional understandings of domestic interiors as private and enclosed. Instead, it prioritises visibility, where there is 'no place to hide' (Gerwig, 2023). From Massey's perspective this openness reinforces the argument that space is 'socially produced', particularly in relation to feminine agency. Unlike Hitchcock's interiors, where the women's exposure limits their autonomy, the Dreamhouse's open floorplan uses exposure as a tool of self-autonomy.

This spatial transparency also provides a groundwork through which this dissertation can analyse the Dreamhouse in relation to Mulvey's theory of the gaze. In classic Cinema, visibility often symbolises vulnerability, suggesting women are placed on display for visual consumption (Mulvey, 1989). Whereas in Barbie, this visibility is rewritten, by exaggerating the openness of the house, with open facades and no interior walls, the Dreamhouse becomes a site through which the female image is knowingly staged (Fig.37,38,39). Gerwig's design suggests a shift from women being looked at as a 'spectacle' (Mulvey, 1989), to women having agency over how they present themselves.

However, this transformation is not without critique, The Dreamhouse, whilst intended as a space of self-agency and feminist protest, is still shaped by female performance, and dramatised image. As Omolara Okunoren argues, Gerwig's feminism, although visually radical and self-aware, remains centred around a consumer-friendly version of empowerment (Okunoren, 2024). Therefore, although the female characters seem to have complete agency, their image is not fully separate from the visual structures that shape how femininity is performed in film.



Fig.37: Barbie's Dreamhouse ground floor plan with minimal interior walls and open thresholds

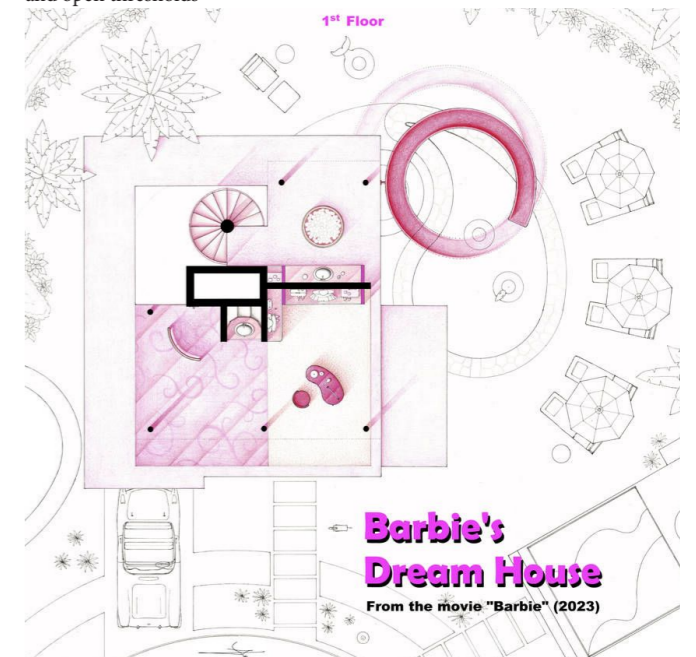


Fig.38: Barbie's Dreamhouse first floor plan with minimal interior walls and open thresholds

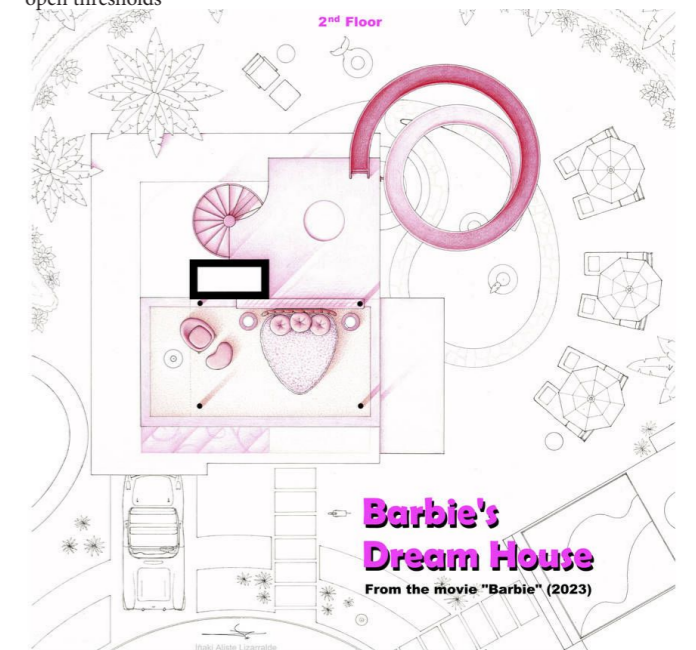


Fig.39: Barbie's Dreamhouse second floor plan with minimal interior walls and open thresholds



Fig.40: Barbie's walk-in wardrobe and vanity display

This discussion is where Rendell's notion of 'critical spatial practice' becomes apparent, where the Dreamhouse is not only aesthetic, but both controversial and political (Rendell, 2006). Its artificial interiors and doll-like proportions do not copy reality, but expose how femininity is consciously performed. Gerwig uses the plastic materiality and toy-like decor (Fig.41) as a metaphor to critique how women are staged in cinema, the omission of private shelter challenges the assumed connotations between femininity and domesticity, with the Dreamhouse becoming a stage where femininity is performed self-consciously. In this interpretation, the Dreamhouse becomes a site of feminist resistance, not by rejecting traditional feminine aesthetics but by exaggerating them, for example the hyperfeminine and excessive vanity and wardrobe display become a form of critique and self-awareness (Fig.40).

The openness of the interior also allows the female characters complete freedom of movement and authority over the space, in terms of Massey who argues that the limitation of women's mobility in space is 'a crucial means of subordination' (Massey, 1994, p.179), this freedom naturally contributes to the empowerment of women's agency. Although, this argument is not without limitations, critics claim that Barbie operates through a one-dimensional gaze and 'fails to imagine anything radically different' (Okunoren, 2024), arguing that this exaggerated femininity risks reinforcing, rather than resisting patriarchal ideologies, as the empowerment Barbie offers is often tied to whiteness and idealised femininity (Okunoren, 2024).

The excessive use of pink within the Dreamhouse deepens this understanding of how women are represented in Barbie. Whilst also being an aesthetic choice mirroring Barbie's hyper-femininity, its excessiveness reshapes pink into a visual tool of resistance. Current discourse surrounding the colours symbolism, such as Stacy Gillis and Chiara Pellegrini's work, suggests a 'link between pink objects and girl power' (Gillis and Pellegrini, 2024). Through this interpretation, the Dreamhouse subverts its traditional connotations of softness and passivity, instead becoming disruptive and overpowering. Rather than rejecting pink as a symbol of oppression in femininity, Gerwig intensifies it to disestablish its traditional meaning.

This intentional exaggeration aligns with Rendell's framework, where the pink interiors become a form of critical spatial practice, using an aesthetic language to reshape the way femininity is presented, and to expose how femininity has been historically commodified and spatially performed (Mulvey, 1989). The Dreamhouse's pink interior, however, is also contradictory, whilst it reclaims the feminine image through excess, it also remains tied to the commercial and aesthetics associated with Barbie as a marketable product (Fig.42).

Whilst the pink interiors challenge traditional associations of femininity and domesticity, the film ultimately profits from the spectacle that it stages, suggesting that its feminist critique does not fully escape some patriarchal structures, operating within commercialised systems that despite its political position, will 'inherently (...) increase brand awareness and opportunities for Barbie, and by extension the aesthetic' (Horton, 2023).



Fig.41: Barbie's all pink living area furnished with toy-like decor



Fig.42: Collectable Barbie dolls from the Barbie movie

Whilst Hitchcock's interiors signal the dominance of the male gaze, Almodovar began to loosen these constraints, whereby his interiors provide emotional refuge, however, they still remained grounded to personal repair rather than social change. Within this trajectory, Gerwig's Barbie presents a shift in female agency, it does not reinforce visibility inflicted by the gaze, as Hitchcock does through cinematic spectatorship, nor does it create interior sanctuaries as done by Almodovar. Instead, Barbie reclaims female autonomy by making the image intentionally excessive and theatrical (Fig.44). The Dreamhouse is not a site of strictly containment nor refuge, but one of self-display. Massey's logic of socially produced spaces is paramount for this argument, where Hitchcock's spaces reinforce patriarchal ideologies, and Almodovar's interior spaces allow for emotional solidarity, Barbie's Dreamhouse actively exposes current social ideologies around how the image of women is represented.

However, this comparison also provides limitations to Barbie's narrative. Unlike the sincerity of emotional repair within Almodovar's interiors (Fig.43), Barbie's resistance to the traditional image is a spectacle, reliant on visual excessiveness. The Dreamhouse critiques the spectacle that it is attached to, one inseparable from commodity and marketing (Horton, 2023). Where Hitchcock's interiors restrict agency through spectatorship, and Almodovar attempts to strengthen it through companionship, Barbie's interiors reclaim agency through excessive imagery, representing the ongoing interplay between the representation of female agency and image.



Fig.43: Raimunda and her daughter supporting each other through crisis in *Volver*



Fig.44: Excessive pink in Barbie's Dreamhouse

Conclusion

Barbie's Dreamhouse, represents the current and ongoing tension in cinematic interiors between agency and image in the representation of women. Massey's concept of spaces being socially produced shows how even though the Dreamhouse enables movement, autonomy and self-controlled performance, these freedoms are still embedded in the consumerist frameworks that define the narrative. Through Mulvey's lens, the interiors help to reclaim the gaze, giving women control over how they are seen, in this sense, the agency is represented through the exaggerated image, rather than a separate entity. However, the theatrical and satirical image (Fig.45) offers the question of whether the empowerment shown is real, or if it is controlled carefully enough that it is still palatable and a 'reflection of what investors and studios are willing to fund' (Okunoren, 2024).

Gerwig's exaggeration of femininity both critiques and participates in visual spectatorship, suggesting that whilst stages can challenge social ideologies, it is still possible to remain complicit in it. Ultimately, its value lies less in offering solutions to the problem, and more so in creating valuable debate around how the representation of femininity, spatial agency and visibility interconnect in media culture.



Fig.45: Barbie and friends' comical reaction to realising Barbie has 'flat feet'

Conclusion

Using *Rear Window*, *Volver* and *Barbie* as comparative case studies across different social, and historical contexts, this dissertation has sought to investigate how film interiors mediate the relationship between feminine image and female agency. It argues that interiors function as active participants in shaping the visibility, movement and occupation of women within the space, therefore determining the level of agency that is granted. Through close spatial and visual analysis, this research has shown that the relationship between image and agency is a continuous interplay, and one that is determined by the interiors themselves.

In *Rear Window*, this mediation is structured through spectatorship and surveillance. The apartment interior and its windows create spatial confinement that grants the male the authority by looking. Femininity is created to be highly visible and sexualised through framing and spectacle, yet the agency remains dependent on the interest from the male viewpoint. This film therefore exemplifies how increased visibility within interiors can intensify objectification rather than enable autonomy. Situated within the post-war, patriarchal context of the 1950's Hollywood, Hitchcock's interiors represent a moment in time where visual and spatial control work together to restrict women's narrative and spatial agency. With this, the relationship between image and agency is unequal, where the interior intensifies the female image, whilst carefully containing their action.

Volver builds upon this relationship by granting agency within domestic interiors traditionally associated with domesticity and labour. The kitchens, bedroom and living areas are repeatedly used within the female character's narrative, allowing for agency to occur through endurance and shared spatial actions, rather than visual hierarchy. Although the image is exaggerated through colour and texture, this exaggeration is different from the eroticised spectacle in *Rear Window*. The interior supports repair and solidarity rather than surveillance, enabling agency to be granted over time. Emerging within a post-Franco context, *Volver* shows a transition where interiors start to allow women to inhabit the space autonomously and collectively rather than being isolated and restricted into domestic, passive roles. In this setting, the dance between image and agency is correlative, the exaggerated image does not take away agency, but coexists with it through the dominant and collaborative occupation within the interior domestic space.

In *Barbie*, the interior becomes completely performative. The Dreamhouse is artificial, open and entirely visible, producing an exaggerated feminine image that knowingly acknowledges its construction. The agency is presented through self-awareness within the narrative rather than reaction to it.

Whilst the film critiques patriarchal structures that represent the image of women, its interiors still limit the endurance of the agency by resisting privacy, as well as its contradiction between brand marketing and political message. This extreme exaggeration of the image results in agency that is intended in the narrative, but falls short spatially. As a contemporary feminist media, *Barbie* represents the furthest progression of female representation in film, as well as the most visible tension between image and agency within this trajectory, where spatial autonomy remains not quite fulfilled. The interplay between image and agency here becomes autonomous but for some, only at surface level, therefore demonstrating that visibility alone, without complete spatial agency, still remains limited.

Together, these three films map a clear historical and social trajectory, from Hitchcock's interiors that objectify, to Almodovar's interiors that enable repair and shared agency, to Gerwig's interiors that present self-conscious performance and critique. This progression represents the cultural shift in feminist discourse, cinematic representation and spatial politics, whilst also displaying the continuous difficulty of fully separating a women's agency from spectacle.

Across each of the three films, this dissertation has shown that agency and image cannot be understood as non-distinct and an outcome of representation alone. Instead, it is produced and reinforced through spatial conditions (particularly the interior) that regulate access, frame bodies, and enable or restrict movement. As learnt in this analysis, exaggerated femininity does not automatically empower or restrict agency, its effect is dependent on how the interiors negotiate the relationship between seeing and inhabiting. By highlighting interiors as critical tools, this research demonstrates that feminine agency in cinema is shaped as much by interior architectural composition as by narrative or image.

To conclude, this dissertation argues that interiors are central to how agency is produced, limited and maintained on screen. By analysing interiors as spatial tools that organize visibility, occupation and movement, this research shows that the relationship between image and agency of women cannot be determined by their representation alone. Instead, agency can be read as a product of spatial conditions, shaped by surveillance and performance in the narrative. The comparative analysis of *Rear Window*, *Volver* and *Barbie* argues that the exaggerated feminine image is not inherently sexualised or empowered, but its political and social significance is dependent on the interiors that support or restrict action within the narrative.

Looking forward, this suggests that the future of feminist cinematic interiors does not depend on increased visibility or strengthened image alone, but rather in the spatial conditions that grant women genuine autonomy over both themselves and the spaces they inhabit. This includes interiors that allow privacy as well as visibility, accommodate multiple contrasting expressions of femininity, and support women's sustained occupation of the space, rather than encouraging spectacle. Interiors such as these would go further than simply performing empowerment at a surface level, and instead embed agency within the spatial politics of the narrative itself, normalising inhabitation, choice and autonomy as fundamental conditions.

By positioning interiors as active participants rather than neutral backdrops, this dissertation contributes to feminist and interior architectural discourse, by establishing interiors as a critical site where power, image and agency is constantly mediated. With this, it offers a framework for reading cinematic space that builds upon film analysis, emphasising the importance of interiors in shaping the female image and feminist autonomy.

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