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Translation Essay
Course 2400 (Prof. Scanlan)
April ??, 2021

Translating Woolrich, Envisioning Hitchcock

“It Had to Be Murder,” by Cornell Woolrich, sits us down into the wheelchair of Hal Jeffries as we observe the little world behind the buildings of characters aplenty, one of whom, Hal begins to suspect, you guessed it, has committed murder. This 1942 story brings us along on Hal’s stationary quest to expose his backyard neighbor, using his attendant (Sam), a frenemy of a detective (Boyne) and a pair of binoculars, like one would expect from any amateur sleuth. Hitchcock’s 1954 adaptation, *Rear Window*, takes what Woolrich has spun as an introspective, first person experience and reweaves it into a bigger tapestry consisting of elements not present in the text. While Woolrich wants us to feel what Jeffries feels, Hitchcock, in his traditional translation, paints a more vibrant picture of different perspectives, giving a larger, more complex shape and dimension to the original story. This will be shown by comparing the narration Woolrich employs and the narrative in “Rear Window,” the sounds and lighting used by Hitchcock versus the descriptors in the text, and the characters’ motives and actions in both compositions. For the purpose of this paper, I will refer to the main character in “It Had to be Murder” as Hal and the main character in “Rear Window” as Jeffries or Jeff.

Firstly, chronologically, the introduction to this tale varies greatly between the original literature and the on-screen rendition. Woolrich’s first paragraph focuses on the neighbors themselves, and more specifically what Hal’s perception of them was as he then goes on to describe some of the households in behavioral detail. He writes, “I didn’t know their names. I’d never heard their voices.” These first two sentences are translated very differently by Hitchcock. The first is played upon in the film by the nicknames and epithets Jeffries, Stella and Lisa have for the rear-window dwellers: Miss Torso, Miss Lonelyheart, the Salesman and, as she’s referred to in the script, Miss Hearing-Aid. The second gives us the idea that Hal is watching a sort of silent film through his bay window. Hitchcock did a wonderful thing by including the occasional quasi-audible dialogue

between neighbors. This was just one way that Hitchcock's translation shifts the point of view from Jeff's eyes to his windows, the difference being that we can now observe Jeffries himself a little more.