

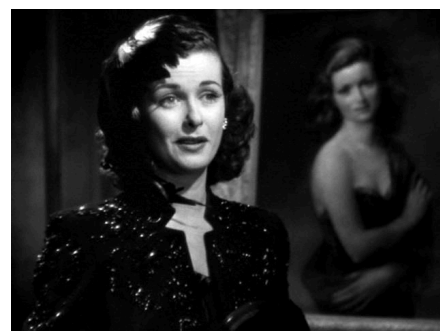


The Woman in the Window

First things first. The title. In terms of the title's ambiguity in relation to what transpires in the film, the word 'window' is a deceptive one. It's a vitrine, a store front. The idea of window is circumscribed if you can only look through the window one way. Yes, it's a window, of course, but 'win-

portrait, the reflection and the actual character standing in front of the window?

And 'in'— what does 'in' mean in the title? The woman is not literally *in* the window. It is her portrait in the window but is her reflection in the window really *in* the window?



dow' suggests you can look out and see the world as well — as in, for example, *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954). In this window you can only look *in*, although, it's true, that the painting could, if it were at all possible, look out, albeit with unseeing eyes. There is an equivalent ambiguity in the noun 'woman' in the title. Is it the portrait that is being referred to? In which case, why not 'The Portrait in the Window'? Or does the title refer to the Joan Bennett character, who actually is not *in* the window but whom we will soon see *reflected* in the window? Or does 'woman' refer to the

This kind of parsing, so reminiscent of Bill Clinton's questioning what the meaning 'is' is in a sentence, does have a point to it. *The Woman in the Window* might more accurately refer to a brothel in Amsterdam, in which women actual sit in windows, displaying their wares. Perhaps Lang is making an unpleasantly ironic comment on the model's source of income. And, in fact, there is an Italian film called *La Ragazza in vetrina* (*The Girl in the Window*) (Luciano Emmer, 1960), in which the woman, a prostitute (Marina Vlady), is quite literally in the window.



Above: *La Ragazza in vetrina* (The Girl in the Window)
 Left: *M: The Girl in the Window*; another object of desire.



In the narrative of the film, which has only just begun, Professor Wanley (Edward G. Robinson) is standing in front of the window admiring the portrait of a scantily clad woman, posed as if she were having her portrait done by Reynolds, angling her head coquettishly toward the viewer. He is separated from the dream woman – which turns out to be literally true, she is a dream woman, as we will find out at the end – by a wall of glass, much as the spectator is separated from the image on the screen. As he is lost in thought, in thrall to the painting in the window, a reflection of the real Alice Reed (Joan Bennett) appears, with a slightly mocking smile, enjoying his appreciation of her painted image. Wanley notices her reflection and its resemblance to the painting. He does a double take and then turns to her and sees the real person, the author of the reflection and the subject of the portrait.

The first betrayal. Alice Reed, reflected in the window, is not nearly as elegant as the painted one. She dresses smartly but there is an air of cheapness about her clothing that has nothing to do with cost or quality. The portrait is obviously an ethereal, idealised version of the woman whose reflection we see. In turn, the reflection turns out to be a much-idealised version of the real woman who, as presented in the film, is nothing but trouble. One level beyond the window – OK, agreed, let's call it a window – we are watching a man and woman talking, bracketing the first woman in the window. They are the characters in a fictional narrative that we are about to enter. And just as they or, rather, Wanley, is separated from the woman in the window, we, the viewers, are separated from the 'real' Joan Bennett and Edward G. Robinson. To add, at this point, that the portrait itself is in a frame, might only muddy the waters. But it is. To put it another way, everything is in a frame within a

frame within the frame of the movie we are watching. The double remove of the woman in the window is very much like the audience watching the film. Robinson and Bennett are looking in the window, just as we, the audience are looking at them – looking in the window. Except that our window onto *them* is the movie screen. The plane of the screen and the camera is parallel to the plane of the window in question. And that's the point. The artifice on the screen encapsulates and refers back to the movie-going experience. In its distancing and layered way, it becomes a metaphor, *is* a metaphor, for movies and the movie-going experience itself.

This is not the first time that Lang uses the proscenium stage or curtain within the frame as a world into which the characters are looking at a stage or a screen or a presentation in the same relationship as we, the viewers, are watching the movie. The stage, the screen, the door, the window, the curtain is always the metaphor for the what the characters in the films see – simulating, anticipating in advance, and duplicating the experience of the viewer. What are we left with when the curtain (the image on the screen) is pulled away, when we penetrate the 'window' inevitably proves that the image we see on the screen is not only a distorted one, but often a lie or a very bitter truth indeed.

M (1931) – a thief tries to escape from a police raid. He pulls the curtain open to reveal a window, his only hope for escape. Access out is blocked. No way out. The mystery behind the screen – no exit. He cannot escape. Not only is the window barred, but a policeman is standing guard on the grill outside the window. We know and he knows he will be caught.



Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse (1933) – ‘Dr. Mabuse’ gives his orders from behind a curtain. No one knows what he looks like. But it also looks like it could be a stage for amateur theatricals.



When the curtain is pulled back, we are literally facing a brick wall – and the props that created the illusion of a Dr. Mabuse. Dr. Mabuse is a shadow or, even further removed, a cut-out of a shadow – his voice, a mechanical reproduction of a voice, maybe not even his own – since Dr. Mabuse no longer exists. But what exists behind the *movie* screen, if we were to look behind it – aside from a brick wall, a sound speaker and our *own* shadows?



Die Tausend Augen des Dr. Mabuse (*The 1000 Eyes of Dr. Mabuse*) (1961) – The American businessman Travers (Peter von Eyck) is offered a gift – an opportunity to observe his girlfriend Marion (Dawn Addams) through a two-way mirror. What he sees is more erotic or more violent (or both) than he expects. Once again, the mirror is parallel to the plane of the movie screen. Travers is observing Marion. We, the movie-going audience, are watching Travers watching Marion. But is it possible that someone is watching us watching them? In Lang's world, it's entirely possible.



Reverse angle. Through the looking glass. Ultimately, Travers has to smash through the window / mirror; the illusion of the illusion, in order to save her.

Spione (1928) – Haghi (Rudolf Klein-Rogge), moonlighting from his day job as potential ruler of the world, performs as a clown in disguise. Like Dr. Mabuse, he enjoys role-playing and the different costumes it requires. Once again, the plane of the stage is parallel to the plane of the movie screen. We are watching the movie and at the same time we are in the theatre watching the performer. We are the audience in the theatre but we are the audience in the cinema, as well. The theatre audience however doesn't understand the nature of what it sees on the stage. The clown blows his brains out on-stage and the theatre audience thinks this is part of his comedy routine and laughs, although we, the audience in the movie theatre, understand what has happened and why. We do not laugh.





Reverse angle – the audience, as seen from the stage, applauding his act.



Weltmann and the empty stage



The very end of the film. Haghi's point of view. The curtain comes down, as it must on every performance. His performance ends, his life ends, the movie ends.

The End.

Doktor Mabuse der Spieler (Doctor Mabuse, the Gambler) (1922) – The most stunning and probably most important example of the window / door / stage set / curtain as a metaphor for the experience that a moviegoer has in watching the screen: Mabuse (Klein-Rogge) as Sandor Weltmann, the hypnotist. Again, an empty stage. The movie screen, the camera, the stage and the back of the stage are all lined up in parallel planes. *Spieler*, in German, means not only gambler, but also player (as one who is engaged in a game), as well as performer. As Weltmann, performance artist, Mabuse will perform an experiment in mass hypnosis. He will hypnotize the entire audience into 'seeing' the empty stage transformed into a desert scene, in which a caravan will appear at the back of the stage, come to the front of the stage. And keep on going. The caravan will spill out *into* the audience and go up the aisle, and thereby become part of the auditorium. The illusion and the audience having the illusion will be one. The mass hypnosis of the movie-going experience in which each audience member imagines that they have seen the same exact scene in front of them, which, when the spell is broken, either by Weltmann or the lights coming up in a movie theatre, reveals that they have only been looking at an empty stage. Or a blank movie screen, with a shadow of a shadow dancing on it.



Weltmann conjures up a caravan, complete with desert landscape



The caravan spills out into the audience. The illusion and the hypnotised occupy the same space. Confronting the caravan is another closed curtain.



Back to *The Woman in the Window*. More windows, an alternative reading. The beginning of Wanley's fantasy is not the only time we see the woman in the window. After Wanley has killed the intruder, he leaves Alice's house to get his car in order to dispose of the body. We see Alice through the glass window in the lobby door while she is framed in her doorway as Wanley leaves.

When finally Wanley returns, the scene is shot from the outer door, which also has a window in it. We see Alice, through the window of the front door, through the second window of the lobby door, framed in her open doorway. She is going to be the lookout while he drags the body to the car. She opens the lobby door (and window) and then the front door (and the window) to see if the coast is clear. And, once again, the camera, the movie screen, the front door window, the lobby door window and the door to her apartment are all lined up, sucking us into the frame. She, Alice / Joan, The Woman of Many Windows, leads us ever deeper into several layers of reality, unreality, and dreams that turn into nightmares. She makes the same exact trip at the end of the film after the blackmailer Heidt (Dan Duryea) has been killed, when she runs to call Wanley to tell him they are both in the clear.

But it's too late. Wanley, similarly positioned in the doors of his house, as if the two locations are matching bookends, can be seen down the corridor through two doorways, at the end of which he will find the solution to end his nightmare. Wanley will take the medicine that will kill him.



One more window to go. When Wanley is reluctantly taken to the place where he dumped the body, the District Attorney (Raymond Massey) tells him that they have the

woman who was probably involved in the murder. Wanley, terrified at the thought of being brought face to face with Alice, claims he is not feeling well and retreats to the safety of the car. Through the car window, he watches a woman who can barely be seen, the woman that he can only assume, as do we, is Alice. We find out later that she is not Alice.



The wrong woman in the window is on the right side of the frame, walking into the forest.

But the window that the title most likely refers to contains an idealised portrait which is there for our pleasure or, rather, for the pleasure of the character in the film viewing it. The painted portrait, just like those in *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944) and *Rebecca* (Hitchcock, 1940) and the as-yet-unmade *The Paradine Case* (Hitchcock, 1947) and *Vertigo* (Hitchcock, 1958) provokes fantasies and dreams – erotic, murderous and masochistic ones as it turns out – for the character in the narrative. He has begun to imagine her in ways that have nothing to do with the woman whose portrait it is – just as images on the screen have confused us as to whether or not what we're seeing is a depiction of reality, a distortion of it, or a flagrant betrayal of it. The audience, like Alice and Wanley, looks into the window and sees a pleasurable provocative image that has no specific or definable meaning. It's an idealised image that conforms only dimly to the reality it is supposed to represent, and even though it is the canvas of a woman, it's almost a blank canvas onto which, as we will see as the film unfolds, Wanley writes his own fantasies and dreams. The portrait allows the character to spin his fantasies around the frozen



image that will never and can never change but can no longer appear as an accurate representation when the real woman appears and, with her attendant complexity, supplants and subverts it. Wanley's response to the portrait, 'the woman in the window', is like the spectator's relationship to what happens on a movie screen. His dream is the movie we're all watching, a dream as all movies are. And the portals in Lang's films – windows, curtains, doors, stages, mirrors, reflective surfaces – are entries to very bad dreams indeed, filled with anxiety, betrayals, deceptions, paranoia, fear and violence – as he himself acknowledges in the title of a movie he will make three years later, *Secret Beyond the Door* (1948).

Mark Rappaport

Mark Rappaport made 9 feature films including, *The Scenic Route* (1978), *Imposters* (1979), *Rock Hudson's Home Movies* (1992), and *From the Journals of Jean Seberg* (1995). He currently lives in Paris. A collection of his writings, edited by Raymond Bellour, was published in 2008 in French 'Le Spectateur qui en savait trop' ('The Moviegoer Who Knew Too Much'). He also makes film-related photo-montages and has had exhibitions at the New York Film Festival and other film festivals.

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