Rear Window Ethics: Domestic Privacy versus Public Responsibility in the Evolution of Voyeurism

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VOYEURISM. WHAT DOES that word mean to you? As you attempt to pin down its definition, I am sure certain images dance through your mind: a shadowy figure spying through a keyhole, a pervert with mirrors fastened to his shoes, that jerk in the locker room with a camera phone. But have you ever caught yourself watching someone? If so, does that mean you are a voyeur? Where do we draw the line of morality? As we grow older, our parents teach us that it is impolite to stare, and yet sometimes even our own government instructs us to keep a watchful eye on our neighbors. There is no denying that we all watch each other from time to time, but is this sort of behavior on the rise? If so, what does this mean about our society?

If you look “voyeurism” up in the dictionary, you will find something that reads like this: one who seeks sexual stimulation by visual means. Consider what effect the removal of one word from that definition makes. If we cross out the word “sexual,” then it reads: one who seeks stimulation by visual means. This new description seems appropriate for most of America. After all, we have been going to the movies for nearly a century now and have been glued to our televisions since the 1950s, not to mention all the visual media we are exposed to on the internet everyday. Some psychiatrists use another word to label our appeal to visual media—scopophilia. Scopophilia essentially means to derive pleasure from looking. Freud associated scopophilia with objectifying others.

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