



ISSUE # 5 | JULY 2024

## Turbulence of the Mind: Psychological Power Struggles in *Red Eye*

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Wes Craven's 2005 film, *Red Eye*, is a thriller with a female protagonist (Lisa) trying to get home on a delayed flight while seated next to a terrorist (Jackson) who threatens not only the life of a guest at the hotel she manages, but also the life of her father should she disobey him. The film is set predominantly in the confines of the airborne plane, where Lisa engages in multiple attempts to notify various other passengers and flight attendants of her potentially lethal circumstances. *Red Eye* fits into the psychological thriller subgenre because it situates the conflict more in mental manipulation and psychological/emotional combat than action/fight sequences. *Red Eye* masterfully explores, unpacks, and eventually inverts the psychology of its two main characters, taking a classic thriller set-up of cat-and-mouse and flipping the script on the emotional and intellectual relationship between the protagonist and antagonist. In the process, Craven reinvigorates the genre by exploring psychological traumas and contemporary gender dynamics.

The genre of the thriller owes a significant debt to Alfred Hitchcock, who placed "a greater emphasis on individual psychology and subjective point of view" in his films (Rubin 80). In the first half of *Red Eye*, Craven emphasizes the intellectual battles between Lisa and Jackson, but adds a social dimension to their conflict by showing how Jackson uses gender bias as a mental weapon against Lisa. For example, in the first sequence after Jackson reveals his true intent, he uses psychological methods of "persuasion" to manipulate her into doing his bidding rather than using physical violence or force. He plays into the stereotypical gender roles the airline staff assign to them to dominate Lisa's will. With a few quick words—"You'll just be another drunk girl"—Jackson destroys Lisa's hopes of getting help. He feeds her insecurities by giving voice to the underlying fear and the very real chance that no one will believe her, recasting their earlier friendly drink at the airport bar in a sinister light, as the audience now understands he was plying her with alcohol to lower her defenses.

The camera angles throughout this sequence emphasize the hierarchy of control between the two. Craven's camera inverts expectations by looking down at Jackson in a high angle shot, while the shot of Lisa is from a low angle, tilted up toward her face from Jackson's point of view. In a typical scene construction, this would work to establish Lisa as the dominant person looming over Jackson, but Jackson is at this point in complete control, and he knows it. There is no need for him



to stand up to intimidate or threaten her. In fact, it would work against him because by remaining seated, he reinforces the flight attendant's perspective that Lisa is being overdramatic and standing before the fasten seat belt sign has been turned off. Her standing up in desperation proves her lack of control in the moment. Jackson looks up at her unfazed, as if taking pleasure in her distress. He is emotionless and detached, his eyes staring at her unblinking. The power he holds over her is further enforced by the weight of the news he has just delivered to

her—that with one phone call, he can end her father's life. How can she risk challenging him when her father's life is on the line? He smiles and commands her to sit down. His subtext is clear: "You're making a fool out of yourself. We both know there's nothing you can do to stop me." His dialogue reflects his view that she is an emotionally imbalanced female incapable of the analytical, logical thought of his superior male mind. By sitting, calm and relaxed, during the entire sequence, Jackson delights in his perceived superiority while effectively trapping Lisa in her seat without laying a hand on her. This sequence therefore emphasizes Lisa's total isolation, despite being surrounded by other passengers—another staple of the suspense genre, where "only by isolating the protagonist can the moral and thematic conflicts emerge clearly and meaningfully" (Derry 11).

Jackson's psychological manipulation of Lisa builds as his deadline draws nearer. In his impatience, he also escalates his physical domination to control her actions. When this violence explodes in the bathroom scene, where Lisa is truly isolated, the film begins to track Jackson's slow decline of control over both Lisa and his own emotions. His mask of mental calm slips as he resorts to manhandling her in an enclosed space, expressing for the first time anything other than a cool and collected façade. Lisa opens the door of the bathroom to find Jackson eerily waiting, and when he catches sight of her soap writing on the mirror, he puts his hand over her mouth to silence her and slams her into the wall, the camera whirling into a birds-eye-view shot. The camera throughout the sequence is handheld, making it shaky to reflect the edgy emotions portrayed. The camera also moves in sweeping motions at several points to catch the action and sudden, jerky movements. As Jackson settles into his position,



holding Lisa against the wall, a series of shots flips between a side view showing both their faces and expressions and a close-up over Jackson's shoulder, encompassing the side of his face pressed up against Lisa. These emphasize the characters' close proximity and give the audience a clear sense of Lisa's panic.



As the scene intensifies and both Jackson's anger and Lisa's fear build, Craven interjects several point-of-view shots that give the audience Lisa's perspective of Jackson's face. It is so intense and close that it feels like Jackson is violating our personal space as well as Lisa's. In the midst of the scene, we also get a close-up of the scar on Lisa's chest. Jackson uses this as an excuse to throw her across the enclosed space and choke her, calling her a liar when she denies his claims. The camera follows the sudden movement, whirling to another overhead shot that reinforces the claustrophobic space of the tiny bathroom. The shots switch rapidly between an insert shot of Lisa's hand bracing her against the wall, a close-up of their faces almost touching as he strangles her, and an insert shot of her high heels as her feet scramble for any chance at balance or support. These perspective changes within the tight space emphasize Lisa's whole-body effort and lead viewers to feel as if they, too, are struggling to breathe. Throughout the sequence, the music rises in bursts for each sudden movement, but during their exchanges, it drops to a dark undertone of sinister beats, with the dominant sounds being Lisa's strained breathing and Jackson's panting. These again amplify both the extreme tension and the tightness of their quarters. Viewers get an intimate view of the fear/tears in Lisa's eyes and hear the tremble in her voice.

The reference to Lisa's previous assault also heightens the emotional intensity of the scene, as Jackson's violence takes on a sexually threatening dimension and Lisa's victimhood comes to the foreground as one of the film's dominant themes. Jackson continues his mental manipulation by



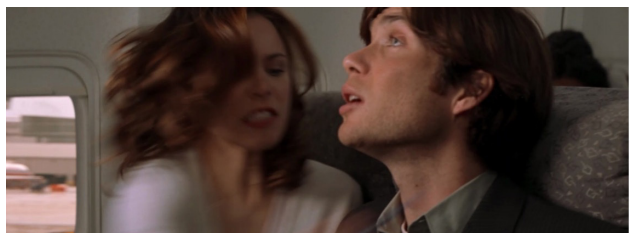
mentioning her father's predicament and how it depends on her. He tries to tell her they are both professionals with similar jobs focused on making their customers happy. His tone is patronizing. He takes her face in his hand in a gentle and mocking way after his violent outbursts and asks if she will listen to him now. Rather than admit that he is the cause of all the trouble, he consistently blames her for the situation she is in, basically saying, "If you'd just listen to me everything would go smoothly, and nobody would get hurt." Jackson's manipulation is that of a self-obsessed narcissist.

In the climactic sequence, Lisa manages to stab Jackson in the larynx and step out of her victim position. Craven's camera puts the audience in a privileged position of knowing what is going to happen before Jackson does, and builds on both the characters' and the audience's psychological stress. A series of shots bounces from a close-up of Lisa's eyes to her unbuckling her seatbelt to her hand on the pen, removing its cap and preparing to use it as a weapon to secure her escape. At the same time, the camera cuts between close-ups of her face and Jackson's, all of these shots registering the mental battle between them as she tells him the story of her traumatic assault.



Best of all, in this scene, Lisa uses Jackson's assumptions and misogynistic views to her advantage because he continues to perceive her as helpless. As the plane lands, he believes he has succeeded. He is completely unprepared for her to fight back in any physical capacity and is distracted by her confession of the truth about her scar. He doesn't understand why she is telling him any of this, because he doesn't really care about the truth. After sharing the details of her assault, Lisa states that she has repeated the same thing to herself over and over again since then. Jackson tries to turn her words against her and manipulate her view of the situation by smugly finishing her sentence, interjecting "That it was beyond your control." It is his perverse attempt at comfort. Lisa uncaps the pen and shakes her head, instead saying "No. That it would never happen again." She turns to look at him, and the close-up of her face shows the audience the change in her mental state. She no longer appears scared, but calm and determined. She isn't about to go down without one last fight. The camera is slightly shaky, reflecting the emotion of the exchange.

As the film approaches the moment of truth, the cuts and edits seem almost slow and steady, creating a calm before the storm. The music is slow and gentle as Lisa shares her story, misleading Jackson by playing him at his own game. He suspects nothing. After her declaration, the music shifts to chords and then goes silent as the seatbelt notification sounds, loud in the silence. As Jackson looks up, Lisa takes the pen and stabs him in the windpipe, effectively taking back the power he has taken from her. As Lisa moves, the camera moves dizzily, the cuts coming quick and fast,





showing Lisa's violent action from multiple angles. The dominating sound is of the movement. The moment the pen penetrates Jackson's throat is emphasized with a boom and clash of cymbals. The shots cut in a rapid

shot-reverse shot between Jackson's wide, wild eyes and Lisa's face. The sound of his strained breathing is emphasized in the same way Lisa's was in the bathroom scene. In this moment, she has not only outsmarted him but overpowered him as well. Lisa begins her escape, and the music hits a drumroll of steadily rising depth and speed, as she snatches his phone and pushes her way out into the aisle. And so the chase begins. From this moment onward, their power dynamic shifts in Lisa's favor, and Jackson loses his detached calm. He is no longer acting from a presumption of male superiority and rationality; he is now acting out of rage and driven solely by his emotions.

*Red Eye* consciously unpacks the mental states of both the protagonist and the antagonist in a traditional cat-and-mouse psychological thriller. The film reveals the mental games and emotional exploitation played out between Jackson and Lisa to reveal the gradual shift in their dispositions and worldviews, which also serves as a commentary on the way gender informs power dynamics, particularly in the mid-2000s when the film was produced. Jackson's gradual decline of control over Lisa and his emotions coincides with Lisa's slow ascent to bringing her emotions and faculties under her control. By the end of the film, their statuses are inverted, with Lisa besting Jackson at his own game. He is driven by his emotions, the victim of his pride, and Lisa uses her intellect to fight, escape, and defeat him. Through camera shots, editing, mise-en-scene, and music, Wes Craven masterfully paints a picture of the characters' psyches for the viewer, pulling the audience deeper into the realm of a true psychological thriller. ☺

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