Formal Permutations of the Point-of-View Shot

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An analysis of three films made in Hollywood in the 1930's showed that nearly 40 per cent[1] of the cuts create what Noël Burch in *Theory of Film Practice* (London and New York 1975) calls proximate spatial articulations (p 9); that is, the space revealed by shot A is near that of shot B — perhaps within the same room — but at no point does it overlap or coincide with the space of shot B. A number of techniques have been developed to link these proximate spaces into spatial, and often temporal, continuity (see eg Karel Reisz and Gavin Millar: *The Technique of Film Editing*, 2nd ed 1968, pp 211-72). One such technique is the eyeline match; and a subset of the eyeline match is the point-of-view shot (POV).

In order to understand what proportion of proximate articulations are POV shots, it will be necessary to define the formal elements of the POV shot. It will then be possible to discover what types of POV shots are favoured by the traditional Hollywood film. In addition — since the POV shot is often considered a ' subjective ' shot[2] — a more rigorous definition of the shot will aid in the discrimination of a larger — and constantly shifting — narrative point of view or filmic voice. To identify filmic voice is to discover the

1. This figure results from a shot-by-shot tabulation of all the transitions (cuts, dissolves, fades, wipes, etc) of *Ever In My Heart* (Mayo, 1933) (37 per cent), *Four Daughters* (Curtiz, 1938) (38.5 per cent), and *His Girl Friday* (Hawks, 1939) (40.6 per cent which includes 6.6 per cent cross-cutting via the telephone). A cut was not deemed a proximate articulation if the same character, though against different backgrounds, was common to both shots.

2. The POV shot is one of five subjective shots listed by Christian Metz, 'Current Problems of Film Theory: C Metz on J Mitry's *L'Esthétique et Psychologie du Cinéma*, Vol II ', *Screen*, v 14 n 1/2, Spring 1973, pp 45-49. The other categories are, broadly speaking, purely mental images, subjectivising the objective, imaginary narrative, and memory images.

origin of the narrative at any given moment – to discover who is speaking and from what standpoint.[3] For these reasons, then, we will undertake to isolate the elements, and hence parameters, of the POV shot.

I The Elements of POV

The POV shot is a shot in which the camera assumes the position of a subject in order to show us what the subject sees. More precisely, the POV shot is composed of five elements usually distributed in *two* shots as follows:

Shot A: Point/Glance
1. *Point:*   establishment of a point in space.
2. *Glance:*   establishment of an off-camera object by glance from the point.

Between Shots A and B:
3. *Transition:*   temporal continuity.

Shot B: Point/Object
4. *From Point:* the camera locates at the point, or very close to the point, in space defined by element one above.
5. *Object:*   the object of element two above is revealed.

At first glance, the five elements of the POV shot appear trivial. However, let us examine them closer to see how a change in any *one* operates to subvert or de-stabilise the POV shot as a five element structure.

Element one ('point') is the establishment of a point in space. Its importance may be illustrated by the cases in which no point is established or more than one point is established. An example of the former would be the case where a glance is established by dialogue ('Hey, look at this! ') *but* no point is established because the screen is black or the camera too far away (on the top of a building, say) or the character is off-screen, etc. An example of the establishment of too many points would be a shot of two heads turning in opposite directions.

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3. According to Roland Barthes, 'the real problem is not how to probe the narrator's motives or measure the effects the narration may have on the reader, but rather to describe the code through which the narrator's and the reader's presence can be detected within the narrative self' ('An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative', *New Literary History*, v VI n 2, Winter 1975, p 260). See also, Barthes: *S/Z*, London and New York 1974, secs XXI, LIX, LX, LXVIII, and especially XII 'The Weaving of Voices', XX 'The Dissolve of Voices', and LXIV 'The Voice of the Reader.'

Element two (' glance ') is the establishment of an off-camera object by glance. Whether or not a glance has occurred may be a matter of degree. Cues which may be present include the following: eye movement, head movement, body movement (eg walking to a door to answer a knock prior to a shot of the door swinging open in front of the camera), a new – perhaps sudden – camera angle or camera distance, camera movement (eg dolly-in), zoom, dialogue (' Hey, look at this! '), off-camera sound, music (a common device of horror films), the length of a shot (a character becomes fixated by an object), and perhaps even larger narrative structures, for instance, has everyone who has entered the room confronted the object?

In *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960) we see Sam from the chest down as he says to Marion, lying on a bed, ' You never did eat your lunch, did you? ' We then see a lunch tray on a table. We cannot ascribe this view to Sam because we were unable to see whether he was looking at Marion or the lunch tray. The shot of the tray is an ambiguous, unclaimed voice in the film.

It is important to note that the concept of ' glance ' implies the existence of a sentient observer in whose viewpoint we may participate. This does not mean, however, that the POV shot is limited to humans nor even to living things. One low-budget horror film, utilising a special camera lens, offers the POV of a killer snake as it winds toward a sleeping victim. In *Vampyr* (Dreyer, 1932) there is an extended sequence from the POV of a dead man. Here, the glance is established by emphasising the wide, staring eyes of the dead man. In *Blood and Roses* (Vadim, 1960) we share the viewpoint of an invisible spirit with the aid of a narrator and stirring window curtains.

The omission of elements one and two (point/glance) within a larger structure may create a tension of ambiguity. In Ozu Yasujiro's *Floating Weeds* (1959) and *Tokyo Story* (1953) there occur POV shots where a man looks at a flower in *Floating Weeds* and tombstones in *Tokyo Story*. However, later in the respective scenes, the POV structure is undermined, or evolves, when the point/object shot is repeated – the flower, the tombstones without the point/glance shot – a man in each case. Thus the flower and the tombstones now seem almost to exist independently, in their own right. We then realise that our first view may not, in fact have been a POV shot; that the men may not have been looking at the objects (only thinking of them, or if looking, not seeing; or whatever); that initially we were snared in the structure of the POV shot and the larger narrative structure (a reference to flowers in the dialogue; the sadness of death) in order to be set free at a later time. The filmic voice at this later time has also evolved: it no longer has a specific origin (the men); rather, it has become larger, more general, more plural.

Element three (' transition ') is any device which implies tem-

poral continuity. There is no requirement of temporal continuity
within shots A (point/glance) and B (point/object); all that is
required is that the last fragment of shot A (elements one and
two) be temporally joined to the first fragment of shot B (elements
four and five). Without temporal continuity (or at least simul-
taneity), the resultant structure will be deviant. For example, in
a party scene, we cut to a close-up (point/glance) then cut to
what that person sees (point/object), but the second shot reveals
a later time when the party is over – empty room, dirty glasses,
etc. The structure is deviant. This is, in fact, the form of the tradi-
tional subjective flashback or flashforward. However, we will leave
the question open whether or not all such memory sequences
derive from the POV structure.

In element four (' from point ') the camera moves to that point,
or nearly so, established by element one of the POV structure. This
implies the spatial continuity of shots A and B. When the camera
does not move to the point previously established, a deviant
structure is generated, such as the cut to a new scene. In *Early
Summer* (Ozu, 1951) we track down a hallway in front of two
women who are creeping forward to catch a glimpse of the man
one of them was supposed to marry in an arranged marriage. The
tracking movement continues as we cut to the viewpoint of the
women. We soon realise, however, that we are in a different hall-
way, that we are approaching an empty room. Here, Ozu utilises
an important secondary cue of spatial position – the so-called
subjective travelling shot; that is, if a person is moving while
looking at an object, then the point/object shot may also move.
Ozu, however, uses the moving camera in this instance not in an
effort to create a ' smooth ' film style, but a style that actually
stresses the structures on which it is based.[4]

More frequently, the secondary cues exist to reinforce spatial
orientation. In *The General* (Keaton, 1926) we see Buster Keaton
under a table lean toward a hole in the tablecloth, and then we see
a long shot of the room framed by a ragged oval – which, of
course, is the hole in the tablecloth and confirms that we are
indeed located at a point previously seen. In *Vampyr* (Dreyer, 1932)
we watch as a coffin lid is lowered over camera and various faces
peer into the coffin through a small window. In *Bambi* (Walt
Disney, 1942) Bambi twists his head to look at some opossums
hanging from their tails upside down on a branch. The next ani-
mated drawing is rotated 180 degrees so that we see the animals

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4. Donald Richie's description of the shot is inaccurate. Cf also his
   judgement of the shot (' simple sloppiness ') with the aesthetic of
   Noël Burch, op cit, pp 6, 15 (' It is only through systematic and
   thorough exploration of the *structural* possibilities inherent in the
   cinematic parameters ; . . that film will be liberated from the old
   narrative forms and develop new " open " forms . . . '). Richie, *Ozu*,
   Los Angeles 1974, p 112.

58 from Bambi's inverted viewpoint, hanging 'straight up' and so
apparently defying gravity. *Lady in the Lake* (Montgomery, 1946)
is a virtual catalogue of contextual cues. Almost the entire film
is shot from the private eye of a detective. At various times we see
the detective's arms, feet, his shadow, his image in mirrors, the
smoke from his cigarette, as well as extreme close-ups of a tele-
phone receiver, lips approaching for a kiss, and a slap in the face
whereupon the camera shakes. Characters also speak directly into
the camera. It has even been suggested that there should have
been an intermittent blacking out of the screen to indicate occa-
sional blinking of the hero's eyes (Lewis Herman: *A Practical
Manual of Screen Playwriting*, New York 1952, p 250). The possible
secondary cues seem endless.

Finally, element five (' object ') reveals the object suggested by
element two of the POV structure. There is the possibility, though
rare in practice, that the object, or part of the object, is actually
seen in shot A. In that case element five functions to reveal the
object either from a new angle or new distance or both. In *Psycho*
(Hitchcock, 1960) we see Marion as well as a police car through
the back window of her car; next we see the police car from
Marion's point of view in the car mirror. These shots alternate
through thirteen shots.

Consider, however, the possibility for disruption of the POV
structure should the camera, instead of revealing the object, point
in another direction. We would then see an object which we believe
a character to be looking at, but which, in fact, he is not. In
Equinox Flower (Ozu, 1958) an apparent point/object shot of a
hospital window is undermined when one of two women looking
up at it says, ' Mother's room is around there,' which suggests
that they may or may not be able to see the window from their
vantage point. This ambiguity raises a second question: could we
as viewers see the hospital room or was it around a corner?

At this stage of the POV structure we are seeing *what* a par-
ticular person sees. It is now an easy step to characterise *how*
that person sees an object, for instance, by throwing the object
out of focus to suggest, say, drunkenness. Thus we have engrafted
a sixth element on the POV structure. To satisfy ourselves that the
sixth element is indeed distinct consider that it must itself be
structural; that is, we understand the use of an out-of-focus shot
because the rest of the film is shot *in* focus. We do not consider,
however, whether all mental process shots – revealing the dreams,
fears, hopes, etc. of a character – are based on the POV structure.

II Angle of Transition

The five elements of the POV structure require a transition device

since the camera must physically shift between element one (point)
and element four (from point). This shift is the physical correlate
for a shift in narrative perception from, for instance, objective and
omniscient to subjective and personal. The device may take the
form of a simple cut, an optical printer effect (dissolves, fades,
wipes, etc), or camera movement in which case we watch while
the camera repositions. In certain situations where the camera
begins close to the subject (point) a fast pan, rack focus, zoom,
etc, may be sufficient to indicate a transition from element one
(point) to element four (from point) even though the camera set-
up has not, in actuality, changed. Whatever device is used, of
course, must imply temporal continuity (element three).

Since the initial angle of shot A (point/glance) may be any
angle, we choose shot B (point/object) as a reference, and take the
line running from the subject's eyes to the object as a reference
line. The POV structure is then classified according to the place-
ment of shot B with respect to this line. The accompanying figure
represents alternate sites for the location of shot B.

FIGURE
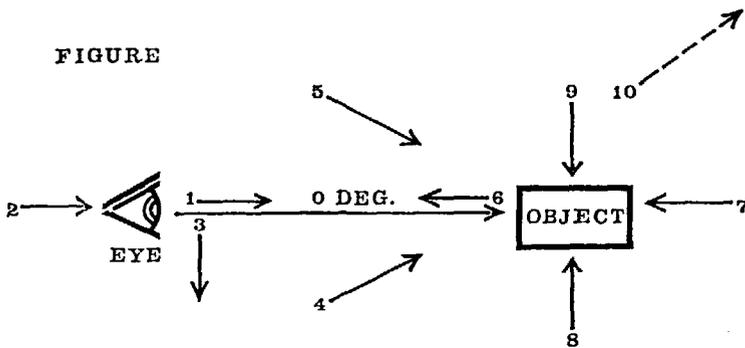
Set-up 1 is the classic POV shot – from the subject's eyes. Set-up
2 is a ' reverse angle ' – from behind the subject, usually over one
shoulder. In addition to being ' less subjective ' than the POV
shot, it is a more stable articulation since we view the direct spatial
relation of subject and object.

Set-up 3 is a deviant POV – discussed earlier – where the
camera reveals an object which we believe a subject to be looking
at, but which, in fact, he is not. Set-up 4 is the typical eyeline
match, especially when it marks the return to a familiar (previous)
angle.

Set-up 5 is the mirror image of set-up 4. It is an important
camera location because, for example, where the object is a person,
by crossing the 180-degree line one can make it appear that two

people are looking at each other while conversing when, in fact, they are looking in opposite directions (as in *Sylvia Scarlett*, Cukor, 1935). Similarly, one can cross the line to make it appear that two people are not looking at each other when, in fact, they are.

Set-up 6 represents the POV of the object and usually occurs when the object is a person. Set-up 7 is a reverse angle of the object. It usually occurs when the object is a person. In *Seven Samurai* (Kurosawa, 1954) it follows a point/glance shot as an alternative to set-ups 1 or 2.

Set-ups 8 and 9 are de-stabilising shots since in their resemblance to set-up 1 – the classic POV – they imply a false space for the subject. And finally, set-up 10 – discussed earlier – is also de-stabilising since it represents a jump into a new space or new scene.

III   A Repertory of Simple Structures

There are two major variants of the POV structure and a number of simple structures. The usual form of the POV is shot A (point/ glance) followed by shot B (point/object). This is the form we have discussed up to now. A major alternative form of the POV is the discovered or retrospective POV where shot A *follows* shot B. For example, two men are conversing in an office about a woman suspected of murder. There is a pause in the conversation (or is it the end of the scene?). We then see a high-scale, extreme long shot of the woman sitting on a park bench (shot B). Then we cut to one of the men looking out of the window of the office (shot A). A reverse angle confirms he is looking at the woman from the office window. The conversation now resumes with one man aware that the woman is nearby.

We shall now examine a number of simple variants of the POV structure including structures which may be termed closed, delayed, open, continuing, multiple, embedded, or reflexive structures.

The closed POV takes the form: A, B, A. The point/glance shot is repeated. For example, in *The General* (Keaton, 1926) we see two point/object shots where we look out from under a table and later where we watch the General being loaded by Union troops. Each time we return to the original point/glance shot after the point/object shot – Keaton under the table, Keaton and girl in the woods.

The closed POV has a high degree of narrative stability because the repetition of shot A (an overdetermination) serves to re-establish time and place and what we've seen. The repetition also signals the end of a ' subjective ' view. The audience is fully prepared for the camera to establish a new relation (the next voice) vis-à-vis the characters.

Further, time is momentarily suspended in the closed POV as in the traditional subjective flashback or during an inter-title; that is, we do not expect events to be happening to the characters while we are looking at an object or until we fully recognise the repetition (closure) of shot A. The closed POV would seem to be a common structure in traditional Hollywood cinema.

In *Vampyr* (Dreyer, 1932), however, the closed POV is undermined. We see David Gray outside an Inn looking in a door toward camera; he glances up (shot A). We cut to a shot of the roof, then pan and tilt down to discover Gray walking along a wall *back* (?) toward the door and looking in the door again (shot B). Thus it is not clear what has been happening while we have been looking at the roof. This illustrates a structural principle of the film whereby the camera is unable to 'keep up' with the events (ie it is not omniscient) and consequently there is a profound tension between on-screen and off-screen space.

The formal variants of the closed POV take the form: A', B, A" where A" is a minor variant of A', such as a new angle or new distance in which the subject is seen, at least momentarily, still frozen in his glance before the narrative action resumes. Either A' or A" or both may be reverse angles. Also common is the structure A, B, and then instead of cutting back to shot A or moving the camera back to A, we see the subject – after a decent interval – step in front of the camera, in effect, creating a reverse angle to remind us of our special viewpoint (eg *The Best Years of Our Lives*, Wyler, 1946). There also exist permutations similar to the above modelled on B, A, B. This discovered and closed POV structure is often used, for example, to emphasise an object or the sudden appearance of an object.

A second simple structure – the first was the closed POV – is the delayed or suspended POV. It often occurs in detective, suspense, or horror films where a character clearly sees something (point/glance) yet the point/object shot is withheld from the audience for a number of shots (while another person is summoned to look at this extraordinary thing) or a number of scenes (when the character is killed by the object). The inverse of this structure would be the case where a point/object shot is given but the point/glance shot is withheld; that is, a discovered and delayed POV. An example occurs in *The Quiller Memorandum* (M Anderson, 1966). We see a high-angle shot of the hero climbing into a car, then window curtains fall across the image. We now realise that someone was watching our hero, but who?

The delayed POV structure may be resolved in a number of ways. Other types of shots may be employed, such as reverse angles (earlier we discussed how these shots were related to the POV). Also larger narrative structures may interact and further delay the POV structure; for example, the POV may be resolved by a later shot but we may not be aware that it was resolved until

still later when a narrator explains to us the significance of the shot.[5] Whether or not a flashback structure is employed, the missing shot — when it is recognised — will have retrospective significance because it completes an earlier POV structure; we now know, for example, that the killer is that person we have seen throughout the film.

Related to the delayed POV is the open POV. In this structure, although a point/glance is firmly established, we *never* see the object. Examples include the Indian torture victims of *Ulzana's Raid* (Aldrich, 1972); cloud formations which are earnestly discussed in *Ohayo* (Ozu, 1959); and, after we see a series of roofs with TV antennas, we do not see the roof which has no TV antenna in *Fahrenheit 451* (Truffaut, 1966).

Another simple variant of the POV structure is the continuing POV where one character looks at several objects or one object a number of times. The objects are typically rendered by cutting from object to object or by camera movement — the subjective travelling shot. If the point/object structure continues long enough, it may be necessary to insert a re-establishing shot (ie point/glance). The re-establishing shot functions to remind us of our special viewpoint — although as *Lady in the Lake* (Montgomery, 1946) demonstrates, one does not automatically lose track of the viewpoint — as well as to change the filmic voice and so introduce another level of narrative codes.[6] In the classic Hollywood conversation of alternating medium close-ups, the re-establishing shot is often a reverse angle.

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5. The delayed POV illustrates the fact that in terms of the five narrative codes of Roland Barthes, the POV structure, in general, contains a built-in hermeneutic code. Depending on the precise form, the POV structure may ask the following: what object is someone looking at? Who is looking at the object? What is the spatial or other relation of person and object? What will be the reaction of the person to the object? etc. The hermeneutic is that code which names a subject, states a condition, proposes a question, delays its answer in multifarious ways, and finally discloses the answer which is the truth of the narrative. See *S/Z*, op cit, secs XXXII 'Delay', XXXVII 'The Hermeneutic Sentence', and LXXXIX 'Voice of Truth.'

6. The failure of *Lady in the Lake* (Montgomery, 1946) has been attributed to the fact that in order to internalise a character's look, one has to know the character (Metz, op cit, p 47). One cannot know a character from a purely personal narrational stance (I, or I see) because psychology is an external construct which depends upon the perspective of an *a*personal narrational voice. Cf Barthes: 'An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative,' op cit, p 263. By way of analogy, one does not understand a film as the personal view of the film-maker (as a real-life person) because there is no context within which to locate the film-maker. Even if the auteur appears in the film, we cannot recognise the 'auteur' who placed him or her within the narration. There is always some filmic voice beyond which it is impossible to go.

repeated in chains to create a continuing POV. There are sixteen POV sequences of six or more shots in the film including at one point forty-two consecutive shots of Marion driving her car and what she sees from behind the wheel (although the sequence does not always maintain temporal continuity). The sustained viewpoint of the continuing POV[7] tends to implicate the viewer in the experience or fate of the character.

The multiple POV is a structure whereby several characters see the same object. It takes the form, or some fragment of the form: A, (B), C, (B), D, E, (B) where B is the object and the other shots are of·persons. Note that when a POV is offered for two people who appear together in a single shot, the structure is ' less subjective ' than if offered as the view of only one person.

An embedded POV results when a POV structure of one character is nested or contained within a larger POV structure of another character. For example, in *Psycho* we see Marion inside her car glance (shot A) at a policeman outside the car who then glances (shot B) at her car licence plate (shot C). Marion is still watching the policeman (repetition of shot A) as he looks up (repetition of shot B). One characteristic of this structure is that while we have seen something from Marion's viewpoint, we have also seen something that she cannot see: the licence plate. Note, too, that the first appearance of shot B functions both as the point/object shot of A and the point/glance shot for C. The five elements of the POV structure need not be distributed in a fixed pattern of two elements per shot.

When the object of a glance is also a person, then it is possible to alternate POV structures – as in a conversation – centred about two, or more, points. This is the reflexive POV. A character need not stare directly into the camera (for this involves another convention) but the eyes must be very near the line of the camera.

Strictly speaking the reflexive POV takes the form: (A, B), (closer B, A), (closer A, B). This represents three POV structures, each fully defined, from A to B, B to A, A to B. An example occurs at the end of *La Femme Infidèle* (Charbrol, 1968). Of special interest is the final shot of that film which begins as a point/object shot of the wife. When the camera tracks back it may still be a point/object shot (the husband is walking away with the police while looking over his shoulder); but when the camera begins to ·zoom as well as track in a new direction, the nature of the shot changes. Indeed we watch while the shot slowly *changes* its filmic voice.

In the traditional Hollywood film the complete model of the reflexive POV is often abridged so that the point/object shot

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7. There may be limits to the continuing POV. See the discussion of *Lady in the Lake* (Montgomery, 1946) by Metz, op cit, pp 47-48.

64 functions also as the point/glance shot for the next series. Hence the above, complete model would be rendered in only four shots instead of six: (A, [B), (A], B). In *Psycho* such a series is created by alternating close-ups of Marion and a police officer through nineteen shots.

The use of a mirror or other reflective surface in the mise-en-scène in conjunction with a POV structure may result in rather complex permutations. The mirror image, for example, alters direction – by 180 degrees – as well as space – the image appears to be in front of the camera when, in fact, it is behind the camera. In addition, the mirror represents two objects: itself and its reflected image. Further, when the reflection is that of the subject (not to mention another mirror), a form of reflexive POV is generated. Thus a mirror may, depending on the circumstances, undermine one or more of four elements of the POV structure – all except the transition element.

Conclusion

As a general rule, the viewer's relationship to the characters in a film is in a constant state of flux. At times we know more than one character or even all the characters know about their world; at other times we know less than they know. The POV structure is a mechanism whereby we experience contemporaneously with a character. The structure may be broken down into five elements which are usually distributed in two shots. Larger POV structures may be constructed from these elements by combining them in various ways. Thus the POV structure is a parameter which may undergo repetition and variation.

It is possible to vary or de-stabilise the POV structure in a multitude of ways. The result shifts the voice of the film and may lead the viewer into impossible time and space relationships. Crucial to the POV structure is the placement of the point/object shot with respect to a reference line running from the subject's eyes to the object. More subtle deviations from the POV structure are possible by undercutting only a single element or by building a larger POV structure which culminates by calling its own structure into question.

Moreover, since our conception of ' character ' in a film is itself a coded construction (cf Barthes: *S/Z*, op cit, secs XXVIII ' Character and Figure ', XLI ' The Proper Name ' and LXXXI ' Voice of the Person '), the POV structure may best be understood as an adjunct to that system, in effect, pointing to the presence – the existence – of character. Variation, and even subversion, of the POV structure is, therefore, a device through which our perspective on character is altered and even, at times, challenged.