

‘Filmic point of view and the representation of character interaction’

Paper delivered by **James Zborowski** at *Film-Philosophy*, St Anne’s College, University of Oxford,

22.7.2015

(Accompanying powerpoint available on request: J.Zborowski@hull.ac.uk.)

The following paper summarises one of the lines of argument presented in my book *Classical Hollywood Cinema: Point of View and Communication*, to be published in December 2015 by Manchester University Press.

It is sometimes said that where we begin our enquiries can have a decisive effect on the path those enquiries take. My experience of studying point of view and film is that one of the places that writing on this subject often begins is with the films of Alfred Hitchcock. In George Wilson’s book *Narration in Light: Studies in Cinematic Point of View*, *North by North West* is the second case study film, after Lang’s *You Only Live Once*. In Laura Mulvey’s ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, Hitchcock and von Sternberg are the two main case studies, and *Vertigo* is the film that receives most attention. In Edward Branigan’s very different ‘Formal Permutations of the Point-of-View Shot’, published in the same issue of *Screen* as ‘Visual Pleasure’, the film that gets mentioned first, and last, is *Psycho*. In Murray Smith’s *Engaging Characters*, after the conceptual introduction, the first film to act as a sustained case study is *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (the 1956 version). In the first of the relatively few passages in Bordwell’s *Narration in the Fiction Film* where ‘point of view’ is used as a term, *Shadow of a Doubt* and *Rear Window* figure prominently as examples. *Film as Film* by V. F. Perkins does not often use the term point of view, but is very much concerned with that topic, and when it is, Hitchcock is often a key point of reference.

I would suggest that Hitchcock provides such a vivid and compelling case study for people interested in analysing the possibilities of filmic point of view for three interrelated reasons.

First, Hitchcock's films often make frequent use of optical point of view shots.

Second, Hitchcock often uses a narrative structure of what Murray Smith calls 'exclusive attachment'. To quote Smith's description of Hitchcock's *Suspicion*, which he offers as an example of exclusive attachment: 'We follow the protagonist's actions throughout the film, and witness the actions of other characters only when they are within proximity to her.'

Third, Hitchcock's plots are often built around deception. Characters often try to deceive one another, and Hitchcock's narration sometimes deceives us by restricting or suppressing key information and only revealing it relatively late in the game.

(CAVEATS: HITCHCOCK DOESN'T DO THESE THINGS QUITE AS MUCH AS WE MIGHT THINK, AND HE DOES OTHER THINGS TOO.)

By bringing these effects together so skilfully, Hitchcock demonstrates some of the key possibilities of point of view in a narrative medium where appearances and the act of looking are particularly important. However, I've come to feel that the well-deserved attention bestowed on Hitchcock might contribute to a limited view of point of view, and more particularly, the place of *fictional characters* in a discussion of filmic point of view.

So that's my first main suggestion before I show my clip: Hitchcock's pre-eminence when thinking about character and point of view might encourage us

conceptualise the topic in particular and limited ways. My second main suggestion is that many theories of character and point of view rest, implicitly or explicitly, on a model of human experience that is similarly powerful but incomplete.

In accounts of filmic point of view, writers often draw a clear dividing line between a character's inner thoughts and feelings, and their outer appearance and behaviour. In David Bordwell's model of point of view, derived from Meir Sternberg, one of the spectra along which he suggests narration can range is knowledgability, and when Bordwell applies knowledgability specifically to knowledgability about characters, he speaks of the possibility of varying *depth* of knowledge, and argues that narration might 'present the whole of a character's mental life', or might alternatively 'eschew any but behavioural indications of psychological states'. Murray Smith's model of character engagement makes a very important distinction between spatio-temporal attachment and subjective access in our alignment with characters. As he correctly points out, it is possible for us to spend a great deal of time alongside a character without finding out a great deal about what they are thinking or feeling. Just one final example from a writer in a slightly different tradition. In his wonderful article 'Movies and Point of View', published in *Movie*, at one point Douglas Pye suggests that: 'It is common for certain moments (often when characters are alone or viewed in a privileged way) to be signalled as offering "authentic" access to thought or feeling, but it is open to directors to limit such moments, so that we struggle to infer characters' inner lives from the faces they present to others.'

If we want to try to think around this distinction between inner and outer, we can turn to analytical philosophers like Gilbert Ryle, phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty or Heidegger, or the uncategorisable philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. In fact, in 1945, Maurice Merleau-Ponty delivered a lecture entitled 'Film and the new

psychology', in which he enthusiastically declared 'The movies do not give us man's thoughts, as novels have done for so long... For the movies as for modern psychology dizziness, pleasure, grief, love, and hate are ways of behaving... The movies are peculiarly suited to make manifest the union of mind and body, mind and world, and the expression of one in the other.'

The thing I want to focus primarily on in the rest of the paper, though, is not psychology and experience, and how we might conceptualise these things. I want to focus instead on character interaction, and I'm not going to try to do much more today than raise it as a valid topic within the study of filmic point of view.

Let's go back briefly to the Pye quote that I presented earlier. That last part of it, 'we struggle to infer characters' inner lives from the faces they present to others', highlights those part of our social lives that feel a bit like games of poker. We keep our cards close to our chests, and we are aware that others are doing the same.

We might say that if two people, or characters, are playing a game of poker, or a social equivalent of the same thing, then the relationship they have to one another might be described as 'A and B observe each other.'

This is one of four ways in which Alfred Schutz suggests in his book *The Phenomenology of the Social World* that people might relate to one another. The remaining three are:

A observes B and B is unaware of A.

A affects B while B observes A.

A and B affect each other.

That second possibility is a great fit with many of Hitchcock's scenarios. But it's the fourth possibility I want to focus on. Philosopher Matthew Ratcliffe, in his book-length critique of folk psychology, has argued that a methodological blind spot in this area is that its proponents fail to 'draw a distinction between interpreting a "he" or a "she" and relating to another person as "you".'

I now want to show you a clip from *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*. I'll discuss it more after I've shown it, but what I want to suggest to you is that over the course of this clip, we see the point of view of Jean Arthur's character shift from viewing Deeds's character as a 'he' to be observed, to viewing him as a 'you' to affect and be affected by. For those of you who haven't seen the film: Longfellow Deeds, played by Gary Cooper, is the recent heir to a multimillion dollar fortune, who has recently arrived in New York from his smalltown home, Mandrake Falls. There's a horrible journalist called Babe Bennett making Deeds look ridiculous in the newspaper she works for. What Deeds doesn't know is that Babe Bennett is none other than the woman he's been falling in love with, Jean Arthur's character, who he thinks is called Mary.

[Show clip.]

There are several phases in the clip. I want to briefly go through five. First, Babe watches Deeds, and we can see by the way that she looks at him while he is not looking at her, that she is watching with detachment and amusement. The framing of the characters in a two-shot in which Babe's eyeline rests on Deeds, but Deeds is looking outwards, lets us see this. Second, we see Babe begin to take Deeds seriously. She is still watching him with detachment, but no longer with amusement. Third,

Babe starts to let Deeds affect her. She talks about her father, prompted by Deeds's resemblance to him. She tells Deeds she is from a small town. She told him this the last time they met too, but he reacts to it as new information, and in a way, so do we, because on the previous occasion it sounded like just a line, whereas this time we are less likely to doubt its truth. Fourth, Babe performs while Deeds watches, evidently delighted, behind her. He puts on a show of being unimpressed, but then, fifthly, the two of them perform together. So Babe has moved from viewing Deeds with detached superiority to a reciprocal act of making music, sharing laughter, and indulging in silliness.

Let me go back now to the elements of Hitchcockian point of view that I began with. I think we can see that in the early phase of the scene, they serve us quite well. They're not a perfect fit, but they get us thinking about the kinds of things that allow us to get a handle on the scene. Babe is deceiving Deeds. Optical POV shots are not used, but acts of looking and eyelines are made important. The film uses a system of dual principal alignment. We follow Deeds as he comes into contact with many different people, and we follow Babe as she comes into contact with many different people. In terms of knowledge, we are more aligned with Babe than with Deeds, because we and Babe share knowledge that Deeds lacks, and the beginning of the scene plays on this.

However, by the end of the sequence, it is much more difficult to use the categories to gain analytical purchase on the scene. The scene ceases to be about looking, or withholding, or deceiving. It also ceases to be about Babe hiding her mental states from Deeds, and Jean Arthur revealing them to the audience when Deeds isn't looking. And it ceases to be about Deeds trying to find words for the things he's feeling inside. Instead, we have characters immersed in an experience

together. Their experience of the moment is not to be located in the realm of private thoughts, but in the shared act of making music.

To conclude, then. When we conceptualise a character's place in a film's handling of point of view, we tend to think first about the relationships that a film creates between each of its characters individually and its viewer. And when we come to think about the relationships of characters to one another, it's easy to let the model we use to think about viewer-character relationships to cross over into the way we think about characters' relationships with each other. We look at characters, and optical POV shots are one powerful way of drawing our attention to the way characters look at each other. We have in our minds what we know about characters, and we also try to keep straight the different degrees and types of knowledge characters have about each other. But when observation and deception or withholding give way to interaction, where two characters create an experience together, a gap opens up between the experience we want to describe and the theoretical and critical tools we have for doing so. This is what makes me think that we need to find a place within our accounts of characters and filmic point of view to discuss the relationships characters have with one another, and to try to develop the kinds of critical tools and ways of seeing that would help us to do this.