

film directing

shot by shot

visualizing from concept to screen

by steven d. katz

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POINT OF VIEW

In the last chapter on open and closed framings, we considered the ways in which graphic and editorial techniques determine *the level of involvement* the viewer has with the characters on the screen. Point of view, on the other hand, determines *who* the viewer identifies with. The two concepts are closely related and nearly always work together in any sequence.

Each shot in a film expresses a point of view, and in narrative film the point of view changes often, sometimes with each new shot. For the most part, point of view—what is often called narrative stance—is largely invisible to the audience, though the accumulated effect of the changes profoundly affects the way the audience interprets any scene. Apart from the familiar subjective techniques of the kind used by Alfred Hitchcock, the ways in which camera placement, editing and composition shape the narrative stance of any scene generally is overlooked. This probably accounts for the fact that point of view, which may be the most important aspect of a director's contribution, is handled indifferently in so many films. Frequently, narrative stance is the accidental result of technical or pictorial concerns, or worse, relentless manipulation.

To better understand how the filmmaker can use the camera to determine point of view, let's begin by looking at the three types of narration used in films, borrowing the terminology used to denote point of view in literature.

First-Person Point of View

First-person narratives are exemplified by the subjective techniques of Hitchcock in which we see events through the eyes of a character—the “I” of the story. Extensive use of the subjective viewpoint has always been awkward in narrative film largely because we are only given the visual point of view of a character and are deprived of seeing his or her reactions through facial or other gestures.

Third-Person Restricted Point of View

Third-person restricted, which presents the action as seen by an ideal observer, is the style of narrative most common in Hollywood movies, but rarely is it used as the sole viewpoint. Most of the time it is combined with limited use of omniscient and subjective passages.

Omniscient Point of View

For film to present the omniscient point of view we have to know what the characters are thinking. This requires some type of narration, voice-over or

graphics. Overt narration is thought by many to be uncinematic and is rarely used. Actually, narration has been explored only tentatively, and so far no mainstream narrative director has evolved a style that combines words and images in a particularly inventive way. The field is open for new ideas.

Levels of Identification

In a novel or short story there is no question whose point of view we are reading at any moment. In film, the point of view can be less definite, and in some instances a shot can convey a narrative stance somewhere between a third-person and a fully subjective shot.

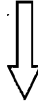
In editing, the most powerful cuing device is the sight line of an actor in CU. Figure 16.1 illustrates a typical setup for a POV shot: the cut on the look. Below this first shot are three possible reverse CUs.

In frame 1 a man looks at a woman seated next to him in a car. In frame 2 we cut to his POV, a CU of the woman looking back at him. Since it is a subjective camera shot, she looks directly into the camera. Used in this way the CU is clearly seen from the man's POV. Compare this with the CU in frame 3, shot at about 45 degrees from the woman's sight line. This is clearly a third-person restricted view. The shot does not elicit our identification with either the man or the woman. But what happens if we move the camera a few degrees outside of the woman's sight line as shown in frame 4? In this case we are placed in a closer relationship to the man, provided the narrative sets up the CU as the man's look. In a sense, this is a modified subjective shot.

This is a valuable concept: *There are degrees of subjectivity, or to put it more accurately, degrees of identification for any shot.* For this reason, OTS shots and

Figure 16.1

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two-shots can favor the point of view of one of the players in a scene, depending on the line of sight of the actors and the narrative context. Generally speaking, *the closer the sight line of a player in CU is to the camera, the greater the degree of viewer identification.*

Viewer Involvement and Identification

There are two ways to determine viewer identification: by graphic control or by narrative control. Graphic control elicits our identification with a player using composition and staging. The modified subjective shot we considered on the previous page is an example of graphic control determined by how a player is composed in the frame.

Narrative control directs our identification using several strategies, but these are largely dependent on editing. For instance, in a detective story, the plot usually follows the private eye. Scenes begin when the private eye arrives at a location and end when he exits a scene. Even when this kind of story is covered in third-person restricted camera setups in closed framings, the narrative context implies that we are learning of events from the private eye's point of view.

Shaping Point of View

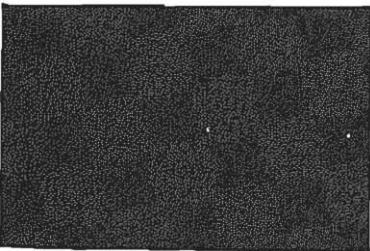
There are no hard and fast rules for the graphic and narrative control of point of view. Both factors are dependent on one another for their full meaning. One of the most important skills a filmmaker develops with experience is a greater awareness, largely intuitive, of the predominant point of view in any shot and sequence.

In the following examples we join the filmmaker as he returns to the scene of the man and woman in bed from the previous chapter. This first series of photoboards stages a subjective sequence using the cut on the look to set up shots. However, the basic principles shown here also are applicable to dramatic situations that are not purely subjective.

Point of View (Version One)

The filmmaker begins frame 1 by fading up from black as a subjective equivalent to the man opening his eyes as he awakens in the morning. Frame 1a is the CU shot of the woman from the man's POV after the fade up is completed. Frame 2 is a reverse CU shot of the man partly obscured by

1



1a



2



the bed covers. This is a reversal of the usual editing pattern of the cut on the look. In this version the POV shot comes first and the “look” second.

The filmmaker decides to revise the sequence with a new opening shot of the woman in frame 3. This time we see only the back of her head and her fingers in her hair. She turns towards the camera in frame 3a. Frame 4 serves as the cut to the look, though we do not see the man’s eyes in this tight OTS shot. Compare this frame with frame 2 in the previous series. Both frames serve the purpose of identifying the CU of the woman as a POV shot.

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3a



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Point of View (Version Two)

The filmmaker decides to open the scene in a traditional POV editing pattern beginning with the ECU of the eye. This is followed by the obligatory reverse to the POV shot and an OTS two-shot. Now go back and look at the previous version. These might be the choices offered to you by an editor in a rough cut based on these few shots. If the footage was photographed with a stationary camera you could easily change the order of the shots. If, however, the shots involved zoom movement or camera movement, your options would be reduced, assuming you followed traditional continuity practice.

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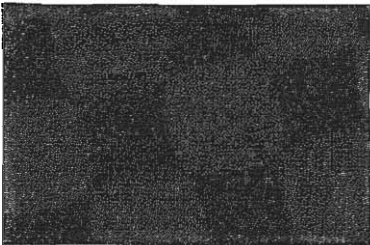


Point of View (Version Three)

This time the filmmaker will devise an aural/subjective sequence. The viewer will see and *hear* things from the man's point of view. This extended sequence begins below and continues on the following page. Frame 1 opens in darkness. Sounds of soft breathing are heard, and the picture fades up slowly to frames 2-4, which are CUs of the bed covers moving with the woman's steady breathing. In frame 5 we see a CU of the man, very nearly a CU of his ear. This is the aural equivalent to a cut on the look beginning with a shot of the eyes. We cut to frame 6, a CU of the woman's face with her breathing emphasized on the soundtrack. In frame 7 we return to the man, who is awake and watching the woman. Frame 8 is a visual subjective shot of the woman's shoulder from the man's POV as she turns away from him. In frame 9 we return to an ECU of the man's eye watching the woman. In frame 10 the filmmaker abruptly *changes to the woman's point of view*. We stay with this shot for several seconds until the woman moves out of frame as she sits up.

In frame 11 the woman sits on the edge of the bed and then turns to the man in frame 12. The filmmaker cuts on the look to an OTS shot. Because frame 13 is so tight over the woman's shoulder and is clearly lined up along her line of sight, we share her general viewpoint and identify with her. The filmmaker doesn't take the scene any further than this moment but makes one last change to limit the number of shots by replacing shots 12 and 13 with a single reverse two-shot in frame 14. In this case the framing includes the woman's look and the object of her look in a single shot. Interestingly, while the action is seen from the position of a third person, the staging encourages us to identify with her. On a visual level, the subject of the shot is the woman looking at the man. This, however, is merely a way of provoking our interest in knowing her reaction to what she sees. The secondary subject of the shot is the woman's thoughts since her reaction is not externalized in dialogue or other behavior. By asking the viewer to consider the woman's feelings this setup shares many of the qualities of a subjective shot.

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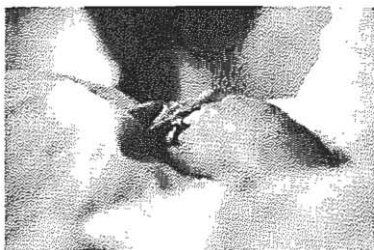
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Narrative Control of Point of View

In this next situation a woman looks for her husband on the beach and finds him sitting alone by the shore. Our purpose here is to discover ways of achieving viewer's identification with one of the characters in a scene.

Narrative Control (Version One)

This first sequence uses the classic subjective setup: In frame 1, a woman looks at something offscreen; in frame 2 we see the object of her attention. In frame 3 the geographical relationship is established in a two-shot. In this sequence we identify with the woman for two reasons: First, she is the person who escorts us, the viewers, into the scene. Second, in frame 3 the two-shot favors her line of sight. This is undercut slightly because we are outside the circle of dramatic action, tending toward the view of a neutral observer.

Compare this with the next series, frames 4-6, which ends with a new shot at the end. In this case we have remained within the woman's line of sight in the final shot, but from a reverse angle. These two graphic strategies develop our identification with the woman differently. Interestingly, being closer to the man in frame 6 does not significantly diminish our identification with the woman. This is because the narrative context of the sequence, beginning with the woman, shapes the way we read the following shots.

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Narrative Control (Version Two)

In this next series we can see what happens if we begin the previous sequence with the man. The question is whether or not this establishes our identification with him instead of the woman. The answer, I think, is that the point of view is divided between the woman and the man, depending on the editing. To test this point, look at this sequence as you might expect it to appear on screen. First, time the shots as you read them so that the shots of the man are longer than the shots of the woman. Now read the scene and make the woman's shots (frames 2-3) longer. Identification usually will side with the subject given the most screen time. Also, the woman is clearly looking at the man, while the man's attention is not focused on any activity that we can easily share.

Part of the strategy that sets this up is the right-angle shot of the man, which is in contrast to the woman's line of sight. This introduces another factor in determining point of view related to the eye-line. Any aspect of a shot that suggests thought on the part of a subject sets up conditions that are favorable to identification. Shots of the eyes, and CUs in general, fall into this category. This is why the over-the-hip shot of the woman in frame 3 does not greatly enhance the cut on the look in frame 2. If an OTS shot were substituted showing the woman's head, our identification with her might be stronger.

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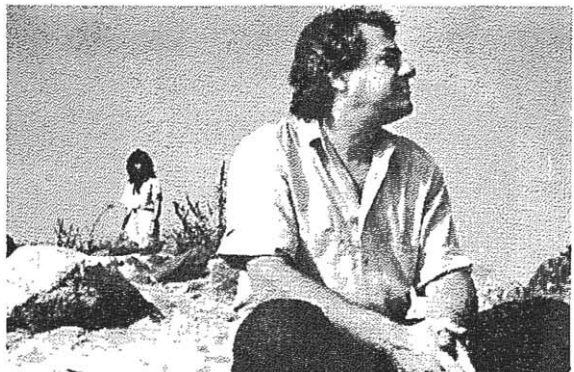
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Narrative Control (Version Three)

In this final series we combine the strategies of versions one and two to see how subtly identification can be controlled. In frame 1 we begin with the man and cut directly to the woman looking at him. If we stop right here our identification is with the woman. The cut to the woman's point of view clinches our identification with her as does the final frame along her sight line. But now look over the shots again: As you can see, the man has the

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strongest CU graphically and is in three shots, while the woman is in only two.

It's clear that the type of shot and the cooperation between shots is more important in developing a consistent point of view than the number of shots given to a particular character. Finally, it is important that the subject we identify with be seen consistently. In this last series, two shots of the woman from the same angle build identification more strongly than the three shots of the man, each from a different angle.