

The Subordination of the Camera Eye to the Human Subject

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Film, as a medium of sight, exists primarily as a mode of representation. By the recording of images, a perspective of reality is created and maintained during viewing. The relation between what the camera records and what the viewer perceives is a direct one, which is sustained through the material assumption of the filmic reality as an actual one (The suspension of belief). Citing examples from *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968), *Man With a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929), and *Blow Up* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966) this paper will contend that these films assert the prevailing domination of the human viewpoint over that of the “cine-eye.”

Beginning with *Psycho*, an analysis of vision and subjectivity can be composed. The themes of vision are brought up immediately. The first shot in the film, the lowering camera gradually moving through a hotel window, evokes familiar positions of perception that are generally associated with scopophilia. Literally the love of sight, scopophilia is most famously explained by Freud as vision connected with sexual desire as in the act of voyeurism. This process of watching, along with surveillance, is a recurring perspective of analysis within the visual framework. This famous opening shot begins high in the sky, the generally accepted position of god, perhaps suggestive of the objective, godlike nature of the camera as the anti-connotative creator of vision. Is this the supposed implication? As the problem is dissected by Bela Balasz, it is impossible to connote the objectivity of the filmic experience without simultaneously making the

viewer aware that they were recognizing it as an experience alien to their own vision.

“On the one hand, the camera is an objective medium, for it can neither think nor feel, and surely no other art in our time has provided us with more objective information about the surface of physical reality than the art of the camera. On the other hand, the camera is a subjective medium, for it cannot show us any object without at the time revealing its own physical position- its angle and distance from the object- as part of what is shown.” (Spiegel 31)

This suggests multiple things about the very nature of the camera in relation to the real. The very epistemological significations of the camera eye are circumscribed by its inherently limited manifestations. Furthermore, a camera can only grasp an object by various points of view. This restricts the apprehension of an object to an ontologically void landscape. In other words, the existence of an objective image cannot be comprehended by a camera to the degree that would be necessary to maintain anything more than a relativist perspective. (Spiegel 28-39)

The crescendo of *Psycho*, following the heroine's arrival at Bates Motel, is concomitant with the conclusions that can be drawn from the reoccurring themes of vision that are presented in the film. As a continuation of the ever-present optical fixation in the film, the scenes that make up the climax are composed of

cuts that constantly alter the point of view of the camera between its function as the spectator's eyes and one of the character's eyes. The main problem with this alterity is the intrinsic contradiction of the external camera's viewpoint and the diegetic characterization. The incongruity of this change disrupts the continuity of the narrative diegesis. This very incongruity problematizes the relation of camera to eye within the realm of visual perception. Similarly, the use of the camera to face the voyeur within the story causes an equal disturbance. By showing a character looking into the camera it is not only breaking the illusion of a diegetic world, but it is also alienating the viewer from the act of voyeurism by eliminating the unspoken existence of it. (Durgnat 100-109)

The culmination of the shower scene also marks the zenith of the visual framework of the film, particularly in the representations of perception and the blurring of the lines therein. The circular, eye-like showerhead looking down at her, Marion is excitedly murdered in frenzy. The camera cuts quickly between her point of view and that of the killer. As the viewer, we are given the emotional victim and the faceless murderer. She is showing intense emotion while the killer is shrouded in shadows. She falls dead, and in one of the most striking equations in the film, the drain is matched graphically to a close-up of her eye. Does this suggest the human perspective as some sort of void or abyss? What conclusions can be drawn from the relation of this scene to the conclusion of the film? (Durgnat 110-129)

The final scene in *Psycho* is a medium close-up of Norman staring maliciously into the camera. Based on the previous cinematography in the film,

the viewer can assume that it is no accident that it is concluded this way. We see the killer, who in the film has been equated with birds, with his dead mother. It is a person who does not even know what mind he embodies. The final association in the film is the complete abandonment of the inhuman gaze, which lends itself to the prevailing influence of the eye of the viewer, the human subject.

2001: A Space Odyssey is rich with references to vision, and has no lack of interest in the scheme of man versus machine. These themes emerge more potently during the third chapter of the film, on the Jupiter mission. On the spaceship *Discovery*, the men have entrusted their lives and the major functions of their mission to a computer machine (HAL), whose only identifying image is a looming, inescapable red eye, which monitors the entire ship. The men refer to the computer by a proper name, and conduct normal conversation with it. The anthropomorphization of a machine is one of the major themes present in this film in relation to subjectivity. The model of vision: the machine eye, an obvious analog of the camera, is spoken to as if it were human and given full control of the mission as man has become reliant on his tools. The ever-present HAL also lends itself to the exploration of voyeurism, surveillance, and the objective analytic framework presented by this narrative. (Ferlita 140-147)

In one of the most telling turns of the plot, the infallible machine makes a mistake by incorrectly predicting the failure of a part of the ship. The commentary of this scene bears heavily on the allegorical presentation of the characters. The computer, which consequently represents the supposedly infallible objective view of the camera, commits an error. What follows is an

attempt by the human, the object of the machine's gaze, to shut down the faulty computer. Not wanting to submit to the end of its life, the end of its sight, the computer attempts to destroy the men on board. In a stunning stylistic and metaphoric battle, the human eventually conquers the machine. When man is no longer the victim of the gaze, the subjected being, he has triumphed. The idea of the success of man over his tools permeates the story. This achievement is significant in the opposition of camera and eye, representative in this relationship by man and machine.

The following scene, subtitled "Beyond the Infinite," shows the sole survivor of the Discovery traveling through the universe. Close-ups of the human eye punctuate the journey, as an indicator of the victory of man and as a symbol of his consciousness and his life. As the viewer, we see from his perspective. The shot of the eye functions as a reminder of the source of his vision and also serves as a sign of the self-referentiality of the cinema. Whereas earlier we would see HAL's eye, now we see the human eye. The human figure has gone from being watched to watching, the ultimate victory.

In *Man With the Movie Camera*, the relationship between camera and eye functions more as a supportive equation than an opposition. As indicated by the opening title cards, the film is an attempt at self-representation. Vertov sets out to show the relationship between the camera eye and the human eye, but he does so with the intention of using this relationship to express the unique language of cinema, the unique interplay between the two. The film's showcase

of citizen's and their trades isn't as simple as it would seem, as it is a reminder that the cameraman is simply another one of these workers.

“The main and essential thing is: the sensory exploration of the world through film. We therefore take as the point of departure the use of the camera as kino-eye, more perfect than the human eye, for the exploration of the chaos of visual phenomena that fills space. The kino-eye lives and moves in time and space; it gathers and records impressions in a manner wholly different from that of the human eye. The position of our bodies while observing or our perception of a certain number of features of a visual phenomenon in a given instant are by no means obligatory limitations for the camera which, since it is perfected, perceives more and better. We cannot improve the making of our eyes, but we can endlessly perfect the camera.” (Vertov 14)

His tool just happens to be a camera, and throughout the film there is an analogy drawn between the workers and their tools. By showing certain scenes and then later showing the camera as it films these scenes in real time is just another layer of the self-referentiality that was apparent in *2001*. Aside from showing how the film was composed and produced, it is also an insight into the processes of human perception, from sight to comprehension to extension. (Petric 70-128)

Again the man with the movie camera appears, filming from the top of a moving car. Throughout the remainder of the film, there are many recreations and revisions of this technique. Vertov will show us a shot, and then a shot of it being filmed. This self-referentiality, far from braggadocio or vanity, is a quite profound awareness of the inherent aspects of a film, and of sight in general. This can be said to concentrate on the recognition of the frame within a frame, to draw attention to the audience and similarly draw attention to the representative aspects of the camera (Removing that fantasy, the audience will recognize that they are intently viewing a fiction that they are not directly involved in). Just as easily, it can be argued that this is simply a plot device, a narrative tool of Vertov. In this case, perhaps he shows the original shot simply to remind the viewer of that which is being filmed, and in turn that which is filming or necessitating the product. (Turvey I)

The next series of shots are among the most memorable in the film. Vertov goes for a more direct approach to the equation of camera and eye by fusing the two through the use of montage and superimposition. One particular scene begins by moving in and out of focus, finally drawing formally on a woman looking out a window. She begins to blink, by doing so the blinds covering the window open and close obscuring and revealing the exterior, the light. There is a cut to the shot of the camera, an iris closes around the lens, and opens again. Another memorable image is that of a film lens, inside which there is an eye superimposed on a camera. (Turvey II)

Simplicity in the subject matter in this film nevertheless yields extremely complex discourse. Approaching 'the filmed' from another level of reality, from another frame of existence, Vertov shows the editor of the clips we originally saw (the same clips that were correspondingly revisited by showing the man filming them). So far we have been shown clips of film, the clips of those clips being filmed. By finally showing those second clips being edited by hand, it is to say that it is the human eye that has the final creation over that of the film eye. It is the ultimate and final message in the sense of man and his tools. In this way, it is similar to *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Antonioni's *Blow Up* is a complex revision of the standard narrative and it includes a systematic epistemological and ontological breakdown. How do we know what we know? This film evokes the issues of the relationship of vision and knowledge and problematizes the associations of man and machine, particularly in the idea of a camera as an extension of the human experience. The character of Thomas is the inspiration for these themes, and the legitimization of these themes in the context of the significance of the human subject. As the narrative progresses, it becomes clear that Thomas's experience within the diegesis is an analog of Antonioni's project.

First, the narrative operates to confuse the associativity of man and camera. Thomas is unable to see without the use of his camera. The objective viewer is unable to tell which side of the conflict this operates on. Does the lens distort and obstruct the truth or does it clarify? The answer lies in the onomastics of the main character. The double meaning of the name Thomas is a signifier of

the doubting Thomas of the bible who refuses to believe that Christ has been resurrected and the 'peeping Tom' who refuses to avert his eyes as Lady Godiva rides her horse naked through the streets in the famous British legend. In a way, this Thomas is paradoxically linked to both; he derives pleasure from the voyeuristic aspect of sight and maintains confusion and uncertainty from the rest.

In one of the preliminary scenes, Thomas is actually framed in the shot as photographing a model from above, with the camera protruding down onto her submissive form. In every form of the phrase, the camera becomes an object of stimulation, both in the sense of taking pleasure through voyeurism and the camera actually being an extension of his sexual organs. It is only by an extension of his voyeuristic habits that he happens upon the supposed corpse that exhumes the remainder of the narrative. We are shown a man who is physically and mentally unable to perceive without his camera and lens. When he encounters on film what appears to be a dead body, all he can think to do is blow up the image ad infinitum, blow it up until it is inconceivably obscured.

Part of Thomas's obsession, as an extension from his voyeurism becomes his fetishization. As is common in pornographic film and sexual eroticism, a fetishization of parts becomes the viewer's fixation. Thomas's metonymic fixation, his association of the desire of an object to a part of it, overcomes him. The transference of his original voyeuristic image to an obscure body in the distance, his longing for an airplane propeller, and his brawl for the neck of a broken guitar are all suggestive of his obsessive gaze. (Mulvey 833-844)

In the climax of the film, Thomas revisits the body without his camera to find that it is actually there, and not just a figment of his photographic paranoia. He leaves, only to return with his camera and discover the body to be gone. This final scene is suggestive of the power of the human subject over the vision of the camera-eye. In Thomas's obsession to record all that he sees, he is remiss in understanding that his own sight is infinitely more important than what he could capture through a lens, his own memory is more powerful than the photographic substance. He becomes the doubting Thomas of biblical association. He doubts his own eyes, his own vision by returning with the camera; he is lost in this obsession. (Macklin 37)

As reflected in these films, the question of perceptual significance is always existent. Within the realm of subjectivity, there exists an opposition between human and inhuman, between man and animal or machine or tool. Within this subjectivity, there exists an association that is enabled by analysis. Through the visual vices of voyeurism and surveillance, there is a subjection of the human aspect. The common theme in all four of these films is the victory of the human aspect over the oppressive camera eye in the field of visual perception.

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