

EYES AND NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON STORY

A Practice Led Exploration of the Use of Eyes and Eye Lines in Fiction Film

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Abstract

Eyes and eye lines are one of the key ways in which the perspective on a story is established in figurative narrative fiction cinema. As such, the eyes and the use of eyes by a performer needs as much creative and technical attention as shot composition, sound, production design and editing. Rather than thinking of the eyes of a performer as a subservient aspect of a projected performance, often driven by the dominance of dialogue-action delivery, this paper seeks to examine how, in fictional cinematic expression, eyes can be deployed to enhance an introspective and transcendent narrative perspective on a story.

This exploration takes place through practice. In particular, during the creation of my latest feature film, *The Raven On The Jetty* (Erik Knudsen, UK 2014), in which I sought to explore how to enhance the relationship between eyes, eye lines and narrative perspective on story.

In reflecting on these issues, I shall look at what is meant by narrative perspective and relate this not only to the performativity of a fiction film, but also to the relationship of this performativity to emotions and feelings. I shall then look at eyes: first looking at their behavioural importance, then at looking and seeing. I hope to show that we can think of eyes not merely as a part of an actor's performance, but also as a window through which we can see a world whose presence is untouchable. I aim to argue that looks and eye lines are as effective as any other cinematic tool in establishing actions, re-actions, space, time, intentions and revelations and to illustrate how I have sought to challenge certain understandings and approaches to the use of eyes to add a different perspective on a story.

I write this paper primarily from the perspective of a filmmaker, as opposed to a film scholar, and therefore while acknowledging the considerable theoretical work done by film theorists such as Vivian Sobchack (on phenomenological semiotics¹), Stephen Heath (on narrative space²), Edward Branigan (on point of view³) and Tom Brown (on breaking the fourth wall⁴), not to speak of the extensive debates taking place on Catherine Grant's Film Studies for Free Blog⁵, this paper is a subjective and reflexive exploration that seeks to reveal a creative thought process in action, in contrast to a scholarly examination of the

¹ See Sobchack, V. C., *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, Princeton University Press, 1992.

² See Heath, S., *Question of Cinema*, Indiana University Press, 1981.

³ See Branigan, E., *Point of View in Cinema: A Theory of Narration and Subjectivity in Classical Film*, Mouton de Gruyter, 1984.

⁴ See Brown, T., *Breaking The Fourth Wall: Direct Address in Cinema*, Edinburgh University Press, 2012.

⁵ Film Studies for Free: The Forth Wall: <http://filmstudiesforfree.blogspot.co.uk/search?q=fourth+wall> accessed 2 February 2014.

cultural theory around film language or film form. Finally, I shall very briefly summarise some of my key findings in a conclusion.

The Story and Narrative Perspective

Every story has a storyteller. Without the storyteller, is there a story? This can perhaps never be answered and may, ultimately, be down to belief. What we do know is that there are certain archetypal stories which transcend time and culture and appear time and again in various narrative forms, told by people who feel compelled, or cannot help, but tell these stories in their contemporaneous contexts. Necessity is the mother of all invention, they say, and these stories will out⁶.

But storytelling is not confined to a select group of people. Indeed, we are all storytellers and story is singularly the most important mechanism for us to understand and engage with the world around us, but also to share these experiences and understandings with each other. Our histories, our values, our society, our culture, our joys and our concerns, even our scientific theories, are not just expressed through stories, but perhaps one could argue are themselves created through story. Story is a nebulous thing. It has no form until some form of narrative is created by a person using a paint brush, their voice, their gestures, a computer and myriad of other tools available to them. Yet we know these stories are there because we recognise them and engage with them the moment someone starts giving them a form. They are like powerful undercurrents that mirror our very mental, physical and spiritual lives and when this mirror is held up to us we cannot help but recognise ourselves and our lives in the archetypes presented to us.

Of course this narrative mirror can range from clear to unclear, from being effective to being ineffective or from old to new⁷. But it is always contemporaneous in the sense that it exists in the present and if it is to work for us, the living, the superficial layering of the underlying story will usually be directly recognisable as belonging to our contemporaneous experience and consequent imagination⁸. Even though *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Trans. George, A., Penguin, 2003) and *Star Wars* (George Lucas, USA 1977) are separated by nearly 5000 years, they share an archetypal story about overcoming the monster. The emotional, mental and spiritual undercurrent is virtually identical: the hero, the call, the

⁶ It is worth noting here the extensive work around story and the archetypal, including feelings and emotions, written by people like Joseph Campbell (1949), Patrick Hogan (2003), Christopher Booker (2005) and how these works have provided a fundamental basis for an understanding of the classical narrative from which I have explored alternative approaches to cinematic narrative in both my practice and theoretical reflections. See, for example, Knudsen (2010).

⁷ As Sobchack points out (1992, p. 14) the idea of 'picture frame', 'mirror' and 'window' are metaphoric concepts that have dominated much film criticism. While she indicates that all three in a sense make us think of a relationship between a 'viewing subject' (ibid) and a 'static viewed object' (ibid) in which the 'exchange and reversibility of perception and expression (both in and as the film and spectator) are suppressed' (Sobchack, 1992, p. 15). I will in this paper be acknowledging the phenomenology of the subject-observer relationship and using the mirror and window metaphors as, in contradiction to Sobchack, indicators of that reversibility.

⁸ While Daniel Dayan's (1974) work on suture is relevant here, particularly in relation to the role of the imagination in filling gaps, his work revolved predominantly around the shot/edit and its relationship to the ideology of our imaginations, but there is no reason why the idea of suture should not also be considered on the macro narrative level.

initial success, the complication and increased frustration, the final ordeal of confronting the monster and the thrilling escape from death. Through an engagement with our powerful uncontrollable feelings and emotions, the story has taken people separated by a gulf in terms of the superficial experience of life - our cultural differences, our technological differences and so on - on a very similar experiential journey embedded in the core of our being. One would have been told as an oral narrative, while the other was told as a cinematic narrative. One concerns a mythical monster based on their experience of actual animals, while the other is based on an alien monster embedded in a monstrous technological beast (spaceship) based on our existing experience of technology and space.

Not all stories are archetypal, as not all narratives are classical. There will always be storytellers experimenting with, and challenging, dominant forms and understandings and it is this impulse that is, in part, responsible for the continual evolution of narrative forms. The storytellers must play their part in innovation if the stories they tell are to engage others, or the narrative language they are using will gradually become meaningless and die. If many of the stories we tell are almost as old as we are as a definable human species, then this cannot be said for many of the forms we use, perhaps with the exception of forms such as performance and music. Certainly, the cinematic form is very young indeed and is the result of specific technological developments. As with any form, codes, genres and approaches have formed around the medium and while these conventions are continually evolving, there is nevertheless quite a strong set of conventions defining the classical figurative narrative film that so dominates our screens in contemporary Britain and beyond.

None so more evident than in the area of performance for the screen and its relationship to time and space. What interests me in particular in this reflection are the eyes and their role in not only telling a story, but in determining a perspective from which the story is told. While Anglo-Saxon narrative cinema has mainly been built on the notion of filming or capturing a performance, with a resultant aesthetic emanating from a theatrical notion of performance, the idea of constructing a performance in the same way one might construct a shot or build a set as an integral, almost technical, part of the aesthetic is not common⁹. Performance is often seen as belonging to the domain of the performer and the other elements of the medium are there to support or contextualise this performance in a verisimilitude that the viewer will feel familiar with. Theatre's strong reliance on gesture, words and voice permeate narrative film and the spacial relationship between characters is fixed in a particular conformity that is supported by continuity editing's reaffirmation of temporal verisimilitude. The dialogue-action axis presents a plausible experience akin to the real world experience of interactions between people¹⁰.

⁹ Though one could look at special effects driven event films and argue that the performer operating in a green screen environment is increasingly being thought of as a technical aspect of the project.

¹⁰ Here we perhaps see a separation of the practitioner's perspective and the cultural theorists. While Sobchack, Heath, Branigan et al will be solely concerned with the spectator experience, the spectator engagement and the generation of meaning, as it may sit within a theoretico-cultural paradigm and history, the practitioner is working with the individual practical and creative components that come together to make a whole, and he or she will more often than not not be concerned with cultural theory, but much more so with archetypal imagery and narratives that can emerge from the unconscious and instinctual. 'I know that I know, but I don't know how I know' (Leonard Cohen).

Nevertheless, it is hard to think of figurative expression in cinema without thinking about expressive eyes. Great cinematographers would go out of their way to light the eyes of the heroines and heroes with a view to letting the look say it all. From Lilian Gish to Cate Blanchett, or from Douglas Fairbanks to Leonardo DiCaprio, popular cinema has demonstrated that the ability of a performer to hold a look at the right moment carries with it such dramatic force. The close up, as a shot choice, has consequently dominated compositional choice, particularly in moments of emotional importance or decision.

The closeup is therefore an example of a creative construction made to shape the perspective on a story¹¹. By coming in close to a face, the dominance of the eyes and their behaviour in giving us access to the thoughts of a character, in effect shifts the perspective on the experience to their perspective. If we then cut back and forth between two closeups - for example as in a conversation between two people - we are continually shifting perspective. The effect is to create a sense of balance in the perspective, even if for other reasons we may be more engaged with one character over another. It would be quite a different experience if, for example, we were to hold on one character throughout the same conversation. We would be drawn into experiencing the conversation in quite a different way and depending on what the eyes are doing, perhaps even start to lose sight, metaphorically speaking, of the other character. Consider, too, the effect of the whole scene if we were seeing the faces from side on, rather than a 30% angle that dominates most conventional closeups. Some may say that this convention distances us from the character(s), perhaps because we cannot see their eyes. While some of these effects could be characterised as being the result of editing, if we were to cut between the two characters where with one of the shots we would not see the eyes of the character, the presence or absence of eyes would, notwithstanding the effect of compositional components, have a profound effect on the perspective of the scene and story.

As a window to the soul, perhaps it is apt to remind ourselves that all animals, including humans, fix on another animal's eyes as a means of trying to understand what they're about, sympathise or empathise with them, or simply to figure out what they might do next. Even in the relationship between animals and humans, such as between dogs and humans, eye contact is critical in the sharing of emotional states. There is a well known experiment in which two strangers sit in a room with a dog and cry - one person with a blind fold, the other without. Invariably, the dog goes to the person whose eyes it can see and licks them sympathetically, suggesting a strong link between sympathy, empathy and eye contact.

Eyes as revelation, eyes as expression, eyes as a window, eyes as a mirror - all metaphors that give an indication of the complexity of the role of eyes in the interaction of sentient sighted beings. In this paper, we are specifically concerned with eyes as part of a cinematic expressive language and how this role relates specifically to create a perspective on a story.

As we can surmise from the example of the eyes in a closeup, and the seeming biological imperative to engage with eyes, empathy is one important aspect of eye contact. In order to fully engage with someone, we need to preferably engage with their eyes and when

¹¹ Dayan's work (1974) here is very important, as the role of suture is critical in establishing the verisimilitude of interacting eyes. Values (and ideology) can be established and the opinions shaped by suture can be instrumental in our opinion of characters and, therefore, story.

dealing with a medium in which verisimilitude - the strong relationship between the iconic signifier and the signified - engaging with a character's eyes takes on a heightened role in generating empathy with characters¹². And empathy is a critical component in narrative perspective.

Empathy can be created in many different ways, including through an identification with character aims, motivation, context and predicament. It is, of course, possible to create empathy for a character without seeing their eyes. For example, by simply only showing scenes in which a particular character is present may help create empathy, or by using dramatic irony to play on the tensions created by the difference between what a character knows and what the audience knows, can go a long way to creating empathy. The two examples often relate in that the choice of scenes can play an important role in revealing things to the audience that the character doesn't know, thereby heightening our emotional concern for a character; or the creation of an immersive engagement with a character by only witnessing what they witness, may give us a very different perspective on the story that engages quite different types of feelings in us. While there is here a suggestion of a subjective narrative perspective on a story through empathy for a single character, empathy can also be extended to multiple characters, suggesting a kind of objective observation of a story's narrative events. And there is no reason why such empathies - and thereby narrative perspectives - should not shift during the telling of a story¹³.

Time, place, context, rhythms, sounds (including music), composition, colour and textures all work together to focus our empathies, and consequently our narrative perspective on the story. Our feelings and emotions are engaged, allegiances formed, opinions stirred and an investment of one's own life made into the plight of protagonists in a story. Our values and socio-cultural contexts - indeed, our place in history - all conspire to give us a particular perspective on a story. But perhaps no single cinematic component has such power to stir empathy in us as the eyes of a character.

The Eyes and Eye Lines

Eyes are a part of the body and we use them to look at and see with. If looking at something is the action part of what the eyes do - the externalising, the looking out - then seeing is the revelation part - essentially a mental creation we could associate with internalising and looking in. We can look at something without seeing it, just as we can see something without looking at it. As such, perhaps we could look at the eyes in two ways when thinking of them in the context of cinema: first, as a means of looking, a kind of projection of intention and attention; second, as a window into a thought and feeling

¹² Contrast this with, for example, theatre, where the verisimilitude of the iconic is perhaps secondary to the indexical and symbolic relationship between signifiers and signified, thereby allowing other human gestures such as movement and voice to take precedent.

¹³ Point of view is often a way in which one may enter the subject of achieving empathy, not just in terms of shot choice and the codes that go with associating a particular character's view of events, but also in terms of the cinematic narrative. For this discussion, I tend to use the term perspective to talk about the latter. For an extended look at point of view, Branigan (1984) provides an in depth analysis of point of view's relationship to narrative. In relation to the specifics of point of view's relationship to empathy, van Peer and Chatman (2001) look more specifically, amongst other things, at manipulation of the viewer through the interplay of the diegetic, non-diegetic, extra-diegetic and intra-diegetic. Here, I seek to understand empathy as an experiential and intuitive phenomena rather than a philosophical one.

process, a kind of revelation of a hidden life. Both tell us things about a character and give us access to their inner workings, but one does so in a meditative manner that might be more associated with the spiritual or mystical, while the other does it in an active manner more associated with the psychological and material¹⁴.

We can therefore think of eyes as the inner, meditative aspect, and eye lines as the active, externalising aspect. First, there are eyes we are primarily interested in looking at to engage with what they might reveal from within - the eyes as a window - while, second, with eye lines we are primarily interested in what the character might be looking at; when, how and why - the eyes as an expression. We can, for example, look at a character's eyes and know that they are not looking at anything, or whatever they are looking at is not an issue or of any interest directly. Contrast this with looking at a character's eyes because what they are looking at is telling us what they are intending to do or what they are thinking.

Notwithstanding many important moments in films in which we are invited through the window of the eyes into a private and mystical inner world of a character, most of the time film narratives are concerned with eye lines and their part in an overall performance of an actor to engage us in the psychological and the physical. This is very much about the actions of looking. Action, reaction, intention and aspiration help present us with a performance whose psychological motivations become apparent in part through the actions of the eyes. The consequent access we get to the narrative perspective on the story is significantly aided by the performance of the eyes in looking at people, looking at things, looking at vistas, looking away from people and looking away from things. Even the opening and closing of eyes as part of an action or reaction falls into this category of eye lines, the expressive act of looking.

Added to the expressive eye lines of a character, other cinematic components emerge to support the construct of a narrative perspective. The edit that works with the eye line to create a relationship to what the character is looking at; the composition and the *mise-en-scène* that can contextualise the eye line and *visa versa*; the sound and its relationship to what the eye line is engaging with; the eye line that reinforces, or challenges, conventions around space, such as the 180 degree action line; the eye line that helps to establish a relationship to the temporal; and of course, the eye line and its relationship to movement, such as an indicator of movement.

These expressive eye lines also, of course, combine with the wider context of the human body and face to create a performance for the screen which then form part of a complex set of codes and conventions which consciously and unconsciously govern the general interaction of eye lines and the many other cinematic components with which they interact. Three examples of these conventions and codes include: eye lines and the establishment of space, such as the 180 degree 'rule' already mentioned; the fourth wall (looking at the camera and addressing the audience) and its relationship to diegesis; and the interaction of characters through eye contact.

¹⁴ Note here that there is a cross over with some of the concepts Sobchack (1992) discusses – reversibility of perception – but that here, in contrast to her phenomenological perspective, I am thinking more ontologically about looking and seeing.

The 180 Degree Rule

This convention is so ingrained in Western cinematic aesthetic that people often refer to it as a 'rule'. And much has been written about it¹⁵. There are many who have challenged this 'rule', but few have done so consistently across an oeuvre, except for someone like Ozu¹⁶, whose developing body of work evolved an aesthetic around eye lines and space that challenged this dominant aesthetic. Nevertheless, as a convention it still dominates our aesthetic understanding of spacial constructs and provides a good simple example of the interaction between eye line, shot composition, editing and spacial relationships...



If we were to cross this imaginary line, our spacial orientation may be confused...



The significance for the narrative perspective on a story of eye lines giving a different spacial understanding of characters' presence, and consequent understanding of things like eye contact and where a character's attention may be, can be profound. Even the technical detail of aligning the eyes correctly to ensure that the eye line matches can be difficult and result in unintended readings of a character's feelings or intentions, or can be used to great effect in telling us something about how someone feels¹⁷.

¹⁵ Quite apart from any academic discussions of this 'rule', it's ubiquity is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that there is a Wikipedia entry for it (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/180-degree_rule) and plenty of YouTube explanations of it (for example, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y4wX_dmh8_g).

¹⁶ See for example *The End of Summer* (Yasujiro Ozu, Japan 1960) or *Late Autumn* (Yasujiro Ozu, Japan, 1961)

¹⁷ Of course, Carl Th. Dreyer was a master at challenging and undermining our eyeline conventions, including matching up eyelines and the 180 degree 'rule', such as in *Gertrude* (Denmark, 1964).



The Fourth Wall

Another 'rule' that despite many challenges and creative interpretations persists in cinema, is the notion of the fourth wall. Just the term itself takes us back to film as a form of theatre driven by performance and the voyeur looking in on a series of events that exist in a diegesis separate to that of our reality. A character looking directly at us via the machine of the camera challenges this pretence - or does it?

Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt* with its aims of challenging the unconscious identification with a story and its characters in search of a conscious and intellectual engagement, built on notions of direct mode of address familiar to theatre since probably the beginning of performance as storytelling. Where in the Greek chorus a separate group of semi or non-diegetic characters would address and guide the audience, with the Brechtian¹⁸ approach, the diegetic characters themselves would break the covenant and let what was, in essence, the storyteller's direct voice address the audience.

In the documentary film, we are well used to modes of address that involve either presenters or characters addressing us directly. The codes of the genre allow this in ways that fiction, on the whole, with a string of fleeting exceptions from Godard¹⁹ to Allen²⁰, does not²¹. Where in fiction the fourth wall is exposed, it is more often than not as part of a mode of address²². The characters are either addressing the audience with both words and eye line, or simply addressing them with their eye line. It is an active decision that usually involves a shift in gaze from the diegetic to the non-diegetic. This conscious shift leads to a rational engagement with the fourth wall in which the storyteller suspends the relationship to the diegesis with a view to, as Brecht perhaps intended, develop a rational - perhaps critical - perspective on the story.

We have, of course, seen entire films based on the blurring of the genres of documentary and fiction which play and tease on the differing dominant conventions in relation to the

¹⁸ First articulated by Brecht in an essay *Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting* in 1936. See Brecht, B., *Brecht On Theatre: The Development Of An Aesthetic*, Methuen, London 1978.

¹⁹ For example, *Breathless* (Jean-Luc Godard, France 1960)

²⁰ For example, *Husbands and Wives* (Woody Allen, USA 1992)

²¹ As Daniel Dayan has pointed out, in conventional cinema 'the film discourse presents itself as a product without a producer, a discourse without an origin. It speaks. Who speaks? Things speak for themselves and, of course, they tell the truth'. (1976).

²² It is perhaps worth reminding ourselves that prior to D. W. Griffiths, and the cementing of the idea of film as a fictional narrative, film was essentially vaudevillian in nature and involved constant interaction between characters on screen and the audience off, so to speak.

fourth wall and modes of address. In the documentary, we want to know that the camera was there, actually witnessing the events, as it adds to the illusion of actuality. In the fiction film, the illusion is about voyeurism and we don't particularly want the characters in the story to be aware of our presence; we will either intellectualise and rationalise our engagement, as all the other codes in use tell us that this is not actuality, but fiction; or we will try to switch codes, so to speak, and persuade ourselves that what we are seeing is actuality²³.

However, this rational estrangement, or detachment, is not the only effect that an engagement of a character's eye line with the fourth wall can create in fiction. There is the interaction with the fourth wall that seems to lack a clear conscious intention or decision to shift an eye line to the lens. An unconscious, accidental, casual or innocent shift in eye line to engage directly with the fourth wall suggests a wholly different purpose and effect²⁴. In this case, we can talk not only of eye lines, but eyes, for it is often in these instances that the eyes perform the role of passive window into a mystical soul, as opposed to active expression of psychologically explicable thoughts and intentions.

This persistent accidental gaze, may at first be a surprise²⁵. We may, for example, think: I can see this character is looking at me, but are they really seeing me? Are they actually looking at the camera, or something else? Unlike the shifting diegesis of a character essentially addressing us with a deliberate decision to look at us, thereby acknowledging us, the persistent accidental gaze fails to acknowledge us. As a consequence, the resultant uncertainty starts to give us a different kind of relationship with the character. Convention has taught us to incorporate the fourth wall into the deceit and make believe of fiction and while the breaking of the fourth wall as a mode of address, paradoxically, reinforces this notion by encouraging us to intellectualise and distance ourselves from the verisimilitude of what we are witnessing, the persistent accidental gaze actually wants to challenge the very convention of the fourth wall by making us question its presence. In a subliminal way, a doubt emerges about whether there actually is a camera present at all, for the character is not acknowledging it, even though they must be looking straight at it. The persistent accidental gaze suggests that the characters are challenging the very existence of this fourth wall, almost as if there is no separation between the fictional construct of the cinematic narrative and the narrative of our real lives. By failing to acknowledge us, and what separates us, the characters are, in effect, giving us sublime, privileged access to their intimate inner world.

It is this persistent accidental gaze that particularly interests me in relation to *The Raven On The Jetty* (Erik Knudsen, UK, 2014) as it offers opportunities to further add mystical and intimate components to the narrative perspective on the story by changing our relationship to the conventions around notions of the fourth wall and voyeurism.

²³ Tom Brown (2012) suggests a complex relationship between the viewer and the character breaking the fourth wall in a narrative fiction film, identifying some devices – intimacy, agency, honesty, alienation and so on – which govern the type of relationship that might ensue. It does, nevertheless, presuppose a direct address that breaks with the notion of the voyeur. The voyeur exposed?

²⁴ Both the leading characters in *Juliet of the Spirits* (Federico Fellini, Italy, 1965) and *400 Blows* (Francois Truffaut, France, 1959) have fleeting accidental glances at the fourth wall that conjure up mysteries that persist to this day, rather akin to the mysterious smile on the Mona Lisa painting.

²⁵ Indeed, initially we may consider an accidental gaze as just that - an accident.

Eye Contact

It might seem glaringly obvious that one of the defining features of character interaction involves eye contact - or not - and that the verisimilitude of this is central to our understanding of cinematic space and time. We have already seen how eye contact is critical in the shaping of conventions around space when discussing the 'action line'. Add to this the key performative component of eye line in establishing relationships to space, objects, *mise-en-scène*, characters and, indeed, the fourth wall, and we can see the importance of eye lines to cinematic language. However, the specifics of the eye line related to eye contact is worth a separate mention as so much is said and revealed through these interactions²⁶.

As Dreyer's later films demonstrated²⁷ by challenging conventions about matching eye lines when, for example, characters are talking with each other, not only do we expect eye lines to match - height, direction and alignment - but we expect this match to combine with shot composition to create a construct of space and *mise-en-scène*. Further to this, the performativity of eye contact is built on one of the cornerstones of the classical narrative - cause and effect. When two characters establish eye contact - or not - this is usually part of a paradigm of action-reaction. The cause and effect of action-reaction give us access to psychological motivation, intention and aspiration and we can therefore, through the empathy that this creates, engage with a particular set of narrative perspectives on the story. The dramatic irony - the differences between what we know the various characters know and what we know - is another important aspect of determining narrative perspective. The knowledge of these distinctions, coupled with the cultural codes that govern our interpretation of behaviour, emerge from our engagement with the cause and effect of eye contact to stir our emotions and feelings.

Critical to confirming that eye contact is indeed established, is our understanding of cinematic time and space, and the fourth wall. Our belief in the idea that two characters have in fact established eye contact depends of a verisimilitude that is constructed on a series of cinematic codes around the shot, editing, *mise-en-scène* and sound²⁸. We have to believe that these characters are looking at each other²⁹.

²⁶ Much of it inexplicable and impalpable.

²⁷ Most notably, *Gertrud* (Carl Th. Dreyer, Denmark 1964)

²⁸ *We're back to Dayan* (1974) and *suture*.

²⁹ As any filmmaker knows, the difference between this screen reality and the reality involved in getting the shots, including the reality of whether the actors were actually looking at each other or not, or indeed were even in the same space, is usually quite significant.

The Raven on the Jetty

One of the central aims in the making of *The Raven On The Jetty* (Erik Knudsen, UK, 2014) was to create a strong narrative perspective on the story that reflected the more mystical and spiritual experiences of the leading character. This was to be achieved in a number of different interacting ways: first, through a transcendental narrative structure that relied less on narrative cause and effect and employed a reflexive and meditative pacing and spacing that would encourage audiences to invest their own life experiences into the story; second, through constructing scenes only based around what the central character was experiencing and to further support this in the editing by challenging conventions around the coverage of action-reaction; and third, the subject of this paper, through exploring the use of eyes and eye lines in enhancing the subjective narrative perspective of the story, in particular by looking at developing a new approach to the persistent accidental gaze, the fourth wall and eye contact.



The story for *The Raven On The Jetty* (ibid) revolves around a boy, Thomas, who on his 9th birthday travels with his mother to visit his estranged father who, since an acrimonious divorce from his mother, has abandoned urban living in favour of an isolated rural life in the English Lake District. As a digital native boy, Thomas's encounter with the natural world, and his gradual understanding of the pivotal connection he provides for his, ultimately lonely, parents leads to realisation and discovery. There are things his parents don't know about each other that only he can reveal. Perhaps, as he starts to discover, he has the power and the means to change everything.

The aim was to create an experiential narrative, one that does not project a story through dramatic narrative devices that direct the viewer's emotions and feelings. Instead I have created a film that has enough breathing space in its narrative form to invite the viewer to bring their own experience into that of the film, to mingle the two and then, hopefully, to be moved by the experience. The narrative approach seeks to focus on experiencing events for their own sake, rather than as a vehicle leading to the next events. The simplicity of compositions, the lingering on our main character's face, the spaces that characters occupy and vacate, the unusual use of eye lines and looks and the focus on the more intimate events, rather than the dramatic, allows for a transcendent realism to emerge.

The Casting Process and Working with Actors

The process of engaging with eyes in *The Raven On The Jetty* (ibid) started at the casting stage. Though an engagement with the eyes in every actor/character was going to be

important, where it was most critical was going to be in the casting of the boy, Thomas. He was going to be in every scene and in almost every shot and, critically, he was hardly going to say a word. What was therefore important was that whoever was going to play Thomas needed to have evocative eyes, on the one hand, while on the other being responsive enough to take detailed instructions around controlling eye movement.

Evocative, in the sense that when looking at the actor/character's eyes being held in a look, we get a sense that there are some profound thoughts and reflections going on behind them and that there is a certain vulnerability evident in the look, as well as a paradoxical sense of both wisdom and innocence. A demanding set of subjective criteria, one may think, yet when doing screen tests, and subsequent reactions of many people to the finished film, it is surprising how there was an intuitive agreement about the qualities of the eyes of the leading actor/character.

We whittled down the casting of the Thomas character to 19 boys between 8 and 10 years old. We decided that we would be casting the boy with either at least a mother or a father. By attaching a parent in this way, we were able to overcome a number of practical problems³⁰ and could look for an established relationship on which to build the cinematic relationship. We saw mostly boys with their mothers, but given that most of the film centers on the relationship between father and son, we were very fortunate to be able to cast a boy, Connor O'Hara (10), and his father, Rob O'Hara, who turned out to be the perfect pairing for the film. We subsequently then cast the mother, Helen Teasdale.

The final stage of the casting was an audition in which we saw the 19 boys, each with a parent, who was also being considered for a role, and a key component of this audition involved screen tests. The screen test itself was important, because it revolved specifically around evaluating our potential actors' eyes and eye lines, aware of the fact that eyes and eye lines were going to play a significant part in the screen performance and in making an important contribution to the establishing of a narrative perspective on the story.

The screen test was simple and lasted about 30 to 40 seconds. Each actor was framed in a medium close up. They were asked to look directly into the lens for 10 seconds, following "action", then to turn and look at a point approximately 30° off lens and to hold that for 10 seconds, to look back at the lens for 10 seconds, then to look down at the floor in front of them for 10 seconds, then to look back at the lens for 10 seconds, then to cover their face with their hands for 10 seconds and, finally, to remove their hands slowly and smile at the lens. No information was given about emotions, feelings or requirements for facial expressions.

On a practical level, we were able to immediately discount quite a few actors. For example, not every boy or adult could follow these simple instructions. Some had difficulty holding their gaze for 10 seconds, while others had little sense of time. In one or two cases, it was difficult for actors to hold their eyes still or to hold their concentration. Perhaps most importantly, through an engagement with predominantly their eyes, but, of course, also their faces and general demeanour, we could get a strong sense of presence. And the issue was whether that sense of presence matched our expectations of what the

³⁰ Being a micro budget production, it was important that we were able to simplify arrangements around permissions and chaperoning of a minor.

main character, Thomas, was like as a person and whether their eyes acted like an inviting window into a stirring and evocative inner world.



As presence was ultimately the key thing we were looking for, we were able to reduce the final selection to two or three boy/parent partnerships - though it has to be said that once we saw Connor O'Hara and Rob O'Hara, the choice had effectively been made. Not only did Connor demonstrate high powers of concentration and ability to carry out the most detailed instructions with his eyes, his gaze - whether into the lens or at an angle - had such a strong presence about it. Looking at the screeners after the auditions, the team could not take their eyes off him: first, when he looked off lens, we could not help but be drawn to, and curious about, what he was looking at, such were the power of the held eye line; second, when staring into the lens, the window of his eyes enticed us into a fragile and mysterious inner world that could be felt, but not touched, and sensed, but not seen. With the quality of the presence of his eyes, and his ability to respond to detailed instructions around eye lines, I knew that I already had 80% of my performance in place by simply pointing my camera at him.

The subsequent directing of actors on set - Connor O'Hara in particular - was focused on directing eyes. I took a Bressonian³¹ approach to performance by not asking for any kind of acted performance. I had no interest in mimicry or performed facial expressions, but simply in the presence created by the eyes. Rather than projecting through some kind of performance, I was interested in the idea of the eyes, both as window and revealer of intention, as a means of accessing a inner world and, in so doing, actually holding up a discrete mirror to the viewer in which they see their own soul. In terms of facial expression, I was not looking for any conscious action, but simply a blank canvas onto which the viewer could, unconsciously, project their own feelings, experience and meaning. In practical terms, the discussion with actors revolved around obviously the general action

³¹ Bresson, R., Notes on Cinematography, Urizen, NY, 1977.

that needed to take place, but more specifically about what actions the eyes needed to take. The detail of the looks, the detail of the timing of the looks, the detail of the angles of the looks, the detail of the lighting on the eyes and so on were the main ways in which I directed the screen performance of my actors.

The Fourth Wall and Eye Contact

A key decision made early in the development of the project was about the relationship between eye lines and the fourth wall - the lens and the viewer. The persistent accidental gaze, the diegetic look straight into the lens in contrast to the non-diegetic engagement with the viewer, was going to be the consistent way in which eye contact between characters was going to be established, and in this case in particular between Thomas and his parents. The lens was going to be an invisible medium linking their accidental gazes. Almost every time eye contact is made between characters, the intercutting shots involve the characters looking straight at the lens.



At a petrol station, Thomas turns to look at a another boy in another car. When that boy looks back at him, Thomas is embarrassed and looks away. Both characters are looking straight into the lens when the eye contact is established.

This was not with a view to creating a non-diegetic *verfremdungseffekt*, but with the intention of developing a mysterious intimacy in the connection between two people. The theme of the film, and the near silence of Thomas so affected by the acrimonious divorce of his parents, demanded this approach to help further establish the narrative perspective on the story as coming from the inner experiences of the main character, Thomas. Shot composition and editing - indeed, the choice of lens focal length³² - were affected by this need to achieve a consistent approach to the accidental gaze into the lens. In addition to the establishing of eye contact, this accidental gaze was also used to establish connections between Thomas and animals - the raven in particular - and some objects of particular importance. In other words, the driver to establishing the accidental gaze was usually Thomas.

Eye Lines and Narrative Engagement

In a narrative where silence and stillness was going to be a key feature, the need to work with eyes also extended to thinking of the eyes as agents of thought and intention and not just as passive windows into an essence of a character. What the eyes are looking at, what they look away from and when, their movement and their reflections all help to give us clues to thoughts and intentions³³. They also help establish space and in some cases, such as the opening and closing of eyes, for example, provide excellent ways of suggesting the passing of time.

Because Thomas doesn't speak to his parents, eye contact - and, indeed, evasion of eye contact - became very important narrative tool and the actions around eyes was an extension of this. As with eye contact, eye line action became an important influence on choice of shots, shot composition, editing and sound. The emphasis was on making sure that the viewer could fully engage in the actions of the eyes, just as in a dialogue driven film the need for understanding the dialogue and its impact on action would drive the same cinematic components in a different direction. For examples, the use of sounds off, in combination with eye line action, could be a powerful way of engaging the viewer in the feelings and intent of the character. Indeed, the shifting of an eye line at a critical moment could suggest a particular reaction to information or a reaction to the actions of another character.



Thomas reacts to some unexpected news from his Mother with an accidental gaze.

³² Of over 250 camera set ups for the film, only 5 involved a focal length that was not 50mm.

³³ Even if usually this is an unconscious understanding.

Similarly, eye line action proved an evocative means of articulating a complex relationship.



Thomas's Father tries to tell him that he has missed him, but then doesn't know what to say. Thomas, too, is awkward. There are budgies in the room and Thomas senses that his Father's attention has drifted to his trusted little friends and is drawn to them, too. Moments later, they have one of the birds out and are fondling it together. The intimate action and reaction of the eyes indicates an unspoken intent to come together and is also a premonition of this development...

Conclusions

What I hope to have articulated in this paper is how I have, as part of my filmmaking practice, made palpable in a useful and systematically practical way something that we may intuitively already know. That eyes in the figurative narrative cinema are important in creating a narrative perspective on a story, but that by working systematically and consciously with exploring how to prioritise the role of eyes in performance, it is possible to create a cinematic expression that can be more transcendent in its qualities. We cannot, of course, isolate eyes from the rest of the face and body, but we can focus more specifically on its role in creating cinematic meaning.

Most contemporary films, particularly from the Anglo-Saxon traditions, depend on a phenomenology rooted in the cause and effect of psychology and expressed through the projection of facial and bodily gestures. The camera then essentially captures these gestures as part of a filmed performance in a spacial context, or *mise-en-scène*, that finds expression through a semiotic phenomenology of the screen form. The eyes are, of course, still important, but tend to be subservient to an overall performativity largely driven by dialogue and overt action. What I hope to have shown is that it is possible to question the dominance of this kind of performativity by exploring ways of enhancing the role of eyes. In my case, this is part of an ongoing creative development that is allowing me to transcend dialogue-action driven performativity with a view to encouraging a cinematic expression which is not so much about self assertion and projection, but more about participation and introspection.

A further exploration of this subject may also connect to cultural and scientific explorations of eyes and their role in our communications and cultural interactions and it is worth noting that while this paper has been from the perspective of a filmmaker, actors and performers may also be able to further shed light on their exploration of eyes as part of their performative tools. Quite apart from the scientific, functional and practical aspects of eyes, they are ultimately mysterious and possess qualities that we will probably never be able to fully explain or understand. Perhaps this is one of the main reasons why I am so drawn to working more closely with eyes in my cinema.

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