

Now You See Him, Now You Don't: The Use of Subjective Camera in Postmodern Horror Cinema

I consider it best to start this essay with a confession. I have only recently gotten into watching horror movies - and I have only realized what spooks me about them most when I started to play around with the thought of writing an essay about something related to horror. The very thought of writing about horror came to me quite naturally and that made me curious, to say the least. What made it so obvious that I should take up writing about such a genre? It is quite easy to just declare that the human mind is drawn to the morbid and the fearsome aspects of life and for that matter, death. And, while I was doing my mundane chores and planned out some petty escapade so as to survive getting bored to death, it came to me. There is a special type of horror out there that is especially not for the faint-hearted: the ones that use subjective camera - or in another name, point of view shots. While there are many movies that use this technique, they tend to use it to a different extent and for different reasons as well. My intention is to prove that the use of POV shots is not just a gimmick in modern cinema; it offers more than just a visual stimulus, although of course that aspect of it is not negligible either. So for the sake of my argument I will definitely not talk about a franchise like *Paranormal Activity* that used and abused the technique to death, no pun intended.

Let me first explain what a POV shot is even if it sounds pretty self-explanatory. POV, of course, is an acronym for "Point of View"; it shows what a specific character is seeing. It is not a modern technique, in fact it was used first in *Lady in the Lake* which came out in 1947. This detective movie was based on a novel of the same name and it was shot almost entirely from the perspective of the main character, Philip Marlowe. Another movie from the 1950s is Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* which also mainly consists of POV shots (and is a thriller film but given the director's name that is also somewhat self-explanatory). What is important is that the other characters react to the camera as if it was a person who is equally involved in the plot. We can hear the character's voice (that is, if he is of the communicative kind which is not always the issue with horror) from whose perspective we are watching the others so we have no other choice left but to believe that we, to a certain extent, participate in the event. We are the character and we see what he chooses to see; so no wonder it the technique is also called subjective camera. What can get more subjective than the perspective of a killer, for example? Or how about getting into the skin of an innocent young girl who only made one tiny mistake in her life and we have to see how the others blame her and shout at her? There

are many kinds of POVs as there are many kinds of people. Actually I would like to make a distinction between such movies now which will probably sound too simplistic but it is vital to make it. In further paragraphs I will detail some of the movies and techniques I will now list.

Firstly, there are movies like *Maniac* (2012) where we are the character himself; the camera acts like his eyes and the characters of the movie react to him both as a person and regular camera in a sense that there are no other layers to the storytelling. *Maniac* is shot (not entirely though, but largely) from the perspective of a misogynistic killer played by Elijah Wood who we happen to see from time to time (for example after the first murder we can see his reaction or in the last scene we can witness his fate from a ‘normal’ view; or in mirrors). There are movies like *Henry: A Portrait of a Killer* (1986) where the situation is interesting: there are not many POV shots and those are made by the characters of the movie with a camcorder of their own. As far as I am concerned, that is “mise en abyme” (or “mise en scène”), a film within a film that we are aware of because we can see the equipment and the character making the movie. And there are the movies which take this technique up a notch - found footage films; movies that try their best to make such an atmosphere that the viewer doubts whether it is just a movie he or she watches. They usually start with a message on the screen that alerts us to the authenticity of the footage by announcing that it was found at a certain place in a certain condition that has not been changed at all. The movie that basically gave birth to the found footage genre was *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). It had an unknown cast of three actors who shot the film themselves with 16 mm cameras, following the orders of the directors and producers. The characters are students who want to make a documentary about the “Witch of Blair” (so again, a film within a film) so they interview people and then go out to the woods to find the witch’s house. It is a film which has its strength in the scary, paranoid atmosphere it creates. Many other movies copied *The Blair Witch Project* although most of them neglected the main point of the movie that it was not clear whether there was an actual “witch” or not. *Cloverfield* (2008) or *[Rec]* (2007) mixed the subjectivity and claustrophobia of POV shots with monster movie elements (the alien monsters in *Cloverfield*) or with zombies (*[Rec]* and its sequels) and of course there is *Paranormal Activity* (2007) and the exceptionally long line of sequels and prequels those are horror bit too close to home for many people (pun intended) and show just what can be expected if a ghost is unleashed in a suburban house. Now that I have managed to differentiate between different kinds of horror movies using POV shots, I will talk about the first two groups and I will try to understand

what effects can be achieved by their techniques. Those not particularly interested in the genre can take my words with a grain of salt as I opted to be subjective with the matter at hand.

For the sake of simplicity, I will start with *Maniac* like in the last paragraph. It is a remake of a 80s movie of the same name which I will not talk about since it there are no POV shots in it. It was a very conscious decision to make the new rendition new in every possible way, and shooting it almost entirely in POV was one means of this decision according to Franck Khalfoun, the director.¹ He said that this solution takes a special kind of suspense away - the suspense that is attached to other movies without POV that tend to follow the innocent victim. In typical slashers like *Scream* (1996) the victim and subsequently the audience can never know exactly where the killer will appear and what will happen; that creates a tension in these scenes that originates from our wishful thinking that innocent people cannot die in movies. This is definitely not the case with *Maniac*. Wood's character, Frank Zito, stalks and then scalps a woman in the very first seven minutes of the movie. We get familiar with his method long before the title screen. Later on in the film his pattern rarely changes; he picks beautiful woman at random on the streets and even on the Net. Interestingly - but not so surprisingly - he and Henry from *Henry: A Portrait of a Killer* share one thing common: one possible reason for their murderous rampage can be their relationship with their mother.

While they harbor different kinds of feelings for their mother, it is sure that Frank Zito has an Oedipus complex. He scalps the women he kills because his mother used to have beautiful, long brown hair that she combed often as we can see it in flashbacks. He puts the scalps on the heads of mannequins in his mannequin shop that belongs to his family. In fact, not only does he put the scalps on the top of the head, he also puts make-up on face of them and puts them in fashionable clothes. Despite his adoration for the woman anatomy, he is most definitely a virgin and reacts violently when one girl with whom he had a successful date starts to perform fellatio on him. He strangulates the young woman and starts talking to himself. "Why can't you leave me alone? (...) Can't I have just one without you getting in the way? Now look... look what you made me do!" These utterances of his can be understood later in the movie when he has flashbacks about his mother taking drugs and having sexual intercourse with men. These pictures are instantly followed by Frank looking into a mirror and perceiving himself to be a mannequin from the waist down. Most certainly he is disturbed by memories about his mother whenever he is stimulated sexually. He expresses regret and anger about killing a woman so he could make the memories go away. At another occasion,

Frank ties up an older woman who previously talked to him condescendingly about his mannequins, and, while he initially does not explicitly say the word “mother”, he talks to her like she was her. He says no one ever loved her like he did, not any of the men she slept with.

In this scene there is an interesting suggestion about Frank’s true intentions and this is one of the reasons why the POV adds more to the story. As I have already said, in most slashers we do not know where the killer is. Furthermore, the killer’s face is hidden from our sight in many of these movies. The famous ghost mask of *Scream*, the mask made out of human skin in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, the hockey mask of Jason Voorhees in *Friday the 13th* all serve the same purpose. It conceals their identities whereby they become strange and often somewhat superhuman to the viewer and the victim; and at the same time we will not be able to tell where they look, what they think and what emotions do they have (that is, if such a killer with sociopathic tendencies can emote). However in *Maniac* we do know where Frank looks all the time. We know how often he reminisces about his mother. We know that he struggles with himself at times and is disgusted by his “work”. In the scene with the older woman when he talks about how lonely he always felt without his mother who was out entertaining men, he does not talk to the woman’s face. He looks at the sadistically tied, naked figure lying on her stomach on the bed; he caresses her skin with a knife first then he cuts her back two times. While there is no denying that the whole scene and what comes after it itself is gruesome and appalling, the idea seems to be a clear-cut one: this man is far beyond help. There is a chance of redemption before this point that is connected to the exhibition with the French girl, Anna. Frank tries to take medication to suppress his urges. Anna is the only character whose body we never get objectifying or naked shots of. He looks into her face in all of her scenes and is able to deceive her into thinking that he is friendly. But the message of the scene that ends with Frank scalping the old woman and ordering her to stay home tonight seems to be that Frank will absolutely never treat a woman any better than an object. He tends to look at the exposed female body excessively and he refers to women like “his” property. These might be signs of parts of him being stuck in childhood; indeed there are scenes in which, after faced with some form of sexuality, he is portrayed by his child self. He does not allow female dominance as it instantly throws him back in his childhood when he could not help but watch his mother do whatever she wanted. When Anna realizes he is a killer and, after much resistance, she is ultimately fatally wounded by a car crash, he shows just how selfish and deluded he is when he does not think about calling an ambulance at all and blames Anna for her earlier, scared behavior.

What I arguing for is that the POV shot requires much more than the willing “suspension of disbelief”. We cannot help watching, in fact, we facilitate killings by watching. Our innocence is gone the instant we start *looking*. And if we watch it all to the ending, it is all the worse because in case of the *Maniac*, we (well, Frank, but we *are* Frank, see) get our long deserved punishment. Frank’s face is torn apart by the girls he has killed before; of course it is only a rather elaborate hallucination of his, but he dies nonetheless because of earlier wounds. The gashes on his face reveal a mannequin’s head in his hallucination. The protagonist of *Maniac* is empty; he is devoid of emotion and sincere affection for others. But the mannequin allegory is a pliable one. How about considering that the audience of this movie is a voyeuristic, deeply curious crowd that watches on, no matter what happens? They are there to watch unsuspecting victims come and go; much like mannequins in a store.

As there is an interesting moral question of performing voyeurism from the viewer’s part, a movie like *Maniac* is a unique chance for a makeshift self-exploration. There are a number of cruel and/or bloody scenes in it, almost all of them committed against the weaker sex. These scenes do not come out of the blue - they are preceded by long minutes of stalking or a more or less obvious reason can be named for them (like with the old woman who insulted Frank). Since we are given a few clues and reasons like the flashbacks about the mother, we understand the character more and more. But are we allowed to have sympathy for him after the credits? The very last scene is of his brutal and (in reality) lonely death - can we condemn a miserable creature like Frank Zito, especially after having spent one hour and a half in his mind? It is a tricky question because no other character - except maybe Anna - is as detailed as he is, so we cannot be connected to them. Sure, we do pity them and sometimes root for them to survive, but then again - they have only a few minutes on the screen, whereas Frank is us. It might sounds trivial but it depends on the personality of the viewer how well they can react to the fact that a protagonist is (probably) completely the opposite of them. But let us take another example from another movie to see just how mixed feelings about such protagonists and their actions get.

In *Henry: A Portrait of a Killer*, there are not many POV shots, actually there are two but they are important as they delve deeper into the characters’ relations with each other and also if they are watched by themselves, they summarize the characters and the overall tone of the movie greatly (perhaps they resemble a cinema vérité-style more since the camera is acknowledged). I wish to talk about the scene which we see on a TV in the movie - so, a

“mise en abyme” since it is a footage previously made by two main characters, Henry and Otis those watch it together with us. What can be seen are the sexual molestation of a woman and the killing of her and her family of three in their own home. Since Henry is the one who made the footage with a camcorder we can only see him in a mirror and for the most part, we watch how Otis gropes a woman. In Isabel Cristina Pinedo’s book, “Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing”², the author shares her discovery that many of her friends (four, to be exact), straight or lesbian, experienced that they felt sexually aroused by the scene (p. 103). Of course arousal was only one of their mixed emotions (the others being mostly those of horror and disgust) but it is such an interesting fact that it is one of the rare POV shots of the film that caused it. While there is no direct evidence that the point-of-view camera especially added to the effect, I tend to think it did influence the reception of the scene. Since we know that it is a footage watched on TV by the characters, we instantly realize that the victims’ situation is hopeless and they are already dead. Actually ‘hopeless’ is a keyword for this scene. Not even the young son of the couple who arrives in the middle of the scene can escape his fate. The woman is hopelessly sized by Otis and cannot stop him touching her body. Her screaming and pleas, the exposure of the female body, the merciless murders together with the shakiness of the camera create a scene resembling a snuff movie. The scene and the next one showing Henry and Otis watching it corrupt the familiarity of homemade videos, for example when Otis grabs the already dead woman’s arm, waves it around and says hi to the camera in a feminine, high pitched way. The total disrespect of the two men for the female body by fact that Henry is watching, taping and supporting it with yelling Otis instructions from behind his camera creates a hopeless feeling in the viewer. A taboo is clearly broken in this scene. What purpose does this serve? I would say that this scene (and again, the fact that Henry and Otis are shown watching it safely) is a mockery of the fact that killers like Henry and Otis can escape getting caught even though they have clear evidence of their crimes. The invasion of a peaceful home is only the start; the real horror is that the footage is just another addition to a private collection of two killers. Another aspect is that Henry does not take any particular interest in the woman. He is unlike Frank in the sense that does not take anything from his victim (that is, except their lives); he does not collect scalps and he does not care if the victim is beautiful or not. He does not participate in the molestation either; he just shouts orders to Otis but is able to realize the danger of the situation when the young son arrives. He has a more simple-minded approach than Frank; he just came to kill. Otis is also a pervert without discrimination and without any kind of moral compass as he also attempts to molest his own sister and a young man at various points of the

movie. Maybe this kind of barbaric simplicity, together with the fact that the footage seems more realistic because of the shakiness and imperfectness of quality are the key to understand why some women experienced arousal while watching.

My point is that a point-of-view camera in horror movies inescapably brings the characters and actions closer to the viewer. Sure, in fake documentaries like *Cloverfield* it seems a pretty impractical concept since the necessity of filming oneself run or climb a building while being chased by a monster is at best questionable. But with movies like *Maniac* where the claustrophobe closeness to a murderer adds to the tension, or with *Henry* where a certain level of self-reflexivity and a complex reaction is evoked in the viewer, I would say it is not just a tired cliché it is regarded nowadays. Naturally, it remains a “treat” for a special kind of audience - but let’s face it: being mainstream can be such a dead bore.

Works cited

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