

## A Scene at the 'Movies'

BEN BREWSTER

She stole noiselessly down the broad staircase ... and noiselessly approached the door of the big room where she had left her father. ... Nobody saw her, nobody heard her, and she had a moment to gaze unobserved at the scene before her. It was like a scene at the 'movies', with all those books, and the piano, and the comfortable chairs, and the big portrait hanging over the fireplace, and the pretty lady behind the steaming tea-kettle, and the dog and the boys. ... Only it was real! There were real bindings on the books, real reading in them, there was real tea in the teapot. The people were real, and their feelings for each other were real, too. She, standing on the outside, was the only unreal thing in this home scene. She looked at her father. Suddenly the room faded, disappeared, and a close-up of his face dawned on the screen before her, as it were. Why, her father was gazing at the lady behind the tea-kettle, as if – as if! – Laurel had seen too many close-ups of faces not to recognise that look! She drew in her breath sharply. It flashed over Laurel that perhaps this man wasn't really her father after all! She stirred, moved a foot: Mrs Morrison glanced over her shoulder. 'Oh! come here Laurel,' she exclaimed at the sight of her, and stretched out her arm, and kept it stretched out until Laurel had stepped within its circle.<sup>1</sup>

In this passage from a popular novel first published in 1923, the cinema is functioning as a metaphor for a kind of experience, or rather as the vehicle for a kind of phantasy. It is invoked for the segregation of the audience and the screen, the division between a place 'down here' outside, from which one can watch unobserved, and a place 'up there' inside where what one sees is fictional, obviously, and yet seemingly more real than what is down here: Laurel Dallas outside the door is the 'only unreal thing in this home scene'. The segregation involves a reversal of the opposition between reality and illusion, and the projection of the spectator into the scene. And the novel goes on to move Laurel (despite her pangs of conscience: 'How could she – oh how could she have become a part of the picture on the screen, while her mother was still in the audience, out there, in the dark, looking on')<sup>2</sup> decisively into the world of Helen Morrison, shifting its point of identification to Laurel's mother Stella Dallas, who abolishes herself as visible to her daughter so as to be able to contemplate her in that world. Near the end, Stella out in the dark streets sees Laurel looking towards her from the lighted window of the Morrisons' house, but 'Laurel didn't know it. Laurel had no idea that her mother's eyes were in the depth of the mirror she had gazed into, at her own reflection'.<sup>3</sup> (The scene is faithfully

reproduced in the 1925 film version of the novel. The 1937 version, far more uneasy about the phantasy, locates the cinema itself as one of its sources.)

What was the cinema, so that by 1923 it could provide such a metaphor? Fifteen years earlier, such a cinema did not exist. It is a specifically English usage that makes the same term, the name for the movie house and for the whole institution of the production, distribution and exhibition of films (*Stella Dallas*, being American, uses 'movies'). But it is appropriate to the institution we know, so appropriate that we read it back into the whole history of the invention and utilisation of moving pictures. But the movie house as the apparent centre of moving picture-related activity only emerges in the decade after 1905; only then is there a hierarchisation of the experience of moving pictures into the cinematic (primary) and the non-cinematic (peripheral). Before this decade there is no such division – apparatuses for the reproduction of an illusion of movement are integrated into a whole series of other practices, of science, education, religion and entertainment. There are a few specialised film-show houses, but films are shown in vaudeville, music-hall or *caf' conc'* programmes, in fairground booths, in peep shows, in church halls, accompanying popular lectures, and so on. Even as entertainment, they constitute one among a variety of attractions.

After 1905, however, marked most spectacularly by the nickelodeon boom in the USA, specialised houses devoted exclusively or principally to the viewing of films appear and are integrated more and more into a national and international network, containing its own hierarchy of first-, second- and nth-run houses, seat prices, publicity channels, fan magazines, press criticism, etc., which is the cinema we know, the 'movies' Laurel can refer to so casually. Of course, all sorts of other uses of moving pictures continue – blue movies, educational films, films for religious use, scientific films, commercial films; but they are not seen in movie houses (except for a few rare occasions when they obtain the accolade of being real cinema, as with the transfer of some training films for the armed forces into the cinema during the Second World War), so they are not cinema, just a kind of poor relation. Correspondingly, activities inside the movie house are hierarchised under the film – stage interludes, sing-songs, Brenograph displays, in the auditorium; coffee, dinner, even steam baths in the building. And the film is hierarchised – main film, newsreel, travelogue, later A and B feature and high and low genres. In one sense this cinema is just as heterogeneous as the pre-cinematic uses of film were, but the heterogeneity is now held in a more or less peripheral location under the very specialised use of film described by Laurel in the universal form of 'a scene at the "movies"'. And the audiences, too, with all their differences of class, income, education, culture and nationality, consume a single product in a social and geographical hierarchy measured by the interval between release date and their viewing.

But what about the combination of exclusion and projection that characterise that 'scene'? The movies are a form of visual entertainment – pleasure is obtained from what is seen up on the screen. However, for the curious reversal of reality and unreality noted by Laurel, more is required – the articulation of the look from spectator to screen with the looks from character to

object and character on the screen. This is the field of what are known as point-of-view structures.

Films had been using point-of-view structures of the type analysed by Edward Branigan<sup>4</sup> for a long time before *Stella Dallas* was published. In the POV structure we see somebody see, then we see what they see from somewhere approaching their viewpoint (less commonly it is the other way round); vision is marked in the first of these shots, and often in the second, too. The simplest form of this is a type of insert. The scene with insert(s) is probably the earliest form of cutting within the scene; in it, some detail of the scene presented in long shot is shown in a 'magnified view' – not necessarily what would now be called a close-up, but a less inclusive camera set-up than the main scene. In *Falsely Accused* we are given magnified views of bank-notes, a key being pressed into wax, and so on;<sup>5</sup> in *Mary Jane's Mishap* we have closer shots of the heroine's face. These are taken from the same angle as the main shots, but with a less inclusive view. They do not represent any fictional character's view, they are there for the audience. Even in *The Gay Shoe Clerk*, where what we see in the magnified view (the heroine lifting her skirts for the shoe clerk to see her underwear) is undoubtedly the object of a look, it is still taken from the side, not from the clerk's own viewpoint.

In the true POV pattern, however, the second shot purports to be (and, more rarely, actually is) photographed from the place where the looking character is fictionally located. In *Grandma's Reading Glass* we see a boy with a magnifying glass looking through it at a newspaper, a watch, a bird in a cage, his grandmother's eye, a kitten, and these shots alternate with magnified views in a black circular mask (representing the glass and the look) of the print of the newspaper, the watch mechanism, the bird, the eye, the kitten's head. In *As Seen Through a Telescope* a peeping Tom with a telescope spies on a young man tying a girl cyclist's shoe-lace, but the view, much the same as that in *The Gay Shoe Clerk*, is now in a circular mask and represents the peeping Tom's point of view.<sup>6</sup>

POV here is, as I say, a special case of the magnified insert. But it would be wrong to see it as a development from the simple insert, leading on to more sophisticated uses of POV in later films. On the contrary, if anything the development is the other way round. In *Grandma's Reading Glass*, the POV structure is the pleasure point of the film, its attraction – to make the break in continuity implicit in a cut within one represented space, the cut has to be made into the end of the film, not its means; in *As Seen Through a Telescope* (and many other films such as *Ce que l'on voit de mon sixième* and *A Search for Evidence*), the structure is serving a simple pornographic narrative, the voyeuristic pleasure in the extra vision still explicitly thematised; in *The Gay Shoe Clerk* the pornographic insert is no longer a strict POV shot; in *Falsely Accused*, conveying straightforward narrative information has become the function of the insert, which function survives as the main role for the insert (and the cut within the same interior space) until the early 1910s (the other role, more especially in comedies, is the complicit closer shot of a character winking or grinning at the audience, as in *Mary Jane's Mishap* and many others).

This pattern, from pure spectacle via pornography to simple narra-

tive, is a common one for the introduction of filmic devices, and the association of POV with the first two stages in the introduction of the insert suggests that POV begins as a primitive rather than as a sophisticated use of cutting. Even when a narrative hinges on what a character sees, this will often be conveyed without POV structures, even if a falsification of the diegetic space is implied: in *The Voice of the Child* a character is shown looking down at a picture and there follows a magnified insert of him holding the picture up in front of him to the camera so the audience can see what, in the fiction, he is supposed to be seeing.<sup>7</sup> By this time, of course, spatially more adventurous directors than Griffith were using POV structures where their narratives gave them the opportunity in much the way that later became standard – for example, in *A Friendly Marriage*, where the wife sees her husband and the vicar's daughter apparently lovers. But this 'reintroduction' of POV seems independent of and secondary to another sense of point of view in film narratives much more significant for the experience of segregation and projection described by Laurel Dallas. This is the sense in which changes of viewpoint not necessarily involving true POV make possible hierarchies of relative knowledge for characters and spectators.

A number of early films exploit the change in what can be seen produced by shifting the camera through 180 degrees. In *Ladies' Skirts Nailed to a Fence*, the first shot shows two ladies gossiping by a fence, the second, from the 'other side' of the fence (in fact the film-makers, with what seems now a misplaced confidence in the Kuleshov effect, use the same camera set-up and simply move the characters round to the other side of the fence), shows two young men creep up, pull the ends of their skirts through the fence and nail them to it, and the third, back on the 'original side', shows the ladies struggling to escape. This really hardly differs in its narrative effect from the gardener's turned back in *L'Arroseur arrosé*, which of course consists of a single shot.

*The Other Side of the Hedge* uses a two-shot pattern round a hedge not unlike the three-shot one in *Ladies' Skirts*, but to greater effect. In shot one, a courting couple sitting in front of a hedge are kept apart by a chaperone. The chaperone settles down for a nap between them. The couple then disappear behind the hedge, but the spectators, and the chaperone when she wakes momentarily and looks anxiously for her charges, can see their hats sticking up over the hedge a decent distance apart. Shot two is the 180-degree shot from the other side of the hedge: the hats, the spectator now sees, are attached to sticks and the couple are kissing in between them. The gap between the image given in one shot, and the truth given in the second, a truth denied the censorious chaperone, creates an irony out of the change in viewpoint. (It is interesting that two out of three contemporary accounts of this film – in *Biography Bulletin*, no. 38, 1904, and *The Optical Lantern and Kinematograph Journal*, 1905, as opposed to the manufacturers' 1906 'Hepwix' Catalogue entry – cannot describe it properly, because they cannot separate a description of the shots from a version of the story being told, when the point of the film is the eventually resolved discrepancy between them; this failure suggests an important threshold in the development of film narration.) On the other hand, neither shot is a true POV shot. In the first, although we see no more of the other side of the hedge than the

chaperone, we see more than she does in that we see her. In the second, we are put into complicity with the couple who are assumed to know what we have seen, that the chaperone has been duped.

This kind of simple irony of differing viewpoints held together by narrative positioning can of course be linked to true POV. In *A Friendly Marriage*, the wife sees the husband and vicar's daughter apparently lovers, whereas we already know that the husband loves the wife and is secretly earning a living, with secretarial help from the vicar's daughter; but the irony is resolved for the characters in the next shot, when the wife accuses him and he explains. More is at stake here than a mere wifely misunderstanding (as sexuality enters this Platonic marriage, money and initiative in it shift from the wife to the husband), but the discrepancy between characters' and spectator's knowledge is only incidental to the narrative structure as a whole.

Narratives entirely constructed around these discrepancies are in fact to be found in the films Griffith made for Biograph between 1909 and 1912, despite the consistent refusal of POV structures in these films, and their reluctance to cut within the same space, especially in interiors. *The Drive for a Life* has one non-POV insert of an action and one insert of a letter, *Gold Is Not All* one; otherwise they consist of one-shot scenes and ordinary or alternating sequences. Yet both depend on hierarchies of relative knowledge and deception.

In *The Drive for a Life*, a man abandons his mistress in order to marry a respectable girl. (The *Biograph Bulletin*, no. 233, 1909, insists the former relationship is completely innocent and the 'mistress' French and a widow into the bargain, but the titles leave the precise relationships so vague as to make mistress the most obvious reading; moreover, it provides a better motivation for her subsequent actions and more powerful identification with her.) After he has said goodbye, the ex-mistress goes out on an errand, riding in a horse-cab. Meanwhile the man is showing off his motor car to his new fiancée. The two routes intersect, and the ex-mistress in her cab sees the couple in the car; but they do not see her. Driven into a jealous rage by this sight, she puts poison in some sweets (insert of this) and sends them with a forged covering note by special messenger to the fiancée. The man arrives at her house to reclaim his love-letters, discovers what she has done, and races in his car to arrive in the nick of time to prevent the fiancée eating the poisoned sweets.

The switchback that ends the film, between shots of the speeding car and the obstacles to its arrival on the one hand, and shots of the delivery, unwrapping and preparation for eating of the sweets on the other, is the device for which Griffith is most famous (although he probably did not invent it), so it is worth emphasising that it too depends for its suspense on the discrepancy of knowledge between the spectator and the fiancée receiving, opening and preparing to eat the sweets supposedly sent by her lover. But more interesting for my purposes in the scene where the ex-mistress oversees the man with his new fiancée. It is filmed in one shot from the back of an unseen car travelling in front of the chauffeur-driven car in the back seat of which the man and his fiancée are seated. After a while, the cab enters left from a side road and drives along behind the couple's car. Finally the couple's car leaves frame right, and the

mistress orders the cab to turn back the way it had come. The murderous jealousy which constitutes the narrative is set up in this one complex shot, through the spectator's sharing in the greater knowledge of the ex-mistress and recognition of the vulnerable ignorance of the couple.

*Gold Is Not All* adds a third layer to these two. It tells the parallel stories of two couples, a poor couple and a rich couple. They court and marry more or less simultaneously and both couples have children. The only direct link between them, apart from living in the same neighbourhood, is that the poor girl does the rich couple's laundry. The narrative alternates between the two stories, and we learn, not surprisingly, that one couple is poor but happy, the other rich but unhappy. But the symmetry between the two couples is deceptive: in fact the spaces they occupy are segregated into an inside, occupied by the rich couple, and an outside, occupied by the poor couple. This is marked not only by the fact that, whereas the rich couple's life takes place largely in interiors (sets), the poor couple are never seen inside their humble cottage; but also, and more significantly, by the fact that the rich couple live on an estate bounded by a wall. The key scene in the film, while both couples are courting, is filmed looking along this wall, with the street outside on the left and the park inside on the right. Both couples appear, initially each couple absorbed in itself. Then the poor couple see the rich couple over the wall and gaze at them in envy. The rich couple, oblivious, leave right, the poor couple shake their heads in sad resignation and leave left. This asymmetry of awareness is repeated throughout the film. Even in their own space, the poor cast many a backward glance towards the rich estate. The rich couple, on the other hand, are oblivious of the poor, until they intrude directly on them, when they (the rich) behave with embarrassed and uncomprehending condescension (in the first scene the poor girl picks up the handkerchief the rich girl has dropped and hands it to her; during the climactic party at the rich house, the poor girl arrives with the laundry at the wrong door and has to be hurriedly redirected). But the narrative (and the titles) provide a third perspective: the rich are ignorant of the poor; the poor see the rich and envy them; the spectator knows rich and poor, and knows the poor do not realise how unhappy the rich really are. Inside and outside on the screen duplicate inside and outside in the movie house.

This is the structure of Laurel's 'scene at the "movies"'. Point of view, in the sense of narrative perspective, the measurement of the relative perceptions and knowledge of the characters by the development of the narrative, is here achieved without point-of-view shots. This is done by finding narrative actions and settings where the look and its object can be staged in one shot, or by dividing the narrative space into contrasting sections linked by much more generalised or even metaphorical looks (when the poor heroine of *Gold Is Not All* looks back over her shoulder 'at' the rich estate as she stands by the door of her cottage, it is not what she physically sees that concerns the narrative or the spectator). Notoriously, Griffith did not develop or ever really acclimatise himself to the 'just-off-the-eyeline-shot-reverse-shot' system which became the 'classical' method of scene editing by the end of the First World War. *True Heart Susie*, which is an extension of the pyramid of knowledge of *Gold Is Not All* to

feature length (Susie knows more than William, but the spectator knows that and what she knows, and also what neither knows), still prefers long shots and 'concertina' cut-ins to close-ups from the same angle. Early examples of that system I have seen – *The Loafer*, *His Last Fight*, *The Bank Burglar's Fate* – all use it in the context of fights, whereas the 'point-of-view' structure of the Griffith films is essentially passive (although it can give rise to subsequent aggression – the poisoned sweets). Although I cannot trace the process in detail, it seems clear that when the 'classical' system came to incorporate less aggressive contexts, it absorbed the Griffithian point-of-view structure, and combined together technical and narrative point of view.

One final characteristic of the establishment of this cinema: what might be called the extra twist of fictionality it brought with it. Many American films made before 1910 involve a plot where a worker hero (usually a foreman rather than a simple workman) is in conflict, usually over his girlfriend or wife, sometimes herself a worker, with another higher-ranking blackguardly employee – a supervisor (e.g. *The Mill Girl*, *The Paymaster*). The foreman displaces the supervisor in the mill-girl's affections, or rescues her from his unwelcome attentions, and is then the victim of some conspiracy on the supervisor's part, which is finally uncovered, the happy couple are united and the villain punished – or the girl is unjustly suspected of infidelity with a (less blackguardly) supervisor, leading to friction between the men, finally resolved by the opportunity for selfless heroism presented by an accident at work (*The Tunnel Workers*). The sets in these films are typically sketchy functional ones, providing a space for the action and painted décor indicating the milieu; but exteriors and a few interiors are filmed in 'real' surroundings – *The Paymaster* in a real (though disused) New England mill, *The Tunnel Workers*, spectacularly, at the top of the shafts of the works for the Pennsylvania Tunnel from New York City to Long Island. Thus the films can be said to have a naive realism: made for the nickelodeon market when it was already becoming reasonably unified but was still confined to a lower-middle- and working-class clientèle, they reflect that milieu in the most direct possible way, confining themselves largely to it and filming directly in its real surroundings.

The films of the early 1910s I have been principally discussing have changed this. Their heroes and heroines are from the respectable, even rich middle class, and the locations and especially the sets are chosen, designed and furnished to convey luxury and fashion. Even more strikingly, the poor have become a picture-book poor, living a carefree life in little cottages with roses round the porch. A shift in the centre of the fiction from the presentation of scenes to the presentation of differing character perspectives on scenes, and a displacement of point of view from a mechanism for articulating diegetic space to one for articulating characters' knowledge, go with a move from the direct photography of real environments to the presentation of a world much more penetrated by phantasy. The American cinema, not yet in Hollywood (although *Gold Is Not All* was filmed in Pasadena), is becoming a dream factory. The remark is not made either in a spirit of civically responsible condemnation, or one of surrealist celebration – the examples hardly suit either response: the story of *The*

*Mill Girl* is no more socially responsible than that of *Gold Is Not All*, and by 1925 the latter seemed embarrassingly naive to Linda Arvidson, who played the poor girl in it<sup>8</sup> – but in order to re-emphasise the cinematicity of the 'scene at the "movies"' that, by 1923, could be reappropriated by popular literature.

#### Notes

This chapter was first published as an article in *Screen* vol. 23 no. 2, July/August 1982, and is reprinted here with the addition of a note correcting a mis-description of *The Voice of a Child*.

1. Olive Higgins Prouty, *Stella Dallas* (New York: Paperback Library, 1967), pp. 38–9.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 251.
4. Edward Branigan, 'Formal permutations of the point-of-view shot', *Screen*, vol. 16 no. 3, Autumn 1975, pp. 54–64.
5. For a still, see Barry Salt, 'Film Form 1900–1906', *Sight & Sound*, Summer 1978.
6. For a still, see p. 36 above.
7. I now realise this is a partial mis-description, and there is no falsification of the space involved. In the main scene, the office typist gives the clerk, her boyfriend, a picture. He looks at the picture and gestures to the effect 'It's you.' In the cut-in, we see first the back of the picture as he is looking at the front. Inscribed on it are the words 'To my sweetheart'. He then turns it round to read the message on the back, and now we see the picture of the typist on the front. Thus, the shot never purports to be a POV shot. It is also worth mentioning that these are secondary characters whose motivations are of no concern to the narrative; the point of the shot is to establish the inscribed photograph, which the false friend will later slip into the coat pocket of the boss of these two characters, the hero of the story, so that it will be found by his wife and interpreted as a sign of infidelity.
8. See Mrs D. W. Griffith (Linda Arvidson), *When the Movies Were Young* (New York: Dutton & Co., 1925), p. 147.