Chapter 5

The Look: From Film to Novel

An Essay in Comparative Narratology

François Jost

Born at the beginning of the twentieth century, the relations between novel and film have often been thought of in hierarchical terms. To the extent that filmic adaptations of novels are much more frequent that novelistic adaptations of films (commonly called "novelizations"), scholars tend to reflect more on the transformation of written texts into images than on the converse transformation. There is certainly much to learn from comparing a given novel with its filmic adaptation, both in ideological and narrative terms. But what I am proposing here is something quite different. Here, it will not be a question of studying film–novel relations, but rather cinema–literature relations. I will not be discussing the relation between two specific texts; rather, I will practice a kind of shuttle between cinema and novel in order to better comprehend a narrative category which functions equally well for the analysis of written as well as filmic narrative. In sum, it will be a question of what I call "comparative narratology." But how can we define such a field? To put it concisely, comparative narratology is less a matter of pointing up resemblances or differences between two semiotic systems than of deploying the cinema–literature shuttle in order to forge more precise and productive concepts.

Our itinerary will take us from what Metz calls a "universal code" – that is, a code found in multiple semiotic systems; for example, a narrative which could be literary, cinematic, or sung – to more restricted codes, concretely linked to the specificities of the materials. For comparative narratology, transcodification will be a heuristic method for understanding a certain concept of narrative. In this back and forth, we will begin with literature in order to find the origin of the concept, then move to the cinema to clarify it, and finally return to literature.

The Theory of Literature and Vision: The Metaphor of the Camera

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This chapter is oriented around the concept of what literary theorists call "point of view," or, following Genette, "focalization." It is curious that this notion, which evokes the look or the gaze, was first formulated by *literary* theory, since within the novelistic field, vision per se does not exist; it is only a transcription, the rough equivalent of a physical phenomenon, more metaphoric than actual.

Even in cases where a description is introduced by a verb of perception, such as "see," "observe," or "regard," the equivalence between a series of words and the described referent will always be a result of convention, of an implicit contract of transcodification in which the author participates. The expression of the thought or intellectual point of view of a character, meanwhile, is more simple and direct, since then it is a matter only of exchanging the verbal for the verbal – if we put aside for the moment the case of non-verbalized psychic movements translated or transposed by authors such as Joyce or Sarraute. What is called "point of view" thus covers two very different phenomena: on the one hand, perceiving, and on the other, thinking and knowing. Yet literary theorists generally use the same labels for the two activities: "vision," "point of view," and "focalization."

It is striking, then, that despite the purely conventional character of the gaze in the novel, literary theorists tend to look to the cinema to explain the functioning of vision in the novel. Thus we often read that the narrator of Camus' *L'Etranger* registers external events in the manner of a camera. As Lintvelt puts it, "the novelistic action is not perceived by one of the actors, but rather focalized, so to speak, by a camera."[1] But, for a film theorist, this use of the camera metaphor is shockingly imprecise. What does it mean to distinguish between actions perceived by an actor and actions perceived by a camera? In films, frequently enough, what is seen by the character is also what is shown by the camera. The idea of the camera's neutrality is also surprising, since both filmmakers and theorists often speak of the "subjective camera." Indeed, what is most bizarre is that literary theorists, who need the cinematic model in order to think through novelistic procedures, do not bother to study either the functions of the camera or the ways in which the look is constructed in film. For those theorists, the camera is first and foremost an apparatus for objectively registering the world, little more than a tool without any narrative function. It plays no active role in the representation; it merely copies reality without changing it. But no informed contemporary scholar still believes in the old dream of automatic filmic transparency formulated by Bazin.

The camera metaphor unfortunately also triggers a kind of sliding from the idea of vision to the idea of objectivity or impartiality. And this sliding, in its turn, transforms a simple perceptual attitude into a mental attitude. Perception and mental attitude are presumed to function together. Literary scholars assert, for example, that if in a novel one follows the events through a character's point of view (Genette's "internal focalization"), one should not see the character from outside, since it is impossible to be simultaneously

inside and outside the character. For example, in *La Chartreuse de Parme*, the description of the Battle of Waterloo is reduced to what the character Fabrice knows – i.e. very little – and he should not be described from the outside. Following the same logic, if one does not know a character's thoughts, they suggest, one should also not know his or her perceptions.

Indeed, a careful reading of Genette's *Figures III* reveals a sliding between the moment where Genette defines "focalization" and the moment, a few pages later, where he explains it. In the first instance, point of view is defined in cognitive terms, through equality or non-equality. For example, Genette claims that a narrative features internal focalization when "the narrator only says what that character knows." In this formulation, the knowledge of the narrator is equal to that of the character. Genette argues further that a narrative features external focalization when "the narrator says less than the character knows," a formulation where the knowledge of the character exceeds that of the narrator. He speaks further of "zero focalization," where the narrator knows more than all the characters, or, more precisely, reveals more than any one of the characters knows. Here the knowledge of the narrator exceeds that of the characters. A few pages later, however, Genette deploys perceptual criteria – vision – to define point of view. Genette speaks, for example, of the traveling carriage in *Madame Bovary*, "told from the point of view of an external witness." Genette also speaks of a scene in which the "witness is not personified but is only an impersonal observer," or again of a situation in which "internal focalization implies the disappearance of the character." This sliding from the cognitive to the perceptive reaches a kind of climax when Genette chooses, as his example of internal focalization, a film, *Rashomon* (1951), which actually shows characters externally, from the *outside*.[2]

Even more curiously, this same confusion between seeing and knowing is found even in the work of some very reputable film theorists. Thus Jean Mitry defines the "subjective camera" as follows: "The image is called subjective because it allows the spectator to occupy the place of the heroes, to see and feel like them."[3] Once again, perceptions and sensations have been conflated. Yet even the slightest reflection on the matter suggests that in the cinema the seen and the known do not always go hand in hand. What happens precisely, then, in that art for which point of view is a fundamental semiotic feature?

The Roles of the Camera in the Cinema: The Construction of the Look

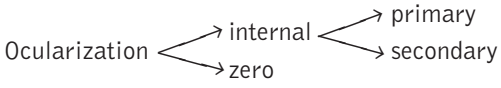
The cinema has two physical tracks – the image track and the sound track – so one easily imagines that film can simultaneously express what is seen – through the image track – and what is thought – through voice-over. The difference between seeing and feeling and knowing is almost a semiotic difference: it is possible to show someone or something and at the same time express something completely different through the voice.

In order to differentiate visual point of view, on the one hand, which once again is not a metaphor in the cinema but rather a narrative reality, and cognitive point of view on the other, I would propose the following terminology: *ocularization* has to do with the relation between what the camera shows and what the characters are presumed to be seeing; *focalization* designates the cognitive point of view adopted by the narrative, with the equalities or inequalities of knowledge expressed at their full strength. In a film, focalization is a complex product of what one sees, what the character is presumed to be seeing, what he or she is presumed to know, what he or she says, and so forth. Here I will restrict myself to the first problem, to wit the problem of determining the narrative value of what is shown by the camera, which I have referred to as ocularization.

Depending on the context, every photograph can be called objective or subjective. A photograph of a landscape can be related to the landscape itself (the referential function) or to the photographer (expressive function). That is why the same photographs are sometimes published as part of a report on a given country, and sometimes as part of a report on the work of a given photographer. And that is why any shot from any film can be transformed into a look simply by juxtaposing it with an image of someone looking. But how can we go beyond this "undecidability," this apparent neutrality? We get a glimpse of how in a small 1900 film, by the British filmmaker Hepworth, entitled *How it Feels to Be Run Over*. In the film, a horse-drawn carriage comes toward the camera and then moves off-screen, followed by an automobile, which also moves toward the camera, after which the screen goes black. White spots spread around the darkness, while we read the following words: "Oh! Mother – *will* – be pleased!"

In viewing this film, one at first has the impression that one is seeing an ordinary Lumière-style "view," a monstration, without any special twist. But then, when the automobile heads straight toward the spectators, their identification with the camera becomes more important than what is viewed. Finally, on reading the title "Oh, mother will be pleased!" one has the clear impression of having shared a particular look. In fact, catalogues from the period inform us that white spots against a black background were designed to signify the stars as seen by the unfortunate victim of an accident.

In order to interpret this shot, then, we have to situate it in relation to the imaginary axis of the camera-eye. Either one regards the image as being seen by specific eyes, in which case one assumes that those eyes belong to a character, or the status or the position of the camera becomes more important, in which case we attribute it to an entity external to the world portrayed, to what has been called the "grand imager." Or we can overlook the existence of this axis, in which case we have the famous illusion of transparency. These three possible attitudes in fact boil down to a binary choice: either a shot is anchored in the regard of an instance internal to the diegesis – what we have called "internal ocularization" – or it is not so anchored, and is therefore a case of "zero ocularization." We can chart this opposition in the following manner:



"Primary internal ocularization" may be defined by several configurations. In the first instance, it is marked in the signifier by the materiality of a body, whether immobile or not, or the presence of an eye which allows us, without relying on context, to identify a character not present in the image. It is a question of suggesting a regarding look without necessarily showing it. To this end, one constructs the image as an index, as a trace which allows spectators to establish an immediate link between what they see and the camera which has captured or reproduced the real, through the construction of an analogy with the spectator's own perception.

We find most of these configurations in the shot from *The Lady in the Lake* (1947) where Marlowe visits a man named Lavery: a slightly trembling forward tracking shot advances toward a sign on a door where we discover the name of the person being sought; another camera movement takes us from the sign to the hand pressing the buzzer, followed by another movement toward the name. Then the hand pushes open the door and sweeps over the house. We also discern the character's shadow.

Other criteria sometimes suggest the presence of a regarding look; for example, an unusually low angle or an out-of-focus background, or the deformation of the image in relation to what cinematic convention regards as normal in a given period (superimposed double images, out-of-focus effects) which suggest conditions such as drunkenness, strabismus, myopia, and so forth: for example, the road which becomes doubled during "Kaplan's" (Cary Grant) drunken ride in *North by Northwest* (1959); masking effects which suggest the (sometimes unnamed) presence of an observing eye (keyhole, binoculars, microscope). If masking effects, perceptual deformations, and the foregrounded presence of a part of the body almost invariably construct a character's point of view, the case of the shakily subjective tracking shot is more ambiguous. The shaking camera could signify the bodily experience of the person seeing, or could be merely an accident due to unfavorable shooting conditions which prevented a more stable image. The question is not always easy to answer since in semiotic terms nothing allows us to make an absolute distinction between a shot which simply elicits primary identification with the camera on the spectator's part, and a point-of-view shot linked to an unidentified character. With some films, it is possible to posit the difference, but in other cases we only know thanks to extrafilmic information concerning genre, period, mode of production. If the camera shakes in a big-budget Hollywood blockbuster, one can assume that it is not a question of technical ineptitude and that therefore the shaking implies an observing character. If the camera trembles in a 1960s' low-budget "direct cinema" militant documentary, on the other hand, one can assume that this stylistic "defect" has to do with the conditions of production as well as the "narrator" who "speaks cinema."

"Secondary internal ocularization" occurs when the subjective image is constructed through editing (as in shot/counter-shot); that is, through a contextualization of an image. Any image that is edited together with a shot of a person looking, within the rules of cinematic "syntax," will be "anchored" in the visual subjectivity of that person or character.

"Zero ocularization" occurs when the image is not seen by any entity within the diegesis. The "zero" here is not pejorative but technical; it simply signifies seen by no one,

"nobody's shot," or, as Eisenstein puts it: "the action which would be depicted without any author's relation to it (the subject) of any kind." In our modern terminology, we would say that this kind of ocularization has to do with the narrator; that is, the instance which seems to organize and execute both the representation and the story. But zero ocularization can be more or less marked: a normal angle seems transparent, while a bizarre or surprising angle more clearly unveils a narrating presence organizing the fiction. "Zero," then, simply means that it is not possible to assign an image to any specific gaze. Most shots of most films use zero ocularization, even in the case of characters or narrators telling their own stories in flashback.

Looking Relations in the Novel

Our little detour through the cinema has taught us the following. First, that seeing and knowing are two different things. A story can be limited to what a character knows (internal focalization) even while at the same time we see the character from outside (zero ocularization). The converse is also possible, as the case of Beckett's *Film* suggests. When a shot is in primary internal ocularization, we know less than the character – for example, we do not know his or her identity, as in the beginning of *Dark Passage* (D. Davies, 1947). The point is that in the novel as well, it is likely that the cognitive and the visual criteria do not always function together and in tandem; they can move in opposite directions.

Secondly, we have learned that the concept of ocularization or the determination of point of view assumes that it is possible to localize that point of view. When the positioning of the camera is not linked to the regard of a character within the diegesis, that positioning reveals the presence only of the cinematic narrator (zero ocularization). In the novel, then, it is likely that some moments allow us to identify an ocular position and others do not allow us to do so, and where we are not obliged to do so. Thirdly, we have learned that in the cinema there are semiotic criteria which enable us to posit with precision the relation between camera position and a character's (or the film's narrator's) point of view. And one suspects that we might also find in the novel some equivalent of this articulation of the narrative and the semiotic at the linguistic level.

With this in mind, let us examine an utterance such as the following: "Toward ten in the evening, the poker players began to show signs of fatigue." When Mieke Bal speaks of a "narrator-focalizer" and concludes that the word "signs" means "that the behavior of the characters may be seen and interpreted by a spectator . . . and that the narrative is obviously told by an extra-diegetic narrator and also focalized by an extra-diegetic focalizer" she fails to carry out the operations that I have been recommending here.[4] Although the word "signs" does imply exteriority in relation to the poker players, one cannot limit oneself to such imprecise approximations when it is a question of defining a "focalizer." Within the utterance, there is no indication of the virtual looking position.

And if the idea of ocularization is to have any conceptual value at all, only this criterion – the question of looking position – should operate, as we have seen in our detour through the cinema. Moreover, if one imagines the filmed version of this poker scene, it becomes quite clear that the camera could be placed in any number of "correct" positions: low angle, high angle, behind the players, in front of the players, and so forth. If you are outside the scene, it is a case of zero ocularization; which does not imply that the scene is observed by someone. In the case of this quotation, then, there is no point of view but only a narrator who tells the story, in the third person, and who is only implicitly present. The choice that confronts the writer, then, is whether he will emphasize the narrative action or choose to make the narrator more or less perceptible to the reader.

The fact that an image is seen by a spectator does not necessarily imply that it is oriented by a point of view in the diegesis. Distinctive indices and/or contextual information are necessary to say whether such an utterance moves toward a subjective intention. The example of cinema – where the look is definitely a fact of language – prods us into clarifying the question of novelistic point of view by articulating both narrative and semiotic criteria. Readers should try to determine, through and beyond the words, whether or not what they read is filtered through the eyes or through the ears. And just as one requires semiotic methods (concerning the material of expression) to analyze these questions in the cinema, one requires linguistics to analyse looking relations in the novel.

Let us examine, for example, the following utterances:

> But the noise of the high heels cannot be heard here. (from Robbe-Grillet's *Dans le labyrinthe*)

> Thus, on my right, the somber and silent image of death; and on my left, the decent bacchanalias of life. (Balzac's *Sarrasine*)

> Above the Hotel Recamier (far behind?) a crane stands out in the sky. (It was there yesterday, but I don't remember any longer having noticed it.) (from Georges Perec's *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu Parisien*)

> A luminous rectangle stands out against the wall, in the back and to the right, just in front of the staircase, and an illuminated zone from that point on . . . (Robbe-Grillet's *Dans le labyrinthe*)

In all four of these utterances, space is organized around a viewing position. The first example separates two spaces: inside and outside. The last three examples all lend a sense of laterality or depth to the described space, but the ocular position is not produced in the same way in the three cases. In the first example, the eminently deictic adverb "here" implicitly calls attention to what C. Kerbrat-Orecchioni calls a "locutor-observer."[5] (The

fact that the observer is an ear changes nothing.) In the case of the first sentence, "auricularization" is deduced in the same manner as ocularization, in the sense that it is a deictic subjectivity, that is, a subjectivity characterized by a spatio-temporal situation, that constructs the text. In the second sentence, it is the possessive adjective "my" that relativizes the spatial description in function of the narrator. In the third sentence, it is the parenthetical sentence that allows us to attribute the sentence to the narrator. In the fourth sentence, we need more contextual information to determine whether we should attribute description to a character or a narrator.

The first point to make about these examples is that the vectorization of perception is more easily determined than the anchorage of a look. It is no exaggeration to speak of a narratological "law:" the existence of ocularization precedes its identification. This observation is not surprising, furthermore, given the difficulties of localization in language. To resolve the question of attribution of a point of view in any given instance, we have to solve two problems. First, the question of orientation in space. If the word "here" necessarily points to a locutor, it is not the same with paradigmatic oppositions like "left" and "right" and "behind" and "in front of." Kerbrat-Orecchioni demonstrates that such words can be used in very different ways. To say that "X is to the right of Y" changes meaning depending on whether Y is oriented in a lateral sense or not. "Go sit to the left of the chair" refers to the side which is "my" left. "Sit to Pierre's left" means to sit at the left side of Pierre, not to my left. Moreover, some objects presuppose a given orientation. The tops and bottoms of a building are the same for everyone, independent of viewing position, whence the need for the parenthesis in statement 3 above.

Second, we need to solve the problems linked to displayed speech. The fourth utterance is difficult to interpret because "in the back" and "to the right" can be deictic or can have to do with the position of a character about whom one is speaking, since "it often happens that when the space is the one where evolves, not the subject of the enunciation but an actant of the utterance, that the relation of the localization is determined in function of S1, the place where the actant is supposed to be."[6] In that case, only a contextual analysis can allow us to determine positionality.

For the moment, we can bypass the problems relating to textual analysis. The list of textual indicators can be enriched through particular analyses. Be that as it may, linguistic reflection, based on a method culled from semiotic film analysis, allows us to offer a tripartite account of ocularization:

Primary internal ocularization occurs when spatial adverbs are deployed as deictics because we are sure that these adverbs bear on the one who is telling the story and on the one who is seeing the scene. As in the cinema, this configuration can be deduced from the signifying traces of the enunciation. Primary internal ocularization thus refers back to a first-person narrator, whereas in the cinema we can only affirm that it refers back to someone seeing the scene, but who is not necessarily telling it. In the cinema, there is no equivalency or solidarity between the observer and the speaker.

Secondary internal ocularization occurs when the description is anchored in the eyes of a character (once we have resolved the kinds of problems addressed above).

Zero ocularization is reserved for cases where the description is oriented in some way but without gaining meaning in relation either to the narrator or to the character. For example, when a painting is described in such a way that there is an orientation, that is, a specific attitude in relation to the painting, but without that attitude being ascribable to a specific narrator or character. In that case, the third-person utterance points to an implicit narrator, but not to a visual positioning. Zero ocularization in a novel is therefore closer to an *absence* of point of view, which is hardly surprising since point of view is not one of the inherent semiotic mechanisms of literature; it can therefore only be indirectly suggested or evoked.

Geographical ocularization, finally, characterizes those descriptions which do not point either to a narrator or to a character but rather to a kind of anonymous traveler of the kind one finds in touristic guidebooks or in Stendhal, with his famous definition of the novel as "a mirror traveling down a road."

Indeed, if literary theorists have often confused knowing and seeing, it is because the language uses the same words to express both attitudes, the cognitive and the perceptive. This process becomes manifest in the following utterance. "James Bond seems astonished." The sentence could either describe a deduction based on the visible appearance of the character or convey the idea that one does not really know the inner feelings of the character. Only the "detour" through cinema can definitively clarify this kind of situation. But the literary detour has also allowed us to bury a series of preconceived ideas from literary theory. First, in terms of the famous "objectivity of the camera." The notion of the "camera eye," often used by critics to evoke a neutral and objective description, is now revealed as a dangerous and baseless metaphor. Secondly, to speak of the looking position in a novel requires us to inquire into localization. In this sense, the concept of "focalizer" is more or less useless, since it adds nothing to the concept of "narrator." Third, the relationship between seeing and knowing is not obligatory. We can see a character *and* be inside his or her head. Ocularization does not always go hand in hand with focalization.

The semiotic materials of film and novel are not the same, and one cannot mechanically transfer concepts forged in one domain to another domain. But it is also useless to try to solve these problems through imprecise metaphors. If one has to define the point of view, which obviously has to do with the visual, it is important to look to those arts, such as cinema, which point concretely to an ocular position, as long as one takes into account the material differences of the two media. Thus transcodification is not only a prod for innovatory theoretical reflections but also a means for forging the more solid and rigorous concepts needed for comparative narratology.

Translated by Robert Stam

1 Jaap Lintvelt, *Essai de typologie narrative: le "point de vue"* (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1981), p. 79.
2 Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1972), pp. 206, 208, 209.
3 Jean Mitry, *Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma* (Paris: Editions Universitaires, 1965), vol. 2, p. 61.
4 Mieke Bal, "Narration and Focalization," *Poétique* 29 (1977), 121.
5 C. Kerbrat-Orecchioni, *Lénonciation* (Paris: Armand Colin), p. 49.
6 Ibid., p. 106.