

To the Students: Developing Your Film Eyes

Some years ago, those of us working in the international office at our college sent a newly arrived Asian student to meet her host family—a welcoming, kind-hearted African American family who over the years had received students from many countries. The next day, the student came into our office in tears. She said she wanted a “real American family.”

A similar thing happened in an overseas program. An Anglo American male student studying for a semester in Paris was placed with a host family of Vietnamese origin. Having barely met them, he complained that they were “not really French” and asked to be reassigned. The parents in this family were French-speaking citizens of France and long-time Parisian residents, and their children were born in France.

What is happening here? What were the two students expecting? From their point of view (p.o.v.), they may have felt they were not getting the true American or French experience. What about the p.o.v. of the two host families? Did they see themselves as somehow inauthentic?

Do you think we should have allowed the two students to move? If so, what type of new host families should we have chosen? What could we have said to the original host families by way of explanation? What if, on the other hand, we had asked the students to stay? What could we have explained to them to help them understand our p.o.v.?

Let’s talk about p.o.v. Used in film, it refers in a narrow technical sense to the placement of the camera. Some scenes are shot from what seems to be no point of view at all—from a seemingly neutral or objective stance. The camera seems to function simply as a recorder, and we are like spectators looking into a scene as if it were happening before our own eyes in real life. Here the camera tries to be invisible.

Sometimes, however, we are thrust into the p.o.v. of a film character. This happens quite dramatically in point-of-view shots, when the camera is placed at the eye level of the character and gives the impression that we are looking through his or her eyes. An excellent

example is the scene in *Witness* (1985) where the eight-year-old Amish boy Benjamin is wandering through the Philadelphia Amtrak station. We see and hear things as he does. The camera moves at “child’s-eye level,” and we walk around as Benjamin does, taking things in from his p.o.v. So, when Benjamin becomes a witness to a crime, we do, too (Bone 1997, 88).

Flashbacks of the kind you will see in *The Joy Luck Club* (1993) are also an expression of point of view. When a particular character like the Chinese mother An-Mei flashes back to a childhood experience in China, we are receiving that experience through her memory—that is, through her p.o.v.—and thus we can better understand why she behaves as she does in the present. This type of p.o.v. gives information about a character’s psychological or emotional state.

Point of view in film is also used in a more general sense to refer to the particular angle or perspective from which part of the film, or the film as a whole, is being told. The movie *Smoke Signals* (1998), for example, is told from Native American points of view. We see the world through the eyes of the screenwriters, director, and main actors, all of whom are American Indians.

Everything in film—not only the camera position, but also the composition, editing, sound, and so on—influences p.o.v. This quotation from Michael Hilger’s *The American Indian in Film* (1986) explains how film techniques in traditional westerns are used to bias viewers against Indians:

The long shot, which emphasizes the setting, often stresses the landscape of the West, with either hostile Indians hiding or threatening to attack, or conquered Indians vanishing into the horizon in long processions. High angle shots, in which the audience looks down on the subject, may suggest the vulnerability of the whites about to be ambushed by Indians. Low angle shots . . . can emphasize the threat of the Indian lurking above his victims or [else] the power of the hero. (4)

Hilger further explains how editing—especially cross-cutting between pursuers and pursued (rapidly alternating the shots of the two groups)—heightens fear of the threatening Indians. **Composition**, the term for how actors and objects are placed within the camera frame, generally situates (white) heroes in positions that are higher, more central, or more in the foreground, reinforcing the idea that they are superior. Sound, such as menacing drums and rescuing bugle

calls, also sends clear messages to the audience about who the enemies and the heroes are.

Though we will not be focusing in this book on the technical aspects of filmmaking, we will ask you to look at films in new ways, becoming aware of how certain techniques affect p.o.v. Most of you have undoubtedly grown up with movies and television, and you already possess a rich store of experiences with visual media. But you may be used to viewing feature films primarily as entertainment. This is not to say that we are denying the value of entertainment. We are both great fans of the films discussed in this book, and we hope you will enjoy them as much as we do. But we also want you to develop a new set of film eyes and ears. They need to be skeptical, questioning, and always alert to p.o.v.

Read and print out the two-part article (beginning and advanced) “Film Viewing: How to Watch Movies Intelligently and Critically” at www.filmsite.org/filmterms.html, and keep it available for easy reference. It gives you great tips—such as how to use freeze-frames to understand composition and what to look for in the final credits of a film. As you read the article, underline and make mental notes of terms that are new to you. Familiarize yourself now with the basic language of cinematography (e.g., types of shots, lenses, and camera angles) and with editing techniques (e.g., fade-ins, fade-outs, and dissolves), and be able to describe the responsibilities of personnel such as the director, producer, and behind-the-scenes technicians. When you have questions later in the course, you can refer to the excellent glossary on this site and at <http://www.imdb.com/Glossary>. In each chapter of your textbook, the **Sneak Preview** sections will help you build on your knowledge.

As you develop your film eyes, you should find that they enable you to look at other forms of media differently as well. You’ll begin to see how everything we read, watch, and hear in our media-filled world is presented from a particular point of view. Even relatively “objective” media forms such as documentary films and *New York Times* articles are still to be understood as interpretations. Every filmmaker and journalist has a unique slant, a personal take on the material. One documentary filmmaker may, for example, tell a story about the successes deaf students experience at Gallaudet University, while another may present a story on the failures. While both stories may be true, they leave us with entirely different impressions. To give a second example, if you have seen any of Michael Moore’s documentaries—like *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004)—you know that he makes his p.o.v. quite obvious from beginning to end. Other directors of documentaries may

not be this open about where they stand, or they may not take as extreme of a stance as Moore, but they nonetheless all have their own perspectives that are given expression in their films.

What about your p.o.v.? In each chapter of the book, you will be asked to articulate your views verbally and in writing. Please keep all of your written work in your film notebook. (We suggest that you use a three-ring binder and that you date your entries.) Many of our students have found that their film notebook has become a valuable record of the class, including in some cases poetry, sketches, and photographs. In addition to using and creating a film notebook, you'll want to write in, and "converse with" this textbook. Please get in the habit of marking up or annotating all the readings—making comments in the margins, underlining, and writing notes and questions. This will help you to become an active reader and to remember what you learn.

If you find it difficult at first to express yourself, know that you are not expected to have final opinions at this stage. You are exploring and discovering your own views and those of others. Along the way you may feel uncertain or confused, you may change your mind, or sometimes you may just wish to think silently.

As you ponder your own positions, often the best thing you can do is listen to others. In this course you will learn a great deal about American cultures and subcultures, not only by watching the films and reading the texts, but also by giving your full attention to other students' points of view. Your peers will bring to the discussions cultural backgrounds and experiences different from your own, and at times you may find yourself reacting to what they say with surprise, disbelief, or even shock.

For example, you will have the opportunity to learn and talk about different religious beliefs and practices at various points in the course. Many of us are unaccustomed to talking about religion with people whose beliefs differ from our own. Also, encountering new religions can be difficult, disorienting, and confusing. (It can also be fascinating and exhilarating.) It may help you to remember that outsiders observing your own form of worship (which seems entirely natural to you) may experience similar feelings of alienation. At the end of this section, you will find a Japanese student's initial reaction to her visit to a Roman Catholic Mass. She was clearly perplexed and even somewhat distressed. This is a normal and fine reaction. It's a first step. When she talked in class about her feelings, Catholic students were able to offer some helpful explanations. (See the

guidelines in Appendix B for visits to religious services and places of worship.)

Whatever your initial reactions may be in class discussions, try to realize that differences between you and others are valuable resources for learning. It is precisely these differences that will lead to more interesting, enlightening discussions and to a clearer understanding of the films you have viewed together. To help make your discussions as productive, satisfying, and worthwhile as possible, we suggest some guidelines as outlined in the **Respect Agreement** in Appendix A. These guidelines will allow you to express yourself more freely and be confident that your peers will treat your comments with respect and interest, regardless of their own perspectives.

Depending on the topic or exercise, your instructor will ask you to work with a partner, in groups, or with the entire class. If you find it difficult to speak in front of groups, you might make a conscious effort to try one or more of the specific discussion roles that follow. These roles can allow you to contribute to a discussion without feeling pressured to make a brilliant remark, have special oral skills, or be an expert on the topic at hand. Gradually, as you grow more comfortable in the group and more familiar with the topics, you can begin to drop the roles. Also remember that in any discussion you may adopt multiple roles.

The roles are also useful for those who may already be confident and experienced in group discussions but who tend to play the same roles all the time.

1. **Rebooter**—you help to get the discussion restarted or recharged whenever it begins to lag.
2. **Affirmer**—you provide encouragement to others by nodding, agreeing, and so on.
3. **Includer**—if you become aware that a group member is being left out, you can verbally or nonverbally encourage that person to join in. You might express your interest in hearing the person's point of view.
4. **Tension reliever**—if a discussion becomes heated, you may be able to inject a lighter note or make the group laugh without trivializing the topic.
5. **Questioner and clarifier**—you ask questions to gain information, provoke thought, clear up misunderstandings, and stimulate further discussion. This role is often underutilized.
6. **Navigator**—if you become aware that the conversation is going

off course or that your group is running out of time, you politely help to keep the discussion on track or bring it to a close.

7. **Recorder**—you jot down the main points your group has made. You may be called upon at some point to provide a summary.

Please feel free to add other roles to the list. In your film notebook, identify two roles: one you feel you can play easily and another that you feel less confident about but would like to try.

We'd like to reemphasize the idea that no one develops a well-informed p.o.v. in isolation. Only by listening to others and taking their views into careful consideration can we begin to get a sufficient sense of the bigger picture necessary to define our own position intelligently. An ancient Chinese proverb tells us *Two good talkers . . . not worth one good listener*. A more modern take on the same idea is the saying that *God gave us only one mouth to speak but two ears to listen*.

Why is it sometimes so hard to listen to each other? In our teaching experience, we've observed two main barriers to listening. The first is a values barrier. Just how many pro-choice people and anti-abortionists are really able to LISTEN to each other? When deeply held values are concerned, all of us tend to shut down.

The second barrier is power. If we are a member of the power group, we don't really have to listen to the minority or take interest in less powerful individuals or groups. We may not even realize how important it is to keep listening. If, on the other hand, we're in the minority, we may, out of sheer frustration and even anger, stop listening to what the more powerful have to say.

Your job in this course is to find ways to cross these barriers. Please try to take every opportunity to learn about values, points of view, and ways of life that may be very different from those you have grown up with or have come to cherish. The multicultural golden rule is: *The greater the differences, the more important it is to explore them*. Don't be surprised if you find yourself feeling defensive or annoyed in the process of opening up and exchanging views. Looking beyond (or outside) the beliefs one identifies with is never easy.

Native Americans knew this. Their saying that you should not judge others before walking a mile in their moccasins is a well-known expression used in many contexts. Try to take not just a few steps but to walk for a while in the p.o.v. of others before dismissing it or them. This is the only way we will begin to close some of the gaps that divide us; heal some of the wounds we all feel; and begin to create a more sane, more peaceful future.

Student's P.O.V.

I went to St. James this morning. First, I was very surprised that on a pole there was a place with some water, and they brought their finger to their forehead. I was like “What!!!!?” I felt very nervous because I wasn’t used to it, so I didn’t do as they did. When they prayed, and said *amen*, they moved their hands from their forehead to their stomach, and from their left chest and right chest. I thought “What are they doing!!!” Before the priest read the Bible, the priest held the Bible and walked around the stage with two little girls on both sides of him. . . . ??? When someone wanted to say something on the stage, they had to bow, and they could go up to the stage. I thought this is the rule for this church. At the end of the ceremony, we had to line up in front of the priest. The priest held something to eat in his right hand, and he gave the food to just certain people. When I went to the front of the priest, he touched my head with his left hand. In Indonesia to touch another person’s head means an insult, and also the left hand is regarded as a dirty hand. If the priest did the same thing in Indonesia, people who don’t believe in this religion will be very mad.

—Marisa Haruta, exchange student from Japan

Explanatory Note: At the entrance of Catholic churches are fonts, or bowls, filled with holy water. When Catholics enter the church, they dip one or two fingers into the water and bless themselves by making the sign of the cross. Crossing oneself is done by touching one’s forehead, center of the chest, left shoulder, and right shoulder while saying, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.” The stage Marisa refers to is the altar from which the priest leads the service. In Catholic tradition, altar boys assist the priest with the ceremony, so this church is quite progressive in having altar girls. Marisa observed that when members approach the altar, they bow. Near the end of the service (called Mass), members receive Holy Communion from the priest. They line up and receive a “host,” or wafer, of consecrated bread. According to Catholic doctrine, the host is the actual body of Christ, the bread having been changed during the Mass through the miracle called transubstantiation. Formerly the priest placed the host on the tongue of each member, but now some priests simply place the wafer in each member’s outstretched hand. Why did the priest touch Marisa on the head? In the past only Catholics would line up to receive Communion, but today sometimes non-Catholics line up simply to receive the priest’s blessing, or touch. Having an Indonesian mother and being familiar with customs in that country, Marisa was taken aback by the fact that the priest used his left hand and touched the top of her head.