



THROUGH THE CAMERA'S EYE



Experiments with Subjective Camera in Film Noir

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Audrey Totter plays to her costar—the camera—in Robert Montgomery's adaptation of Raymond Chandler's *The Lady in the Lake*

In 1939, Orson Welles rolled into Hollywood promising to revolutionize the art of filmmaking. One of his first ideas was to shoot an adaptation of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* entirely from the point of view of the main character, Marlow, as he travels up the Congo. In other words, Welles explained, we would never see Marlow because we would be looking through his eyes. The camera, in effect, would be the main character, thus reflecting the first-person narrative of the novel. While the director eventually abandoned the plan as unworkable and moved on to *Citizen Kane*, the idea of an entire movie told with a subjective camera was just crazy enough to keep floating around Hollywood.

Of course, the subjective camera shot itself (or POV shot) had been around for years. Deployed sparingly in films like Murnau's *The Last Laugh* (1924) and Mamoulian's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931), it helped add emphasis and shift the emotion of sequences, acting in writer J.P. Telotte's phrase as a form of "narrative punctuation." Alfred Hitchcock was particularly a fan of the technique, using it to great effect in his 1927 silent film *The Lodger* and famously using it to frame a suicide in *Spellbound* (1945). As deployed by these and other directors, the POV shot was just another tool in the kit. In 1947, however, the subjective camera achieved that most



Leon Ames (left), Totter (center), and the rest of the cast stare down Marlowe in *The Lady in the Lake*



Montgomery (seated with script) directs Lloyd Nolan in a bout of first-person fisticuffs as the *Lady* crew looks on

fleeting form of Hollywood glory: it became a fad.

Adapting Raymond Chandler's fourth Philip Marlowe mystery *The Lady in the Lake*, director/star Robert Montgomery started with an audacious idea: he would adopt the novel's first person narrative as his visual scheme. Not only would Marlowe (played by Montgomery) introduce the movie, we would see it through his eyes. Aside from a few quick sequences when he is onscreen addressing the audience directly (at the beginning of the film, near the middle, and then again at the end), we would see Marlowe only in fleeting glimpses in mirrors. Since the primary pleasure of a Marlowe novel was the private eye's first-person narration, the concept of telling his story visually from his point of view might have seemed like a stroke of offbeat brilliance.

In practice, however, the *Lady in the Lake* pulls off the trick of being both experimentally bold and crushingly boring at the same time. By shooting an entire feature film with a subjective camera, Montgomery managed to prove only that shooting an entire feature film with a subjective camera is a bad idea.

The technique turned out to have several drawbacks. For one thing, it actually robs us of a main character. Noir scholars Alain Silver and James Ursini have pointed out that Marlowe doesn't really narrate *Lady in the Lake*. Since we hear his voice in dialogue, the

narration is kept to a minimum to avoid confusion. Without a visual representation of Marlowe for 95 percent of the film, and lacking a voiceover that allows us entry into his mind, there's really nothing to the character except some brusque lines and the stodgy movement of the camera. The irony here is that in trying to situate the film's narrative from Philip Marlowe's point of view, the film ends up quashing the voice of perhaps the most iconic first-person narrator in all of crime literature. Montgomery's experiment ended up disproving the theory that a subjective camera would allow viewers more access to the interior life of a protagonist.

It also disproved the theory that by supposedly looking through the eyes of the character we would then assume the character's identity. At the beginning of the film, Montgomery promises that we the audience will investigate the clues and solve the case. We will be Marlowe, in effect. The usual process by which we identify with a protagonist onscreen will be intensified.

What actually happens, however, is that since Philip Marlowe isn't onscreen, we seem to float through the air, our focus eventually settling on the other characters in the plot. This explains why the screenwriters—a bitter Chandler (who quit the movie after 13 weeks), and novelist/screenwriter Steve Fisher—greatly expanded the role of Adrienne Fromsett (Audrey Totter), the editor of a crime



magazine who hires Marlowe to find a missing woman. This is a fundamental mistake in adapting a Marlowe novel, because Chandler rarely wrote particularly compelling supporting characters, and never wrote a fully believable woman. Even with her role beefed up, Ms. Fromsett makes for a less than dynamic protagonist.

Part of the problem here is connected to another drawback of the subjective camera: the actors in the film are forced to do their scenes with the camera rather than each other. The actors in this movie rarely look at one another. This stifles the performances of people like Totter and Lloyd Nolan, actors who are *always* good but who here, without any way to develop a rhythm in the scene, are reduced to histrionics. As our de facto main character, Totter gets the worst of it, having to do her big love scenes opposite a lens. A shot of her leaning in to kiss the camera gets a bad laugh, as do her overactive facial muscles in many of her endless reaction shots. This noir goddess, a beautiful and intelligent actress, has to keep finding new ways to arch her eyebrows in shocked disbelief.

One last problem with the subjective camera here is that it constricts the action onscreen. The mise-en-scène of this movie is dreadfully dull. Actors are constantly pinned to the center foreground so they can talk at the camera. Occasionally, Montgomery breaks free of this and manages an interesting image (Marlowe crawling on the ground after a car wreck or peering through a cracked door to spy on a meeting), but the bulk of the film is the same monotonous

set-up of an actor standing a few feet from the camera trying to act with Montgomery's disembodied voice.

The argument could be made that the problem with *Lady In The Lake* is Montgomery's deployment of the subjective camera technique, not the technique itself. A director of greater skill might have pulled it off. Perhaps this is true, but watching this film one gets the distinct sense that Welles was smart to abandon *Heart of Darkness*.

While the idea for an entire POV movie didn't live past Montgomery's failed experiment, the technique itself kept making its way into noir that year. In 1947 alone, director Curtis Bernhardt employed the POV shot in two superior films, *Possessed* and *High Wall*, to reflect the disoriented perspectives of his protagonists. Used in these isolated sequences, the technique is arresting and quite effective. Score two points for the POV shot.

Later that same year, director Delmer Daves thought the subjective camera might be put to interesting effect on *Dark Passage*, his adaptation of David Goodis's novel *The Dark Road*.

In the film, Humphrey Bogart plays Vincent Parry, a convict who has just busted out of prison when the film starts. He's picked up by a strange woman, Irene Jansen (Lauren Bacall), and, surprisingly, she already knows who Parry is and wants to help him. Turns out that Parry was wrongfully convicted of killing his wife, and Irene followed his trial in the papers, convinced of his innocence. With Irene's help, Parry undergoes a facelift and sets out to track down his wife's killer.

Because the story involves plastic surgery, Daves had to come up with a way to handle Parry's transition from one face to another. His solution was to have the pre-facelift sections of the movie told from Parry's subjective point of view. Studio head Jack Warner was reluctant to embrace such an avant-garde camera technique, especially for a new pairing of the lucrative Bogart and Bacall team—to say nothing of paying Bogart top wages to sit out half the movie while the camera essentially plays his part—but the subjective camera had the virtue of solving the problem presented by the facelift plot. Moreover, Daves was a talented craftsman eager to utilize the new AERO-FLEX handheld camera, which allowed him the freedom to keep shots from becoming static. Warner capitulated.

The subjective camera work here is about as effective as Daves could have hoped. It builds suspense, for instance, in the scenes just after Parry has escaped from prison. This is not surprising since the



Tom D'Andrea gives Bogart a ride in *Dark Passage*



Plastic surgeon Houseley Stevenson, seen from Bogart's POV, in *Dark Passage*

POV shot is typically enlisted to help create suspense. It is, by its very definition, a technique that restricts the audience's knowledge of a scene, creating anxiety about what might jump out from the edges of the shot. A little later in the film, Daves uses the camera to replicate Parry's nervous state as he rushes down the sidewalk to his 3 a.m. appointment with a shady plastic surgeon. As he passes a man on the street and the fellow catches his eye to ask if they know each other, the camera drifts just a bit as if Parry is trying to break eye contact. Later, the creepy surgeon (played with sleazy glee by Houseley Stevenson) looms over Parry, cackling about "botched plastic jobs" while fingering a straight razor. Here, and elsewhere, the subjective camera enhances the scene exactly as intended, by placing us in the head of the nervous protagonist.

Having said that, however, the limitations with the POV shot are also on display. For one thing, the technique puts added burden on the actors. Because Bogart isn't onscreen, Bacall has to carry the first half of the movie by herself, essentially creating the emotional core of their relationship while staring into a lens. She carries off this task by skillfully underplaying these scenes, but there can be no doubt that the movie suddenly snaps to life once Bogie actually shows up onscreen. He's in his noir prime here, weary and scared, and his last few scenes with Bacall have a fragile emotionalism unlike anything else in their



Dark Passage: Two people play Bogart's "arms" in this subjective camera shot

work together. The last shot of the film might be the sweetest one they ever shared. While all this material is terrific, however, it has the unintended effect of drawing attention to the limitations of the film's first half.

It should also be noted that while much of the first forty minutes of the film is done subjectively, not all of it is. Daves alternates between Parry's point of view and a more conventional point of view that includes establishing shots, over the shoulder shots, and two-shots. While *Dark Passage* is stylistically daring, it did little to keep the subjective camera fad from going out of style.

Since noir directors often utilized odd camera set-ups to reflect discombobulated protagonists, the POV shot naturally stayed on as a valuable, if judiciously employed, technique. Director Rudolph Mate was able to inject a little style into the otherwise talk-heavy psychobabble noir *The Dark Past* (1948) with some striking POV work. He began the film with a lengthy first-person subjective shot (the camera functioning as the eyes of psychologist Lee J. Cobb on his way to work). Later in the film, as escaped convict William Holden recounts a childhood trauma to Cobb, we assume his POV as a child. Tying together these two shots is a clever way to link the doctor with the hood, and both shots are deftly handled, particularly the Expressionistic flashback.



The POV kept popping up from time to time. Henry Hathaway framed some shots from the perspective of a distraught Richard Basehart as he threatens to jump off the ledge of a high rise in *Fourteen Hours* (1951). In Orson Welles's *Touch Of Evil* (1958), the camera assumes Janet Leigh's drugged POV as she awakens

in bed to find Akim Tamiroff's bug-eyed corpse slung over the bed post above her. In 1964, Sam Fuller used it for one of the best openings in all of noir: as the wobbly POV of a man being beaten by a bald prostitute in *The Naked Kiss*. And Alfred Hitchcock never lost his enthusiasm for it, using it in his hymns to voyeurism, *Rear Window* (1954) and *Vertigo* (1958); on television in the *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* episode "Breakdown" with Joseph Cotten; and in later films like *Psycho* (1960) and *Frenzy* (1972).

While some non-noir films employed the technique—Welles would use it, for instance, to reflect an epileptic seizure in his 1952 production of Shakespeare's *Othello*—its brief heyday in 1947 tells us something important about film noir. 1947 was a pivotal year for the genre, a year that saw the release of no less than 30 noirs, a year of benchmarks like *Body and Soul* and *Brute Force* and *Out of the Past*. The subjective camera experiments taking place in crime films during this same period reflect the larger aesthetic movement that only later would be recognized as film noir. Because the subjective camera worked best when used to convey the disoriented or worried perspective of a particular character, most often a bewildered protagonist in over his head, it makes sense that it should get so much usage in a genre devoted to chronicling the cracks in the human psyche. Indeed, one of the main reasons that Montgomery's *Lady in the Lake* failed artistically is that the camerawork was too stolid. It plodded along stoically from scene to scene. The subjective camera worked best when, in its weird way, it drew attention to the frightening limitations of our own perception. ■