

## 9 The portable keyhole

*Every film trains its spectator.*

David Bordwell *Narration in the Fiction Film*, p45.

*The text always contains an indication of the way it is to be read.*

Tzvetan Todorov 'Reading as Construction', *Genres in Discourse*, p46.

At various points I have talked about narrative as a motivating principle behind both the construction of an image and the viewer's construction of that image's meaning. The implicit relationship between narrative and viewpoint has been seen as an intrinsic aspect of mimetic modes of representation which, in terms of visual art, find an apt manifestation in the structuring procedures of linear perspective. Earlier chapters have looked at viewing as a process of reading sense into an image where the spectator actively (although not necessarily consciously) *constructs* a world from a represented fragment. Here *world* is understood in a broad sense in that it refers both to the spatial disposition of an illusory scene and to the narrative dimensions of that scene. The notion of the picture which returns our gaze is as much concerned with the psychological implications of the image as with its relation to the viewer's own sense of place, that is, the position from which they perceive it. As we have seen, Duchamp's cryptic assertion that "the spectator makes the picture" applies not only to the artwork but also to the narrative spaces opened up by cinema. These differing media and their related strategies of representation point to the centrality and the temporality of the viewer's role in the construction of meaning. By way of concluding, it will be necessary to look more closely at narrative as a structuring *process* in order to identify more clearly the nature of this role. Such ideas should also prove useful in establishing a more direct link between the theoretical and historical material covered in the thesis and the visual work which I have produced in conjunction with it.

I am less concerned with the notion of narrative as the actual telling of stories than with narration almost as a process of thought, a way of making sense of the world. Narration is an intentional, structuring activity which, as Peter Brooks has put it, "demarcates, encloses, establishes limits, orders."<sup>1</sup> Discourse on narrative is commonly concerned with literary fiction where a story is related in a particular manner and entices the reader with its own specific logic. In terms of visual art or picture-making, however, the function of narrative is less certain. Pictures, after all, present a stilled image which although experienced *in time* does not (unless it forms part of a sequence) function in the same temporal

1. Peter Brooks *Reading for the Plot*, p4.

sense as an image in a novel or a film. Moreover, as the project has developed I have become increasingly drawn to the narrative dimensions of such things as implied viewpoint, the viewer's role and the effects of framing and believe it right to develop these aspects in my visual work. Our perceptions of spaces and objects are coloured by our subjective relationship to them; the same goes for our perceptions of pictures. Whilst I have not intended to look at what those subjective impressions might be (if, indeed, this is possible), I would like to articulate the process of ordering the circumstances through which they arise. Narrative theory or 'narratology' attempts to plot the ways in which not only texts but representations of all types are structured in terms of storytelling. It would, therefore, seem fitting to end by looking at some relevant narrative models which bring into focus many of the issues addressed throughout the project as a whole, particularly the relationship of viewer to picture or artwork.

Earlier I mentioned the distinction made by Russian Formalists such as Shklovsky between what they termed *fabula* and *syuzhet*. To recap, the *fabula*, often translated as *story*, is the chronological sequence of events referred to by a narrative whilst the *syuzhet* is the order of events (re)presented in that narrative. The reader of a fictional narrative (or viewer of a fiction film or figurative painting), moreover, never has direct access to the *fabula* itself which is only ever a representation contrived through the *syuzhet*. That is, we construct a seemingly coherent story from the evidence presented by the *syuzhet*. In a detective novel, such as Raymond Chandler's *The Lady in the Lake*, where the story of a crime is related via the story of that crime's investigation, the *fabula* is traced and (re)plotted through the *syuzhet*. The narrative strategy, Marlowe's first-person account of his investigation, provides the reader's only means of access to the concealed story of a killer's change of identity which becomes apparent at the end of the book. In a fictional story, of course, the referent or *fabula* does not exist at all, or rather, it is brought into existence through the means of its representation. As Tzvetan Todorov has stated:

"What exists, first of all, is the text and nothing else; it is only by subjecting the text to a particular type of reading that we construct an imaginary universe on the basis of the text. The novel does not imitate reality, it creates reality."<sup>2</sup>

If the (re)construction of this imaginary universe is the text's purpose, a narrative, in order to be successful, should contain some indication of how it is to be read. As was discussed earlier in relation to pictorial representation, if a narrative constructs a realistic representation which is intended to deceive, there is an implication that this 'reality', the world of the *fabula*, has precedence over the means of its representation, the *syuzhet*. Although this is the essence

2. Tzvetan Todorov 'Reading as Construction',  
*Genres in Discourse* Cambridge & New York:  
Cambridge University Press 1995 (1978),  
pp39-49, p39.

of any mimetic illusion, the form which that illusion takes is never transparent and always requires the reader or viewer's cooperation. We are aware of the fabric of the medium be it novel, film or painting and therefore, are aware of the presence of the 'author' despite the lengths he may go to in order to efface his presence. As Bakhtin has observed in his discussion of the dialogic nature of novelistic discourse:

"The author manifests himself and his point of view not only in his effect on the narrator, on his speech and his language... but also in his effect on the subject of the story - as a point of view that differs from the point of view of the narrator."<sup>3</sup>

3. Mikhail Bakhtin 'Heteroglossia in the Novel',  
*Bakhtinian Thought*, p208.

In order for the novel or film to successfully "create reality" as Todorov maintains, it must, of course, involve the reader or viewer. In a discussion of the relation between fabula and syuzhet in terms of film analysis, Bordwell uses a cognitive-perceptual model to suggest that the viewer constantly posits 'hypotheses' about the depicted events which are subsequently tested against their existing interpretation of the film's narrative.<sup>4</sup> From isolated details they infer - over time - an increasingly refined whole. In the opening sequences of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), for example, the camera silently pans around the interior of the main protagonist's living room and presents the spectator with various objects - cameras, flashguns, photographs - clues to his profession. In doing so, the camera methodically discloses that he is a photographer for a leading magazine whose business involves travel and adventure although there are examples of studio work evidenced by a pile of fashion magazines which, we assume, contain examples of his work. In particular, the camera focuses on the image of a racing car crashing into a barrier. One of the car's dislodged wheels has been frozen by the shutter as it hurtles towards both camera and photographer who, we assume, is none other than the man seen lying asleep with a broken leg in the next shot (James Stewart).

4. David Bordwell *Narration in the Fiction Film*,  
especially chapters 3-7, pp29-147.

The fabula/syuzhet distinction is useful in that it separates the causal relationship of events from the ways in which they are represented. Chronological sequence can be sliced up, interrupted and rearranged for the purposes of the narrative which, for example, may be concerned with prolonging the outcome of the story in order to create suspense, a strategy Bordwell calls *retardation*. Similarly, any implied spatial coherence of the fabula is solely a product of the syuzhet which may facilitate or undermine spatial and dramatic unity where relevant. In *Rear Window*, the photographer, L.B. Jeffries or Jeff as he is known to his associates, acts as the perceptual window through which the narrative is related. From the opening scenes, we are encouraged to identify with his point of view and follow him as he subsequently weaves a story around his observa-



Figure 50

Alfred Hitchcock *Rear Window* 1954  
View of Thorwald's apartment

5. Miran Bozovic 'The Man Behind His Own Retina', *All you ever wanted to know about Lacan (but were too afraid to ask Hitchcock)* (ed. Slavoj Žižek), London & New York: Verso 1992, pp161-177.

6. It is worth noting that approximately 35% of the film is entirely without dialogue. See Stefan Sharff *The Art of Looking in Hitchcock's Rear Window* New York: Limelight Editions 1997, p179.

7. Bordwell, op.cit. p62.

tions of his neighbours. The story is of a crime, the murder by a character called Thorwald of his invalid wife who live together in an apartment opposite Jeff's. This crime occurs early in the film when Jeff hears (and we hear) a scream off-camera. The passage of events is gradually pieced together by the house-bound photographer as he recuperates in his claustrophobic apartment. What is intriguing about *Rear Window* in terms of narrative is that the story of this investigation is both the film's syuzhet and simultaneously, its fabula. That is, it reflexively relates the concealed story of the crime by relating a story about a man who is, in turn, making up a story about what he sees. Literally immobilized like the ideal perspectival viewer, "a man behind his own retina" as Miran Bozovic has observed,<sup>5</sup> in his boredom Jeff has taken to watching his neighbours' activities through his window, the rear window of the title, and begins to make inferences and create stories about them: a newly-wed couple, a young dancer he dubs "Miss Torso", a sculptor, an aging couple with a dog, the Thorwalds, "Miss Lonelyhearts" and a composer whose current work-in-progress provides part of the film's soundtrack. Each character is predominantly seen through their respective windows which act like little cinema screens onto which are projected silent movies, with each screen having its own particular 'story' (figure 50).<sup>6</sup> One of these stories becomes that of the film and Jeff's increasing preoccupation with discovering the apparent truth drives its plot. His role is a model of the spectator's but in addition, he is also the director of his own 'film' within the larger film; it is predominantly through his observations that we revisit the story of the crime if not its actual scene.

There are moments, however, when the spectator is fed more information than Jeff. Whilst he is asleep, the camera closes in on Thorwald's window and reveals him leaving his apartment with a woman in black whose back is to the camera. As Jeff is asleep, it is up to us to make sense here: the woman is possibly Mrs Thorwald, alive and well, or more sinisterly, Thorwald's mistress. Such tactics retard the logical sequence of the fabula and disrupt our reading (if not Jeff's) of the implied story, forcing us later in the film to revisit or re-plot these events in our mental conception of the fabula. Like Jeff, we become detectives confined to a position outside the spatio-temporal world of the story. If, as Bordwell puts it, "the narration... creates the narrator," then the investigation creates the detective.<sup>7</sup> Bearing in mind Bakhtin's comments on the author, in moments like this, Hitchcock moves from a subjective to an objective framing of the narrative. In doing so, he reveals his own shadowy presence behind his fictional counterpart as the actual controller of the syuzhet just he later appears in person as a piano tuner.

The structuralist writer, Tzvetan Todorov, also draws on the fabula/syuzhet

8. Tzvetan Todorov 'The Two Principles of Narrative', *Genres in Discourse*, pp27-38.

9. Brooks, *op.cit.* p18.

10. *Ibid.* p18.

distinction although in his terms, the distinction is now between *histoire* and *récit*. Similarly, he distinguishes between *description* and *narrative* stating that although the former can act as an element within a narrative, in itself it is not narrative.<sup>8</sup> This, on the contrary, involves the fragmentation of chronological or event-time into elements which can be composed in what he calls duration-time. Moreover, in the ordering of successive events, narrative *transformations* occur between the beginning and end which render the sequence irreversible. Todorov identifies two distinct types of narrative which effect different kinds of transformations, the first of which he calls mythological and which is purely concerned with events and actions as they project forward towards other actions. To this he opposes what he calls gnoseological or epistemical narrative which incorporates transformations concerned less with events than with the reader's perception of those events, less with what a character does than with what we know about that character. A novel which represents the quest for knowledge typifies Todorov's notion of such a narrative. Barthes draws a similar distinction between what he calls proairetic and hermeneutic codes. The former concerns the logic of actions and sequence; the latter is concerned with interpretation and enigma, with questions and answers as means for structuring a story. This results in "a 'dilatatory space' - the space of suspense - which we work through towards what is felt to be... the revelation of meaning" as Peter Brooks has put it.<sup>9</sup> Brooks himself proposes a less polarized opposition and maintains that *plot* - the organizing logic behind narrative - interweaves both codes or principles of narrative with the interpretation of actions and characters affecting not only our perception of them but also our understanding of the logic of events. He suggests that this "overcoding" encourages an "interrogation" of actions in terms of "their point, their goal and their import" and posits "plot as a part of the dynamics of reading."<sup>10</sup>

The detective story for both Brooks and Todorov is a prime instance of such a narrative in that it both provokes and proffers a search for knowledge. It reconstructs a crime through the story of the crime's investigation in terms which, in the most simple scenario, are either true or false. In an elaboration of this simple schema, *Rear Window* overlays the story of an investigation with the story of a faltering romantic relationship and in doing so, involves questions not only about the truth of Jeff's hypothesis - that Thorwald murdered his wife - but also about the main character's changing attitude to his girlfriend, Lisa (Grace Kelly). Early in the film, we realize that Jeff is uneasy about her occupation and social milieu in relation to his, he being a lover of adventure and she, a society model. It is through the agency of the investigation that this problem appears to be resolved. Lisa at first ridicules his obsession with the murder case but gradually is drawn



Figure 51

*Rear Window*

Jeff and the 'portable keyhole'

into Jeff's 'story' and becomes involved in the action itself, eventually acting as the catalyst for the resolution of the mystery. Jeff's relationship to the world of his story is analogous to our relationship to the film itself. He sits (relatively) immobile in front of a window, not unlike the cinema screen onto which this story and the other space it implies is projected, and actively pieces together fragments of information and clues to the imagined crime. When we first meet Lisa, the theatrical analogy is posed as she announces "the opening night of the last depressing week of L.B. Jeffries in a cast" and later on, as Jeff becomes more obsessed by his observations, she pulls down the blind, exclaiming the "show is over for tonight." It is only when she puts herself in danger by walking *into* the spectacle beyond the window, when she becomes a literal participant in Jeff's drama - she breaks into Thorwald's apartment in order to find Mrs Thorwald's wedding ring, proof that she has been murdered - that he perceives her, and we perceive *him*, anew. That is we gain knowledge about Jeff's mental state as a result of the transformations, to use Todorov's term, resulting from the cumulative interplay of actions with our perception of them. By objectifying and nearly losing Lisa, he realizes the depth of his attachment to her.

Much has been said about the representation of gender in *Rear Window*, a dimension which has profound significance for the film's meaning, if not its immediate narrative, especially given the voyeuristic activities of the main protagonist. When we first meet him, Jeff is a self-opinionated chauvinist with a problematic attitude to women. He is rescued for the film by the transformations effected by both his involvement in the murder hunt and by Lisa's actions. Despite the fact that he becomes a hero, having risked his life (albeit unwittingly), it is Lisa who has the dynamic role and who at the end of the film appears to have gained a victory of sorts. We see her lounging on a sofa dressed in denim jeans and work shirt, idly reading a book about the Himalayas. When she realizes Jeff is asleep, she puts the book down and picks up a copy of *Harper's Bazaar*. Although Lisa has the ability to transform herself - indeed, there is not a little irony in her change of identity which is nicely directed towards the audience in a somewhat theatrical manner - there is a sinister implication that her own preferences have to be repressed in order for the couple to find some common ground.<sup>11</sup>

Returning to the climactic moments of the narrative, Jeff, like the film's spectator, can do little more than watch as Lisa is attacked by Thorwald. His only option is to telephone the police to report the incident. It is at this moment that the conventional relationship between film and audience is reversed as Jeff makes the transition from spectator to participant. Lisa has found the ring and surreptitiously signals to Jeff, whom she knows is watching, that she has the



Figure 52

*Rear Window*

Thorwald (Raymond Burr) returns Jeff's gaze

11. For discussions of gender and voyeurism, see Robin Wood 'Rear Window', *Hitchcock's Films Revisited* London: Faber & Faber 1989, pp100-107; Steve Jenkins 'Refocusing the Spectator', *Monthly Film Bulletin* 51/601, February 1984, pp34-36; Roberta Pearson & Robert Stam 'Hitchcock's *Rear Window*: Reflexivity and the Critique of Voyeurism', *Enclitic* 7/1, Spring 1983, pp136-145.

evidence they need. Thorwald, however, sees her gesture and in a crucial shot, looks directly at the camera, that is, at Jeff who is peering through his telephoto lens, his “portable keyhole” as Stella, the nurse (Thelma Ritter), dubs it earlier in the film. In that look, the voyeur’s gaze returned, the space of the story spills over into the space of the narration (figures 51 & 52). It is now Jeff who becomes objectified by another’s look and who shortly will be literally thrown out of his window, flung through the screen onto which he has projected his story. In the dramatic moments leading to his defenestration, his only means of protection against Thorwald is to pop flash-bulbs at him, temporarily blinding the murderer, rendering him unable to return that gaze which has been directed on him throughout the film. In a reading of the film which draws on the Lacanian notions of the gaze discussed earlier, Bozovic maintains that Jeff’s voyeurism is a product of his narcissistic desire to see himself seeing and he points out that the ‘eye’ which reciprocates this desire is none other than Thorwald’s window which ‘looks’ back at him. In a particularly effective scene, for example, Thorwald’s window is dark and the apartment apparently empty until Jeff and we see a cigarette glowing in the darkness, eerily signifying the murderer’s presence. Like Sartre’s evocation of the gaze as the rustling of branches or the sound of footsteps in a corridor, it is this ‘blot’, the burning cigarette, which signifies the gaze of the ‘other’ and which objectifies and returns Jeff’s own gaze; or as Bozovic quotes Sartre, “‘being-seen-by-the-other’ is the truth of ‘seeing-the-other’.”<sup>12</sup> After being discovered literally in Thorwald’s gaze, Jeff answers the telephone and, thinking it is his detective friend, starts talking about the murderer who, it transpires, is the caller. Whereas Jeff’s gaze was reciprocated, however, his words are met with a deadly silence and eventually, the gentle click of the receiver as Thorwald hangs up. Jeff awaits the latter’s arrival and becomes the object of his ‘gaze’ which is now manifested in the sound of a door closing downstairs in the apartment block, of footsteps on the stairs and in the switching off of the light in the hallway which can be seen in the gap under Jeff’s door.

12. Bozovic, op.cit. p170; Sartre quotation from *Being and Nothingness*, p257.

The way these telling details are combined epitomizes the narrative tactics of the film as a whole and highlight the spectator’s role as one of construction. As Brooks notes: “Plots are not simply organising structures, they are also intentional structures, goal-oriented and forward-moving.”<sup>13</sup> Moreover, plot is as much an aspect of reading as it is of writing or telling stories. In *Rear Window*, we are constantly given clues about the implied story through the arrangement of the sequence of events which are either verified or dismissed by the characters onscreen, particularly Jeff who has a dual function as both spectator and director. That is, the work of narrative construction is represented in the film itself. We are invited to speculate on the hidden story perceptible through the narrative’s filters

13. Brooks, op.cit. p12.

14. Tzvetan Todorov 'Reading as Construction',  
*Genres in Discourse*, pp39-49, p48.

15. *Ibid.* pp42-43.

- point-of-view, mood or sequence of events - in a manner which is analogous to the ways we construct stories about the reality - the people and situations - surrounding us. In the words of Todorov, "One does not construct 'fiction' differently from 'reality'."<sup>14</sup> He also notes that the reader's interpretation of a narrative necessarily differs from the writer's. In a passage which begins by asking what happens when we read and why one account of a narrative differs from another, Todorov seems to be questioning the nature of subjectivity or at least, the subjective nature of reading. He sketches a model of the transformation of the narrative from the author's version, through what he calls the "imaginary universe" created around that narrative by both author and, subsequently, reader, who then interprets and creates their own version of the 'narrative' which may differ from the author's.<sup>15</sup> Todorov similarly points out the gap that exists between what the words of the text may *signify*, a particular event for example, and what that event *symbolizes* in the imaginary universe created around the narrative, such as a particular character trait. There is a discrepancy between a reader's *understanding* of the words of a text (its signification) and their *interpretation* of those words in the context of this imaginary universe (symbolization). Returning to *Rear Window*, before our 'reader', Jeff, has even thought of his murder hypothesis, he and Stella idly look out of the window at Thorwald who in turn is looking out of his window at the small dog which is digging in a flower bed in the courtyard. To Jeff, Thorwald looks like "a man afraid that someone is watching him", an observation which proves correct especially given the fact that the dog is later killed by Thorwald on account of its curiosity. Jeff and we understand what Thorwald is *doing* when he looks out of his window but Jeff's interpretation - that Thorwald looks guilty - leaves room for doubt. It is only later when the dead dog is discovered and the whole courtyard alerted by the screams of the dog's owner, that Jeff's interpretation seems plausible: Thorwald is the only inhabitant *not* to come to the window in response to the woman's cries. This scene is the one described earlier in which Thorwald can only be discerned in the darkness of his apartment through the agency of the glowing cigarette. Indeed, this inference - that Thorwald is somehow watching in the darkness - itself is an interpretation based on the "imaginary universe" we create around the evidence signified by the sequence of shots. In Todorov's words,

16. *Ibid.* p43.

"The signified facts are *understood*; for this level of understanding, the reader need only know the language in which the text is written. The symbolized facts are *interpreted*; and the interpretations vary from one subject to another."<sup>16</sup>

This interpretation is not completely arbitrary, of course, but depends on the



17. Marcel Duchamp *Duchamp du Signe*, p105; 'The Creative Act', *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, pp138-140.

18. Octavio Paz 'Marcel Duchamp or The Castle of Purity', *Marcel Duchamp: Appearance Stripped Bare*, p85-86.

19. *Ibid.* p86.

reader's recognition that the depicted events exist within a causal framework. In terms of pictures or still images, however, we cannot witness and verify the causal relationship between events as obviously there is not the same temporal dimension as there is in a novel or film. The gap here between understanding and interpretation is surely wider and, therefore, there is less surety about intention and more room for the *mystery* that Magritte talked about. Going back to Duchamp's statement that "the spectator makes the picture" (a comment which in retrospect has served as the organising thread or *plot* behind my entire project) and Octavio Paz's discussion of it, one finds an analogy for Todorov's account of narrative diversity.<sup>17</sup> As we have seen, Duchamp coined the term 'art-coefficient' to describe the difference between an artist's intention and its realization in the work itself. This difference, he goes on to state in 'The Creative Act', is echoed in the spectator's reading of the work which initiates a further difference; that is, at one pole we have the artist's original intention and at the other, the spectator's interpretation, not of that intention as the viewer does not primarily judge artistic intention, but of the work itself. Paz adds that whilst the work is transformed by the viewer into another work through the process of looking at and thinking about it, the actual work, its material manifestation, remains as the basis for further misreadings and further differences. In this sense, the work is a machine for "producing meanings", a particularly apposite observation given that Duchamp's two most substantial works were literally based around the notion of a self-desiring machine.<sup>18</sup> Both *The Large Glass* and *Étant Donnés* are intrinsically related to Duchamp's description in *The Green Box* of the Bride and her Bachelors, a description which although cryptic, elliptical and non-linear in its sequence, creates an imaginary universe which contextualizes the visual clues contained in the works themselves. The works are not precisely narrative in that they do not represent transformations which are irreversible; in the nature of machines, their 'movement' is cyclical and repetitive. Like all pictures, they are without beginning or end and represent instead the interminable loop of desire and fulfilment.

However, the narrative and narratological strategies looked at in this chapter can be useful in terms of pictorial art precisely because they articulate the part played by the viewer without whom the work is incomplete. As Paz states, "the picture depends on the spectator because only he can set in motion the apparatus of signs that comprise the whole work."<sup>19</sup> The apparent motion created by the film image finds an analogy in the internalized machinations of interpretation where we move through the work as much as the work moves within us. By reading or observing or thinking, the spectator activates the relationship between the parts

in the work and makes it *live*, in the electrical sense of a live wire. The work's meaning, therefore, is to be found neither in the work itself, nor in the hands, eyes or minds of either artist or viewer. It is apparent only in the space or the *difference* between them.