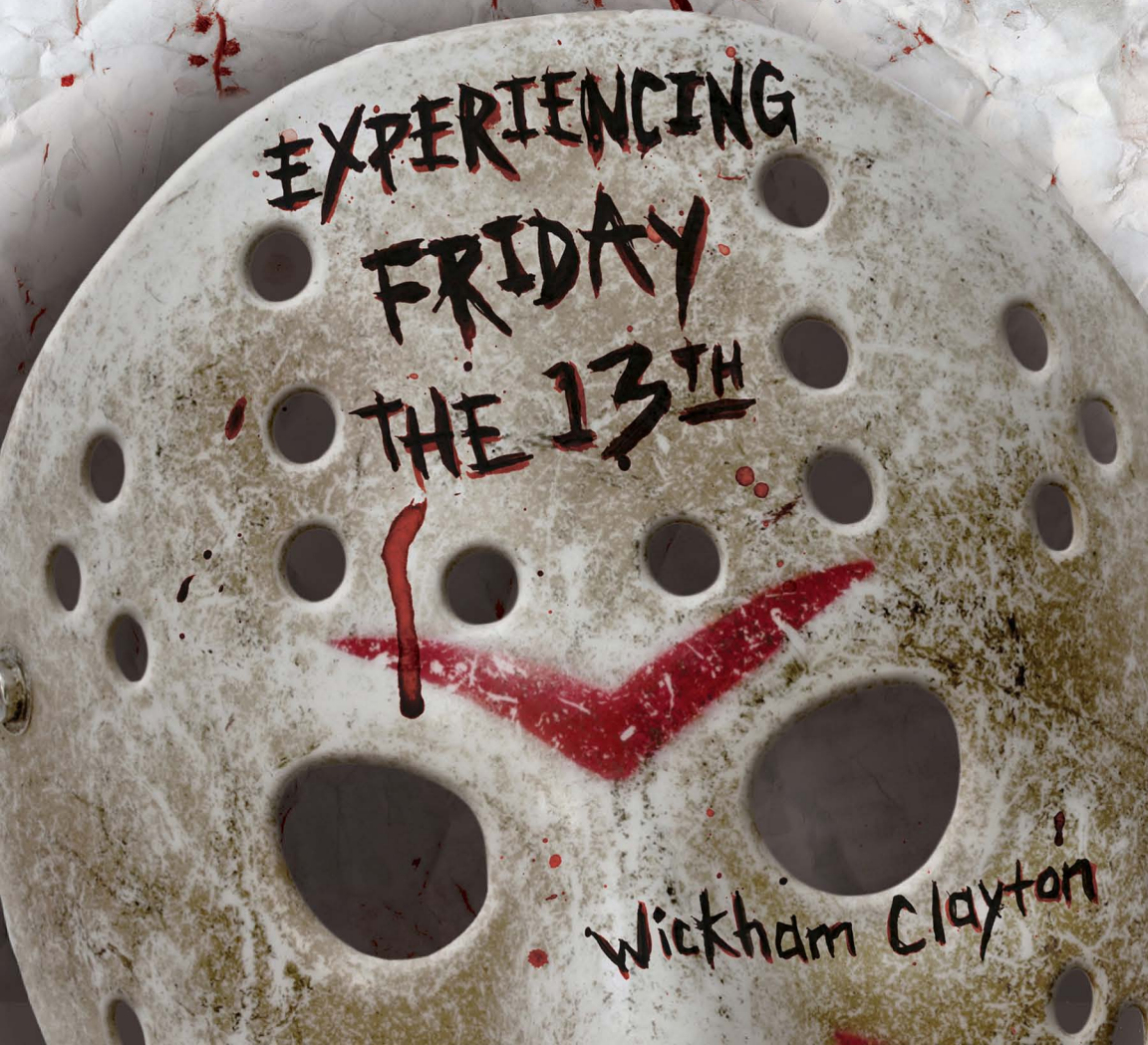
SEE! HEAR! CUT! KILL!...

EXPERIENCING FRIDAY THE 13TH



Wickham Clayton

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Chapter 1

Meet Jason Voorhees: An Autopsy

Sometimes the weirdest movies strike you in unexpected ways. In the winter of 1997, I attended a late-night screening of *Friday the 13th* (1980) at the campus theater at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. I'd never seen the film before, but I was aware of its cultural significance. I expected a generic slasher film with extensive violence and nudity. I expected something ultimately forgettable. Having watched it seventeen years after its initial release, I found it generic; it did have violence and nudity, and was entertaining. However, I did not find it forgettable. Walking home with the first flecks of a winter snow weaving around me in the dark, I found myself thinking over it. I continually recalled images, sounds, and narrative moments that were vivid in my mind. *Friday the 13th* wormed into my brain, with its haunting and atmospheric style.

After watching the original film several more times, I started in on the sequels, preparing myself for disappointment each time. To my surprise, each one thoroughly entertained me. I watched them all multiple times. As I began studying film four years later, I would frequently admit to liking them with a touch of embarrassment, dismissing them as a guilty pleasure. After taking a class with film theorist Todd Berliner, I began to ask myself why I felt the need to dismiss my enjoyment of them. If I find them entertaining, I thought, there must be a reason why. This stayed with me until I began to consider ideas for a doctoral research project.

Wherefore art thou writing about *Friday the 13th?*

The *Friday the 13th* series found success according to Hollywood's preferred metric: money. However, the bulk of critical and academic writing on the films deride them. I could almost excuse someone who has never seen them for assuming they are meritless. However, we can't ignore how important the series is to the slasher subgenre.

The "slasher" film is a subgenre of horror with a story focusing on the detailed actions of a serial murderer and their victims. Slasher films mostly tell stories of an aggressor, sometimes working in tandem with supernatural forces, stalking and killing victims, and leading to a climactic confrontation with the killer. Plot and character develop in a minimal fashion, with the focus mainly directed toward the final or surviving victim and the killer. Although fear and suspense traditionally characterize horror, slasher films focus mostly on the cause of death, with particular attention to details of bodily mutilation.

I write this book to shine a light on this subgenre, and especially the films in my chosen franchise, with three aims. First, I explore the way in which "perspective" is established and communicated within the *Friday the 13th* films, which is central to the way we experience and respond emotionally to these movies. Second, I outline the way that this perspective is created through the stylistic choices of the filmmakers over time. The style of these films develop and evolve as the series progresses, and this particular series provides us a unique opportunity to explore these changes over a thirty-year period. Finally, I argue that the series doesn't develop all alone. What we see in these films relates to contemporary slasher films and critically successful Hollywood films. What is happening in these films either reflects popular trends of film style or sometimes act as key examples that their generic contemporaries respond to. Such an analysis holds implications for our understanding of film texts outside of the genre as well.

Duck!

Theorist Steven Shaviro writes of the visceral effect of watching cinema: "Images confront the viewer directly, without mediation. What we see is what we see; the figures that unroll before us cannot be regarded merely as arbitrary representations or conventional signs. We respond viscerally to visual forms, before having the leisure to read or interpret them as symbols" (26). Perhaps not many but a fair number of scholars write about horror, and slashers particularly, through a position of social, cultural, or political analysis. Typically (and not

at all unfairly), they conclude that they often interact with our subconscious fears, play with contemporary concerns, and hold very backward views of society and culture. I'll explore some of these arguments later, but it's fair to say that, true or not, it's been done before. I'm interested in what Shaviro points out: before we "read" or "interpret" movies, we respond to them. While filmmakers design all kinds of movies with the viewer's response in mind, slashers are created specifically for this impact. We "jump" out of our seat. We "cringe" at the cutting of a victim. We instinctively cover our eyes when we know something is coming, but are not quite sure when. We feel scared or tense. And there's a method of analysis that is great for considering this response we have to movies.

Viktor Shklovsky, a Russian literary critic and theorist, says, "Compositions are made, they are developed; the author creates in them semantic knots that are correlated, intensifying the perceptibility of the composition. New structures emerge" (20). Shklovsky's view foregrounds the construction of these works of art. He is more interested in the choices made in their creation and how they impact us, which is a radical (and politically subversive) approach in Russia post-revolution. Shklovsky worked in an area called "formalism" which has since been applied to other art forms, including movies.

Some of the foremost scholars in Film Studies wield formalism to chop up movies into little pieces and see what those pieces do. Unlike Jason's victims, these films still work the same as before when put back intact, but what is done with these pieces varies. One of these significant theorists, Kristin Thompson, has written about a concept known as *Historical Poetics*. Thompson writes that every viewing of a film "occurs in a specific situation, and the spectator cannot engage with the film except by using viewing skills learned in encounters with other artworks and in everyday experience" (21). Formalist critics see viewers as active participants in the puzzle-game of film viewing rather than passive receivers of messages, as other analytical forms seem to suggest. But how do we interact? We know what we have seen in other movies, so we expect what we are watching to be like them. And either they are or they aren't. Thus, based on what happens in *this* movie, we decide what we think will happen next—again, based on other movies we have seen. We can look at the history of films, what came before a movie we analyze and what came after, and see how this context influences what we, or even audiences from the past, expect to happen based on what they *would have seen*. Then we consider how this movie, depending on its stylistic choices, may influence later filmmakers, or at least influence the way in which viewers interact with other movies after having seen it.

During the very long process of writing this book, I've tried to remind myself of something Susan Sontag once wrote: "The aim of all commentary on art now

should be to make works of art—and, by analogy, our own experience—more, rather than less, real to us. The function of criticism should be to show *how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*" (14) [emphasis in original]. Sontag, as brilliant and provocative as she was, broke this aim often. Maybe it's my fault for taking it so seriously.

Look the way you feel

Imagine the following film sequence: Tom Cruise plays a character arriving home to his lavish upscale New York apartment very late at night. He closes the door and goes into the kitchen, has a beer, and sits at the kitchen table. After a while, he goes to sleep next to his wife in their bedroom, and finds a mask on his pillow.

That is exactly what happens in the sequence. What I did not tell you is that when Tom Cruise enters the house, it is very dark, bathed in deep blue light and run through with even darker shadows. As he walks toward the kitchen, we see the background punctuated with startling red and white pinpoints emanating from the Christmas lights used to decorate the home for the holiday season. Meanwhile, we hear the rustle and flutter of his clothes as he removes his coat and slowly moves through the house, as two notes from a piano repeatedly trudge back and forth, which is the musical score to the sequence. In the kitchen, harsh white light fills the room from the overhead fluorescent fixtures. Up to this point, the camera has steadily followed Cruise's movements, not swaying or distracted and keeping him central to the composition without cutting away. However, as he sits at the table, the image slowly dissolves (or fades from one image into another) to him entering the doorway to his bedroom. The entire room is blue with intense shadows playing against the interiors, and a whip pan reveals his wife in their marital bed with a mask—a physical remnant of his attempted, and failed, infidelity.

This sequence in Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) takes a simple scenario and makes it startling. His home is unpleasant. The shadowed area becomes frightening, the Christmas lights make this familiar location feel alien, and the pleasantry of the kitchen has become cold and clinical. The slow dissolve shows the inevitable reluctance with which he joins his wife in their bedroom. Even without the context of this situation, the viewer understands that Cruise's house, although familiar, now seems unhomely and unwelcoming, fostering a feeling of claustrophobia. The sequence climaxes with the greatest terror in the entire house: his marital bed and his mask from the orgy he attended—a physical sign of his infidelity. While the events themselves are

relatively banal, the sequence becomes suspenseful and frightening.[1] Kubrick uses lighting, camerawork, editing, and sound to show the viewer how Cruise's character feels and experiences these events and locations.

In his book about the film, Michel Chion addresses the function of point-of-view in *Eyes Wide Shut*, and cinema in general. He states:

> In the cinema, "point of view" is only suggested. It is linked, in particular, to the question of "in whose presence" the scene takes place. If a character is in almost all the scenes—as Bill is—with two or three "exceptions," the film will be regarded as being told from his point of view, although we see him just as we see the other characters, from the outside. Another important question is that of knowledge: do we know less than the character, or more, or as much? Do we share his "secrets?" In the case of Bill we do, since we alone follow him through different situations whose connections are in principle known only to him (and us). (52) [parentheses in original]

Furthermore, Chion later addresses the viewer's relationship to an established point-of-view. Speaking specifically of *Eyes Wide Shut*, he states:

> The cinema audience is in an ambiguous position: they know both more and less than each of the characters in isolation, but this knowledge is all logical speculation, which they know the film can overturn like a set of skittles from one moment to the next. Through cross-cutting they know that Alice does not have a lover she sees while her husband is at work; but the ellipses in this cross-cutting enable them to imagine that there are things they have not been shown, and will not discover until the end.
>
> The question is not what we know, but the form in which we learn it. (53)

Chion suggests two significant concepts here: the importance of the viewer's positioning in relation to the film text, and the importance of style in creating point-of-view.

Perspective establishes and reinforces the relationship of the viewer to a film text. *Eyes Wide Shut* allows the spectator to, figuratively, see the world through the eyes of Bill Harford. Bill's experiences guide us through this universe, and the action we see is shown because it is significant to this character. While we don't witness an accurate presentation of reality, we are given a clearer understanding of the people, places, and events in the story because of the stylistic choices being made. And these choices indicate that we are seeing what Bill feels.

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1. Some critics and "friends" of mine have suggested it's still boring. These people are wrong.

Related to this dynamic created between the viewer, the character, and the film (the viewer-character-film dynamic, if you will), the point-of-view adopted by a film creates an understanding and empathy within the viewer. Bill Harford may not be likable as his failed attempts at infidelity[2] are generally unappealing. The suspense and the way the film impacts us and engages us emotionally, however, depends entirely on the fact that the viewer experiences the events of the film as they relate to Bill. The sensations of fear, excitement, arousal, sadness, and so forth depend on the expressionistic use of the elements of style like sound, lighting, camerawork, and editing, to create the relevant character's perspective.

Theorist Edward Branigan writes that the idea of subjectivity "may be conceived as a specific instance or level of narration where the telling is *attributed* to a character in the narrative and received by us *as if* we were in the situation of a character" (73) [emphasis in original]. So subjectivity and perspective share a lot of similar ideas to the point of being synonymous.

I mention Branigan as he discusses two theoretical approaches to point-of-view: one approach aligns point-of-view with perception, the other with attitude. In reference to the argument for perception, Branigan writes:

> The approach seeks to expand, in a literal fashion, the "we see" into a set of spatial and temporal *constraints* on our vision—what the film presents to us. These constraints are to be interpreted as modelling the activity of a unique perceiver: we see "through a singular mind." For example, it is claimed that our perception of pictorial space is related to some person's monocular vision. The lines of linear perspective are used to define a hypothetical point of vision from which the space is ordered and made intelligent (perceived). This viewing position lies outside the represented space and corresponds to that place where a hypothetical observer of the scene, present at the scene, would have to stand in order to give us the space as pictured. (5–6) [emphasis in original]

Branigan certainly explained this in quite a dense way. However, this quote helps me identify three points which I will use to define "perspective" for my purposes here:

a) Perspective is a stylistic design, using the most basic elements of filmmaking, created in order to house (contain) and convey the point-of-view *of a specific character, whether the character is identified or not*;

2. I do love the nice touch of the word "fidelio" being used as the password to the orgy.

b) Perspective also indicates the elements of style which communicate a point-of-view which *connects or changes between multiple characters*;

c) Perspective relates to the point-of-view *of the spectator* in terms of both advance expectation (what we think will happen next) and immediate experiential viewing (how we are thinking about and processing what we are seeing) of the film.

My definition of perspective acknowledges both perception and attitude. But how can we identify perspective? First, perspective shows us what the viewer witnesses or experiences. Secondly, perspective affects how the events and information are communicated to the spectator.

Daniel Frampton writes of film as a thinking entity, a notion I find to be quite absurd. However, Frampton provides useful information in considering movies in this way: "In thinking 'for' a character the film can give an impression of their mental state, perhaps, without aligning itself point-of-view-style. We may in fact be looking at the character while seeing what they are feeling" (86). It sounds a bit inside-out, but the observation is sound: we don't need to be inside a character's head to see what they see and feel what they feel.

Experiencing fear: Horrors and Slashers

German expressionist cinema and its frequent depiction of horror stories provides the earliest and most significant examples of the close link between perspective and horror in film. The strange sets of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), and the exaggerated movement and performances as well as the disorienting editing in Fritz Lang's *M* (1931), prove this point. The sets of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* consist almost wholly of painted backdrops, which exaggerate the angles and features of the surroundings. These sets even include painted shadows, which can directly oppose the lighting of the characters in the foreground. Peter Lorre's performance in *M* changes from a mysterious sinister figure to a panicked man chased to, in the final sequences, a manically gesticulating madman of monstrous proportions. The editing disorients us, making sudden, jolting movements between similar conversations in different locations. One such sequence juxtaposes the police with the mob discussing how to handle the killer, making the viewer unsure of the specific location and thematically connecting the two seemingly disparate organizations.

Slasher films are no exception to the strong usage of perspective. Since slasher films usually have sparse, streamlined plots, filmmakers often use

perspective not only to provide the appropriate emotional response but also to fling the film through the flimsy fiction. While most movies tend to establish both a protagonist and an antagonist as soon as possible, slasher films often show us the antagonist first (even if their identity is a mystery), and slowly develop the protagonist, as secondary characters fall by the wayside. This makes sense when one considers the issue of perspective. We might not sense the immediate terror of the victim of a violent act if a slasher film adopted the perspective of a singular protagonist that meets the antagonist in the climax. This is why a film such as *Terror Train* (1980) benefits from slowly developing the characters, as the perspective can move fluidly between them, depending on who is experiencing a violent act. Sometimes—rarely, in fact—slashers jettison characters from the development of perspective. Impartial omniscience appears more often in other genres, but horror as a whole depends largely upon the effect provided by showing the viewer the experience of a character.

The choice of character perspective limits the scope of a story, dictating how the viewer is to respond to the events portrayed. For instance, a movie showing the perspective of a killer would look very different from a movie showing the perspective of a victim. Significantly, horror's tendency to change fluidly between perspectives allows for either added simplicity or complexity in how the story itself is presented.

For an example of simpler structure, we can look at most mainstream slasher films. *The Slumber Party Massacre* (1982), though thematically complex, employs changing perspectives to create a more straightforward episodic narrative. We see the events through a progressing series of victims. The escalation of violence and the deaths of increasingly more significant characters drives the film from sequence to sequence, as opposed to a cause-and-effect plot structure. *Psycho* (1960) also uses this episodic structure, but the changes in perspective discomfort the viewer more, and the transitions between perspectives must work more rigidly and intricately. After the infamous shower scene,[3] in which the seeming protagonist, Marion Crane, is brutally done away with, the camera is left to wander the hotel room, focusing on certain potentially significant details. Norman Bates then enters the scene, and after a seemingly protracted absence of any character for the film to use to dictate perspective, the film immediately assumes his point-of-view. The film experiences locations and events through Norman until the car containing Marion's body sinks into the swamp.

After a dissolve to black, the story resumes in a very jolting manner, immediately assuming the perspective of Marion's sister, Lila. At one point,

3. If you are sufficiently familiar with *Friday the 13th* and all of its sequels to be reading this book without having seen *Psycho*, you honestly deserve to have this spoiled for you.

the film's perspective moves to Detective Arbogast fairly seamlessly, but his death creates a jolt, making the transition back to Lila still uncomfortable. *Psycho* provides an interesting case due to the fact that the episodic nature of the plot is also driven by a cause-and-effect structure. This is unique as episodic films generally hinge on similar concepts or interrelated characters. However, Hitchcock builds *Psycho* on the seemingly unrelated set pieces, which are all connected by progressive developments in the search for Marion Crane and/or the money she has stolen. These changes in perspective affect the events seen and the film's structure as a whole.

Horror films also create perspective through the distortion of space. A sense of a character's perceived relationship to an object, or specifically a threat can heighten a viewer's emotional response. In an early scene in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1985), the menacing Freddy Krueger approaches the character of Tina from a distance. As he slowly moves towards her, he stretches his arms out, but his arms have grown to be several yards long. While his arms may not actually be that long, the film communicates Tina's feeling that his arms are overwhelming and inescapable. Tina's perception distorts space within the dream and the viewer experiences Tina's perspective. Slasher films frequently employ stylistic devices like wide-angle lenses that enhance swift movement towards the camera, low-angle shots that make the subject look big, high-angle shots that make the subject look small, and disproportionate relationships between subject and sound that create an unsettling and indeterminate sense of distance.

Finally, horror films accentuate and distort time through perspective. Filmmakers use devices like slow-motion, rapid editing, and crosscutting between simultaneous events to distort time. Within horror, these devices communicate the perspective of a particular character. Slow-motion provides a feel of a slowly moving but impending and inevitable action. Fast editing creates a sense of swift unexpected movement. Crosscutting between simultaneous events can create tension by protracting the time before an anticipated event.

We can understand a film's aesthetic design through perspective, which proves a valuable tool, and an appropriate starting point for beginning a formalist analysis of any film, particularly slashers. However, slashers do not stand alone in a vacuum with no history. The slasher, as a subgenre of horror, holds stylistic similarities to the genre dating back to early cinema. The slasher draws on stylistic elements outside horror, going as far back as the primitive silent film shorts. Theorists, historians, critics, and novelists have written many books about the history of moving images, and I imagine many more will be written for years to come. I won't recap all of this, as it would result in a much larger book, but it is important to understand where the stylistic

elements that have informed the way perspective is communicated in the slasher film originated.

The Eye/Camera: Looking like somebody else

The first-person camera, a very popular trope, shows a moving image from the point-of-view of a character. This camera position replicates movement and positioning that would connect the audience to the experience of seeing out of a person's eyes. Writers have grappled with ideas around this device, particularly in regards to horror. Academics and critics have theorized and interpreted the first-person shot in a variety of ways in terms of how it works, what it means, and whether it's a good or bad thing.

A critical book on slasher movies is never quite complete if it fails to acknowledge the work of Carol J. Clover. Her book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* broke assumptions about slashers in academia wide open, making them seem serious and legitimate subjects for study.[4] In this book, Clover brought the term "I"-camera to academic prominence, and critics regularly use it in relation to the slasher. Clover's model focuses on the relationship between the camera and the self, hence the use of "I."[5] However, this use of "I" creates a Gordian knot between the image and you. Ignoring yourself for a moment, as I clearly have trouble doing, this type of shot compresses three visual planes so that they inhabit the same space. The eye of the viewer, the lens of the camera, and the eye of the character within the film all exist within the same place and time (figure 1.1). These two sets of eyes, one real, one imagined, conjoined by the camera expresses something more akin to an "eye/camera" than an "I"-camera, and sometimes, a "mind's eye/camera." This term also bypasses those pesky debates about the link between first-person images and "identification," which we won't see the end of anytime soon.

Viewers should not put too much trust in the character eye; it is not always reliable and is subject to variety and change. Although viewers live different lives, and we change and grow as people (hopefully), we rarely change during the course of watching a movie. Furthermore, the movie itself never changes, unless Michael Mann, Ridley Scott, or heaven forbid, George Lucas should

4. She was by no means the first—Vera Dika wrote about them in her 1990 book *Games of Terror: Halloween, Friday the 13th, and the films of the Stalker Cycle*. And, prior to that, Robin Wood in 1986 addressed them in his book *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, which was updated in 2003.

5. This connection resembles Dziga Vertov's idea of the "kino eye" (1922).

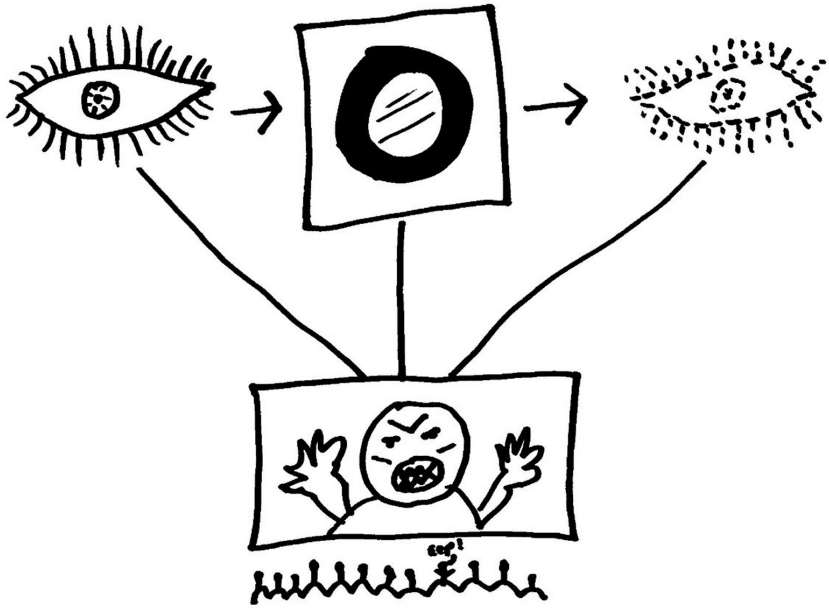

Figure 1.1. Author's drawing of how the eye/camera works. Viewer eye → camera lens → Character eye.

slip in silently and tinker with your DVDs. The camera codes the eye/camera composition, and the viewer decodes these elements to perceive a first-person point-of-view.[6] The character eye influences the image's design, and each character presumably has different qualities. This creates distinctive differences in eye/camera coding from film to film, and visual representations of the eye/camera have evolved since the origins of cinema.

The eye/camera contains very specific elements, which make the audience aware that it is witnessing a first-person point-of-view. The shaky image of a handheld camera creates an unsteadiness that is usually associated with personal eye, head, and body movement. Viewers may recognize the swish pan/tilt, which also results from filming with a handheld camera. A swift movement of the camera upwards, downwards, or from side to side mimics human head and eye movement. We may also detect an eye/camera shot from an image filmed at a relatable or understandable height. The camera

6. Keep in mind that I don't mean "coding" and "decoding" as in creating hidden messages in the manner of "the killer is a symbol for Trump's attitude to climate change." I refer more about creating an image with certain narrative meanings, such as an image where the characters are around trees, but it is very dark around them, so they are likely in a forest and it's probably nighttime.

typically shoots the action from a height of about six feet with a variation of approximately six inches. This height variant reflects the perceived height of an adult human.[7] These basic elements reflect median human experiential vision. While variations on these elements occur, the variants tend to be exceptions that prove the rule.

The genealogy of Jason's eyeballs

The eye/camera appeared quite early in the history of cinema, although the elements I have outlined do not firmly appear until the early 1940s, and the device itself evolves along with cinematic technology. Two films from George Albert Smith provide the opportunity to examine the early history of the eye/camera as they both house the camera within the theoretical position of a character's eye. *Grandma's Reading Glass* (1900) assumes the point-of-view of a child looking through a reading glass, highlighting this eye/camera shot through a wide black iris. This also helped develop early film language, particularly concerning editing. A shot of somebody looking followed by a cut to their point-of-view makes visual representation seem consistent and guides the flow of the narrative, which is also demonstrated in *As Seen Through a Telescope* (1900).

Although it's not the first horror film, nor the first German expressionist film, F. W. Murnau's movie *Nosferatu* (1922) contains an instructive example of the way the horror genre uses the eye/camera, while also using strange variations of the device. Let us consider one of the most recognizable sequences in the movie: Hutter's first night in the castle of Count Orlock. When the clock chimes midnight, Hutter moves to the bedroom door, opens it a crack and peers out. At this point, we see the shots shown in figures 1.2 through 1.4, with the first two shots connected by a dissolve.

Hutter runs to the window to look for a way out, but the climb down is impossible. Hutter gets in his bed and watches as the door to the room opens on its own. Figures 1.5 through 1.8 show the next series of shots: Hutter looks away, Orlock approaches toward the camera, Hutter covers his head with a sheet, and Orlock enters the room, looking from the camera to the bed.

While this sequence seems to engage the audience without drawing the viewer into the first-person, I would argue that Murnau uses the eye/camera in a way that plays with perspective and subverts typical spatial relationships.

7. People, of course, come in all sizes, but where Hollywood is concerned, hegemony is the *ordre des affaires*.

About the author

Photo credit: 2016, James Taylor-Mémé

Wickham Clayton is a lecturer in film production at the University for the Creative Arts in Farnham, UK. He is coeditor of *Screening Twilight: Critical Approaches to a Cinematic Phenomenon* and editor of *Style and Form in the Hollywood Slasher Film* and *The Bible Onscreen in the New Millennium: New Heart and New Spirit*. This is the first book he's written by himself.