THE CAMERA EYE ON THE EDGE OF THE 'BALCONY SCENE'

Eliza Claudia FILIMON[1]

Abstract

The camera eye becomes a looking glass for the subtle display of feelings Romeo and Juliet share in the notorious 'balcony scene' in five equally famous movie adaptations.

Keywords: love, framing, editing, subjective perspective, objective perspective.

Films are polyphonic media which speak to audiences on various levels, some fairly easy to decode while others unveil deeper meanings only to the trained eye. Shot angles, framing and camera movement, which make up a key slice of cinematography, provide the key to understanding film point of view, the answer to why we feel strongly for certain characters in the movie.

The focus of the ensuing technical analysis is the "balcony scene" in five famous adaptations of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* listed in the order of their appearance: *Romeo and Juliet* (1936) directed by George Cukor, *West Side Story* (1961) directed by Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins, *Romeo and Juliet* (1968) directed by Franco Zeffirelli, *Romeo and Juliet* (1996) directed by Baz Luhrman, and *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) directed by John Madden. Each director skilfully manipulates frames, angles and movement to add a meaningful message to the Shakespearian legacy.

Alessandro Giovannelli (2009) signals three forms of sympathy in his minute analysis of the overlapping between sympathy and empathy, yet only two present interest to my analysis: anticipatory sympathy, which refers to the spectator's emotions stemming from knowing more than the characters or rightly anticipating the narrative development. The source of the spectators' emotions is a character's future and certain experience. Conditional sympathy, on the other hand, is related to the character's possible experience, one that would change the narrative course, yet not available to characters. They will not be provided with the information spectators have from sources unavailable to the characters under discussion.

The third theoretical division I considered for my approach is Murray Smith's three stage approach of sympathy (1995), set according to the intensity of spectator-character engagement: recognition, alignment and allegiance. We instantly connect to the lead characters on screen, as we recognize their chief role in the narrative development of the story, from the opening scenes in a movie. The recognition stage relies on our knowledge of the genre's conventions and our expectations are easily met or upset if the main character is suddenly removed from the movie before the climatic confrontation. Alignment with a character is firstly spatial-temporal, and refers to our physical focus on

[1] Asisstant Prof. PhD., University of the West, Timișoara

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the character. The critic draws attention that, as we are glued to the character's actions, we are also provided with access to his/her thoughts, memories, we learn what his/her motivations are, a level he names subjective access, 'the process by which spectators are placed in relation to characters in terms of access to their actions and to what they know and feel,' (1994:41). Allegiance, the third and most intense stage of sympathy, means approval, taking sides with the character in a moral sense. Smith claims that *allegiance* 'pertains to the moral and ideological evaluation of characters by the spectator' (1994:41), what we understand by character identification. There is seldom perfect similarity between the feelings of a character and those we experience as witnesses, but this does not exclude identification from the least intense to the highest emotional involvement.

Romeo and Juliet (1936) dir. by George Cukor

The opening scene places us close to Juliet, who is talking about Romeo, out on the balcony. We see her in medium-shot, framed from the waist up at eye-level. Both the distance of framing and the angle of framing support her confession, and we are drawn close to her display of feelings. At first glance this view of Juliet seems to be from hidden Romeo's perspective. Similarly, the ensuing high-angle, medium-shot of Romeo stepping into the lit area under Juliet's balcony appears to be a point-of-view shot form Juliet's perspective. This impression is contradicted by the next subjective long-shot of Romeo, from Juliet's perspective, framed in high-angle, which places the lovers at distance as they address one another. The next sequence of shots provides an unsettling experience to the viewer because of the mismatch between the angle of framing and the distance of framing in most shots of Juliet on the balcony; we see her framed in low-angle, which would naturally be Romeo's view of Juliet, so that such shots could be classified as either subjective or point-of view shots. However, as far as the distance of framing goes, Juliet is seen in medium-shots, too close to Romeo at this stage, since he has not yet moved closer to her. The discrepancy is more acutely felt as we see Romeo in low-angle shots, as if from Juliet's perspective, yet again from too close, namely in medium shots. The use of the latter shot types satisfies our desire to see the characters' faces and read their feelings in their acting style. Perhaps the fast alternation between objective shots and subjective ones, as long as the distance of framing is strikingly switched between long-shots and close-ups without any of the characters moving to justify the shift, creates a confusing position for the viewer, who is neither the objective eavesdropper nor in any of the character's shoes for long enough to enjoy the benefits.

Once Romeo starts climbing to get near Juliet, the objective long-shot provides an accurate sense of how far the two lovers have been, reinforcing the domination of objective shots over subjective ones, up to this point. As Romeo stops below the balcony, a series of four subjective shots follow, alternating Romeo's and Juliet's perspective of each other in medium close-up shots, framed either in low-angle or high-angle. The switch from subjective shots to point-of view shots is intercut with an objective long shot of both lovers framed at eye-level. Two shots of Romeo clearly from

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Juliet's perspective, as her left shoulder is visible, are mismatched because they frame Romeo in slightly higher angles than expected. Objective medium close-up shots focus on each character as they speak, with Juliet framed first in a close-up shot from a low-angle view. We see her in close-up two more times in the sequence, once in an objective shot similar to the above mentioned example and once more in a subjective shot, from Romeo's perspective. On the other hand, Romeo appears in close-up only one time, in a subjective shot, from Juliet's perspective.

In terms of duration, the longest shot is a two-shot of the lovers holding hands; we see them in a profile medium-shot, from eye level, and feel the intensity of their emotions underscored by the non-diegetic tune which takes over the auditory line once Juliet bids Romeo "good-night" and leaves. Romeo is followed in high-angle perspective as he climbs down, as if form Juliet's point of view; since she has already left the balcony, this closing shot is undoubtedly an objective one.

West Side Story(1961) dir. Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins

Maria and Tony are out on the balcony with us at close proximity, as we witness their brief verbal exchange form medium close-up, in an eye-level point-of-view shot of Maria which shortly turns into a high-angle view. This latter one is matched by a low-angle point-of-view shot of Tony, who is sitting on the balcony rail while Maria is standing before him.

The fifth shot in the sequence is the first objective one, an eye-level medium-shot of the two lovers, brief in duration but functioning as an establishing shot which gives us a sense of placement in space.

As Maria sings her turn we keep an eye on Tony, in a low-angle medium shot form Maria's perspective, which is followed by a high-angle medium close-up shot of Maria from Tony's high-angle position as she sings his name. The camera takes its distance once more in a shot identical to the fifth described above, as Tony comes down and faces Maria, never letting go of her hand.

There are only two close-up shots in the balcony scene, both of the protagonists' faces, the first is of Tony from Maria's perspective, while the second is of Maria opening her eyes, from Tony's stance. Both bring us close to the lovers' emotions and reinforce the message of the song they are singing to each other. An objective eye-level medium close-up shot is inserted between the two close-up shots, displaying Tony and Maria in profile view. The camera lingers on the two longer than in the previous shots, standing in place as they embrace.

We step further back in the thirteenth shot to watch Maria first kneeling, then standing up and eventually turning to face the camera together with Tony while singing. They are viewed in medium eye-level shot with a stationary camera from the start of the shot to its end, when they turn to one another.

We are swept close by in the ending sequence, in a medium close-up shot of the two, with Tony kissing Maria's forehead and her bidding him "Buenas Noches".

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Romeo and Juliet (1968) dir. Franco Zeffirelli

The sequence begins with two eye-level close-ups on Romeo's face, intercut with a medium close-up shot of Juliet seen from a low angle, which would presumably induce our assumption that we are dealing with a subjective shot or a point-of-view shot. However, Romeo is not physically close enough to Juliet yet, not is she aware of Rome's presence. The fourth and the sixth shots are indeed point-of-view shot of Juliet from Romeo's low-angle perspective, more distant this time, paralleled by two similar medium shots of Romeo, seemingly from Juliet's high-angle perspective. These truly are objective shots which mimic, or anticipate Juliet's view, since she has not yet seen Romeo from her position on the balcony.

The objective focus is maintained, somewhat in contrast to the intimacy created by the close-up views of Romeo in high-angle, or of Juliet in low-angle.

The first real point-of-view shot in the balcony sequence is the tenth, a low-angle shot of Juliet. It is the most distant, as well, an extremely long shot, which gives us a sense of perspective as far as the position of the two protagonists is concerned. On the other hand, it casts doubt on Romeo's ability to hear the words spoken thus far by his beloved.

An objective close-up on Romeo's face informs us of his surprise on hearing Juliet's wishes, and his eyes follow the direction of her movement, as she walks down the stairs. We see her in a low-angle long shot from Romeo's perspective, walking down and giving free rein to her wishes of removing the "name" obstacle from their love-story.

Three close-up shots of Romeo's face follow, in low-angle view, as if from Juliet's perspective. They are all objective shots, because she is still too far away and unaware of his presence. Two long point-of-view-shots of Juliet are intercut between those mentioned above, with the notable difference that she turns and faces the camera in one of them, as she speaks, resuming her descent.

The camera focuses on Romeo from a distance, in the next shot, which is a long one, in high-angle, showing the young man coming out from the bushes to answer Juliet's call. The scene becomes dynamic in content, with Juliet starting in surprise at Romeo's appearance, as well as in form, since her face is shown in an objective low-angle close-up shot underscored by Romeo's enthusiastic declaration.

Juliet's perspective is captured briefly in the coming shot, a high-angle long shot of Romeo, followed by a last close-up shot of the girl running down to meet the man of her dreams.

Romeo and Juliet (1996) dir. by Baz Luhrman

Romeo's status as an intruder is signalled by the diegetic barking of the dogs, descriptive noises of objects falling as the clumsy Romeo makes his way around the swimming-pool, trying to stay as close to the shady areas, out of sight. We see him in two long shots, at eye-level, cut with a medium shot in high-angle. The latter is short in terms of duration, aiming to mark our alignment with the character's tense feelings, further

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emphasized by his audible short breath. The closed window of Juliet's room is focused in the first subjective shot of the sequence, a medium one, in low-angle, from Romeo's perspective. As he starts climbing the handy rope ladder to reach it, the camera shows him in high-angle medium close-up, the same distance of focalization being preserved in the next two subjective shots of her window, meant to track Romeo's physical proximity. A high-angle close-up on his face is intercut between the two subjective shots; it lasts longer, until he delivers his speech praising Juliet's beauty and invoking her presence. The nurse shows up instead of Juliet and we witness her scrutinizing glance onto the yard from Romeo's perspective, in a subjective medium close-up shot, in low angle.

The camera resumes its objective distance and focalizes both the nurse at the window and Romeo's disgusted grimace and rushed climb down to hide, in an eye-level medium shot. Once the nurse is out of focus, the objective camera tracks Romeo's climb down from a close distance, an eye-level medium close-up shot which also captures Juliet's arrival into the yard from the right side. Romeo is still facing the wall, we see him in close-up, but the camera zooms out to a long shot of Romeo and Juliet close to each other, although Juliet has not seen him around the corner. On the other hand, Romeo's realization is underlined with a close-up shot of his face, eyes closed, followed by two medium shots of the two lovers, intercut with a close-up shot of Romeo again, a profile view, indicating the direction of his gaze.

When Juliet begins her monologue a hide-and-seek framing game sets off. The camera first focalizes Romeo's happy facial expression in an eye-level close-up shot, and then moves onto Juliet as she approaches the pool. The medium-shot enables us to see Romeo behind her, while his wonder is further emphasized in a close-up of his face. A misleading high-angle medium-shot of Juliet seems to be a subjective one, had it not been for its frontal perspective. Juliet bows to touch the water, but Romeo is behind her. While a high-angle view would be appropriate from his stand point, he is not facing Juliet at that moment. Before the shot is repeated, a close-up of Romeo moving away from the wall is inserted as a transition to a medium-tilt of Juliet standing, with Romeo walking behind her. A close-up of his face is followed by the only extreme close-up shot in the whole segment, focusing Juliet's eyes as she screams in surprise at Romeo's presence. Their fall into the pool is presented in a high angle medium-long shot paralleled by a medium-shot of the watch inside his room, alerted by Juliet's scream, turning to check the screens which show no particular disturbance outside. Romeo and Juliet under water are shot from eye-level, in medium close-up. The profile shot captures their fluid movements which seem to be rendered in slow motion, making us sense their need for air.

A camera tilt tracks their coming to the surface and a long take frames them in close-up and medium close-up as they speak to each other. Romeo's daring attitude and Juliet's watchful gesture of pushing him back into the water are kept in focus in the same lasting shot. A second close-up shot of the guard is completed with a point-of-view shot of the pool in high-angle, from the man's perspective. When he comes outside we see him from Juliet's perspective, while an objective profile shot of poor Romeo under water is set

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in contrast to an exchange of polite smiles between the guard and Juliet, who is trying to hide Romeo behind her, under water.

The kissing shot is the longest take is the sequence and frames the two lovers in close-up shots from either profile view or front view, matching their turn in delivering the lines in between passionate moments.

A series of point-of-view shots marks their prolonged moment of saying "good-night"; Juliet's perspective is a low-angle close-up view of Romeo, while the man's subjective perspective is notably different in terms of angle of framing, namely low-angle while she is out of the pool, or low-angle when they are both out.

The sequence ends in objective shots of both, trying to delay the moment of separation, but the high-angle shot, which takes over Juliet's subjective stance is maintained even after Juliet is no longer in sight.

Shakespeare in Love (1998) dir. by John Madden

A fading non-diegetic tune sets the scene as the first floor apartment is initially shown in extremely long shot, slowly zoomed in and focused in low-angle long-shot, with Viola coming out on the balcony and mentioning Romeo's name. The camera pans to the left, still focusing on Viola while an off-screen diegetic voice calls "My Lady".

These opening objective shots are followed by a high-angle subjective shot of Will Shakespeare, in high-angle, making a rushed appearance from behind the trees. This shot establishes the physical distance between the two participants, which is halved in the next medium objective shot presenting Viola in low-angle. Three identical subjective shots of Will in medium, high-angle view ensue, intercut with two objective shots of Viola in low-angle medium close-up, which mimic Will's perspective, had he been closer to the woman.

Before Viola answers the nurse's call and goes inside she is focused in a low angle close-up shot, which enables us to witness her frustration on having to cut her meeting short. The medium close-up focus is preserved in the presentation of Will in the twelfth shot. He is facing us at eye-level, with his back to the wall, aware of his status as intruder.

As soon as Viola is back outside two subjective shots of the lady follow, a medium one and a medium close-up, smoothly cut with an objective medium shot of Will looking up. Their verbal exchanges are visually matched and balanced in the seventeenth shot, an objective medium close-up of Viola, framed in a slight low angle.

An abrupt shift in distance follows with a brief view of Will in an objective long shot. We get closer to him, as he starts climbing up the weeds, and the camera tracks his movement in alternate low-angle and eye-level medium shots, so that we share Will's perspective. The non-diegetic music has a foreshadowing function and gives the shot a sense of comic suspense, heightened by parallel editing of shots from inside the house, with the old nurse approaching the window, and medium shots from outside, where Will is anxious to reach the window and meet Viola. The climatic encounter is anticipated in a brief objective close-up shot of both Will and the nurse before they see each other, which

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triggers our humorous reaction. A point of view shot of Will from the nurse's perspective comes next, underscored by the alert non-diegetic music, completed by a second point of view shot of the nurse from Will's stance. The moment their eyes meet is marked by diegetic screams on both sides, while the camera focuses their faces in medium close-ups. Will's fall and landing on a bush are presented in two objective profile shots, his fall in low-angle and his safe landing from eye-level, shots that serve to inform us that the protagonist is safe despite the unfortunate accident.

The camera slips into Will's view in the next long point of view shot of the still screaming nurse, framed in worm's eye view. Her screams ring louder to alert the guards as Will stands up and starts running toward camera, to safety. His narrow escape is captured in an eye-level long shot, from the front, which gives us visual information about the number of guards following the protagonist. The suspense of the chase is, nevertheless, minimized at the level of sound, as the persisting diegetic scream of the old nurse infuses the scene with humour.

The five scenes selected for analysis reshape the same scene from Shakespeare's play, yet they differ in the vantage point used for dramatic presentation. All five productions are powerful artistic expressions from which we can derive a deep understanding of human nature, romantic love and the trouble of our times. In line with Bela Balazs' observation that "every picture shows not only a piece of reality, but a point of view as well" (1979:38), this in-depth approach proves that the camera eye allows the audience to shift perspective with a frequency, completeness and suddenness no human eye can catch.

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Movies

Romeo and Juliet (1936) directed by George Cukor

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