Bangkok and three up-country cinemas in the provincial centres, Lampang, Khorat and Prae. Ultimately, in latter 1932, the operations of the Siam Cinema Company together with those of the Queen's Theatre were taken over by the United Cinema Company [*Borisat phaphayon saha sinema*], a new conglomerate of Thai and European investors in which King Prajadhipok had a controlling interest. See Boonrak, 1992, pp.64–5. *National Archives* R 7 rachalekha [Royal Secretariat], 18/23, 18/30, 18/48. Throughout the 1930s this new venture was able to maintain a similar type of monopoly position to that exercised by the Siam Cinema Company and opened a number of new cinemas including the Sala Chalerm Krung, Bangkok's first modern, air-conditioned theatre. Following Prajadhipok's abdication in 1935 the company was taken over by the state under whose control it remained Thailand's premier cinema enterprise until the post-World War II period when American film interests moved into the country and established their own distribution network and theatres. Dome, 1982 [a], p. 24.

37. Dome Sukwong, *Prawat phaphayon thai* [The History of Thai Film], Bangkok: Ongkan kha kho'ng khurusapha, 1990: p.8. Another, somewhat less well-known, film maker who began work shortly after the prince was *Phra* Sathaphong [Tuay], the owner of the Ratana Cinema. Dome, 1990: p.9. One of his films screened at the cinema was, 'a view of Bangkok streets taken from a moving cart .' *B.T.*, 23 October 1909.
38.. *B.T.*, 27 November 1903.
39. *B.T.*, 20 March 1911, 8 January 1912.
40. Dome, 1984: p.88. This may have been influenced by a Pathé comic film of early 1906, *Mésaventures d'un Chapeau*. See Henri Bousquet, *Catalogue Pathé des Années 1896 à 1914*: vol.1, 1896 à 1906 (Henri Bousquet, 1996).
41. For example see Dome, 1990, p.12; Lent, 1990, p.213; Sakdina Chatrakul na Ayudhya, 'Direction Unknown' in *Cinema* (Summer 1989) [pp.58-62]: p.58.
42. I have been unable to locate any vernacular sources which refer to the film using its Thai name.
43. *B.T.*, 29 February 1912.
44. *B.T.*, 20, 25 March 1912.
45. Sakdina Chatakul na Ayudhya, 'Phaphayon kap kan t'o su chon chan nai huang wela haeng dan phlat phaendin' [Film and Class Struggle in the Time of Political Change], *Sethasat kan mu'ang*, 7, 1–2, (January-June, 1989 [pp.15–32]): pp.16–7; Dome Sukwong, 'Khut khru nang kao kho'ng krom rot-fai luang' [Unearthing the old films of the Royal Railway Film Unit], *Silapa-wathanatham*, 2, 12 (October 1981), pp. 51–63.
46. *B.T.*, 4 September 1922.

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The Figure Seen from the Rear, Vitagraph, and the Development of Shot/Reverse Shot

Robert Spadoni

Most mainstream films and television dramas today contain instances of the editing pattern known as shot/reverse shot. In this pattern, at least two shots alternate views of two persons who are having a conversation or otherwise in some interaction, usually a face-to-face one. Sometimes the shoulder of the rear-facing figure in the shot is visible; other times the framing implies that this shoulder is somewhere just behind the camera lens. As Kristin Thompson points out, this device is among the most common figures in the spatial system of the classical Hollywood cinema,[1] and it is, as David Bordwell has explained, an enormously flexible and versatile technique.[2]

Some of the first appearances of shot/reverse shot are in films made by the Vitagraph Company of America in the 1910s.[3] These appearances are related to other practices that, while not exclusive to Vitagraph filmmaking, are highly characteristic of it. I will trace the development of shot/reverse shot back to certain issues of depth staging and to how Vitagraph in particular responded to these issues. Of special importance will be Vitagraph's practice of placing rear-facing figures in the foregrounds of shots. This essay will not be an attempt to give a general history of the development of shot/reverse shot, but to describe how Vitagraph practice became a particularly significant site for its innovation and adoption.

As Ben Brewster and others have noted, the French Films d'Art had influentially deep sets. First appearing in 1907, these films resembled story films from earlier in the decade in their tableau stagings and distant camera. Particularly influential among them was *L'Assassinat du duc de Guise* (The Assassination of the Duc de Guise, 1908).[4] Stagings in this film took advantage of built sets whose depths the makers wanted viewers to notice and appreciate. To this end (and others), they applied at least three techniques.

In a rich essay on deep staging in early French films, Brewster describes an emphasis technique that has been used in films since before the turn of the century. This technique consists simply of placing extras in the scenographic depth while keeping the principal actors in the foreground.[5] A second technique can be traced back more closely to *L'Assassinat du duc de Guise* and produces more dramatic results. This technique is to lower the camera from the previously typical eye level to around waist

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Fig. 1. *L'Assassinat du duc de Guise.* [Le Film d'Art, 1908]

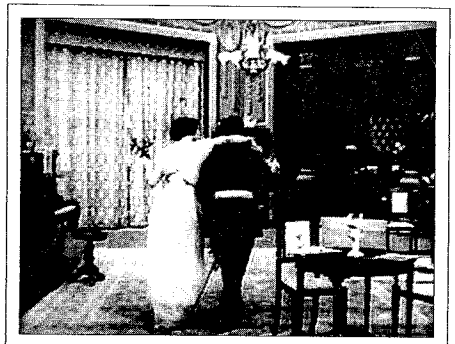

Fig. 2. *Ma l'amor mio non muore!* [Film Artistica 'Gloria', 1913]

level.[6] The effectiveness of this technique, Brewster explains, derives in part from the fact that, from the lower height, figures and objects that are closer to the camera appear larger than they do when viewed from eye level.[7] The result is an increased difference between the sizes of figures and objects in the foreground and ones in the background, a change that increases the viewer's sense of the depth of the space depicted.

Insight on the third and perhaps the most potent emphasis technique comes by way of Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin. In his influential study of transformations in style from Renaissance to Baroque paintings he describes a shift from planimetric compositions to 'recessional' ones, or compositions that emphasise depth, and he notes that 'recession speaks most intensely when it can reveal itself as movement'.[8] This is the case in films also, only less abstractly so since figures in films can actually move.[9] With respect to our other two techniques, figures *moving* through depth tend to bring the depth to life more dynamically than ones merely *placed* in depth (as in technique one); and they draw direct impetus from technique two, since from the lower vantage point, figures moving into and out of the depth will now shrink and enlarge more quickly. Figure 1 shows these techniques at work in *L'Assassinat*. This enlargement also shows what can happen when, in films, recession reveals itself as movement: actors can turn their backs to the camera.

Another instance of figures moving to emphasise depth occurs five years later and emphasises a much greater depth. In the Italian *Ma l'amor mio non muore!* (But my love does not die!, 1913), in one of the film's extended-duration shots, Elsa Holbein (film diva Lyda Borelli) and her father slowly make their way into the recesses of a richly appointed set (Fig. 2).[10] This is another case of the figure seen from the rear, another in which the appearance is a byproduct of movement in the service of calling attention to depth. When Italian diva cinema did present the backs of figures, it was often with exquisite care. At Vitagraph at around the same time, presentations of the backs of figures were both much more casual and common.

This casualness and commonness are decisive factors, two reasons why the rear-facing figure that was to function as an intermediate stage in the development of shot/reverse shot made its most sustained and frequent appearances in Vitagraph films. Why not also in other American films? Why not in European films? It is not difficult to imagine filmmakers spread across several filmmaking practices, many diverse and dispersed artists and technicians all tackling many of the same storytelling problems, hitting on this highly versatile editing pattern roughly simultaneously. And yet, after describing applications of the pattern in Vitagraph films, including in a 1913 film in which 25 of its 75 shots are in shot/reverse-shot pairs, Barry Salt notes that 'in European films made in 1912 and 1913 one finds a few extremely rare instances of reverse-

Fig. 3. Leonardo, *Last Supper.* [© 1999 Alinari/Art Resource, NY]

angle cutting, but only under the same severely limited conditions as in Griffith's films. Basically that means in scenes involving a theatre and audience.'[11] So why not a case of shot/reverse shot breaking out in a dozen spots at once across the filmmaking world? This question jumps us too far ahead. Let us instead ask about the Vitagraph rear-facing figure, the intermediate stage.

Fig. 4. *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (Edison, 1902). Josh's theatre box is visible behind and to the left.

Consider briefly Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*, in which Wölfflin finds a 'wall-like compactness which forces the plane upon us'[12] (Fig. 3). He describes many formal aspects of the transformation from this flat Renaissance technique to the greater depth in Baroque paintings. A comparison of the early film *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (Edison, 1902) to later films suggests that a roughly similar transformation took place in the cinema.[13] For our comparison of these two transformations, I propose just one term: 'wall-like compactness'.

In *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show*, in which a country rube mistakes various films for the real things, we see Josh from behind whenever he rises from his box in the theatre. However, when Josh is seated he is, to borrow a term from theatrical

Fig. 5. Tiepolo, *The Last Supper*. [© 1999 Giraudon/Art Resource, NY]

stage blocking, 'cheated out'. It is as though to look at the depicted film screen from over his shoulder was compositionally a bad idea in 1902 (or perhaps one that occurred to few filmmakers). Even when Josh is out of his seat, he and the screen remain virtually in the same plane (Fig. 4). This film typifies the 'visual "flatness"' which Noël Burch believes characterises many pre-1906 films.[14] In its staging we see something at least distantly comparable to Wölfflin's Renaissance 'will to the plane'.[15]

Now, as the dramatic playing areas on interior film sets became deeper, how was this visual flatness overcome?[16] In his consideration of Tiepolo's *Last Supper*, a Baroque work, Wölfflin points out one way that in painting the plane was broken down. In this type of painting, Wölfflin writes, 'the spectator is compelled to co-relate in recession'[17] (Fig. 5). Note that Tiepolo's arrangement of figures includes a figure seen from the rear. Elsewhere Wölfflin writes generally about developments from planimetrics to recession: 'If we attempt to compare the characteristic transformations, the simplest case would be the transposition of the alignment in two-figure scenes into a diagonal recession'. His example, Tintoretto's *Adam and Eve*, presents another figure seen from the rear (Fig. 6).[18]

Is the example suggested by these paintings followed in film? The answer is 'yes and no', for the diagonal recessional figure alignments that Wölfflin describes are by no means natural byproducts of depth staging in the cinema. In films following the practice of the French Films d'Art, they are permitted or blocked by other conventions that are simultaneously shaping particular filmmaking practices. Simply deepening the playing area does not automatically produce rear-facing figures. For example, Brewster describes Italian diva cinema and its Danish precursor:

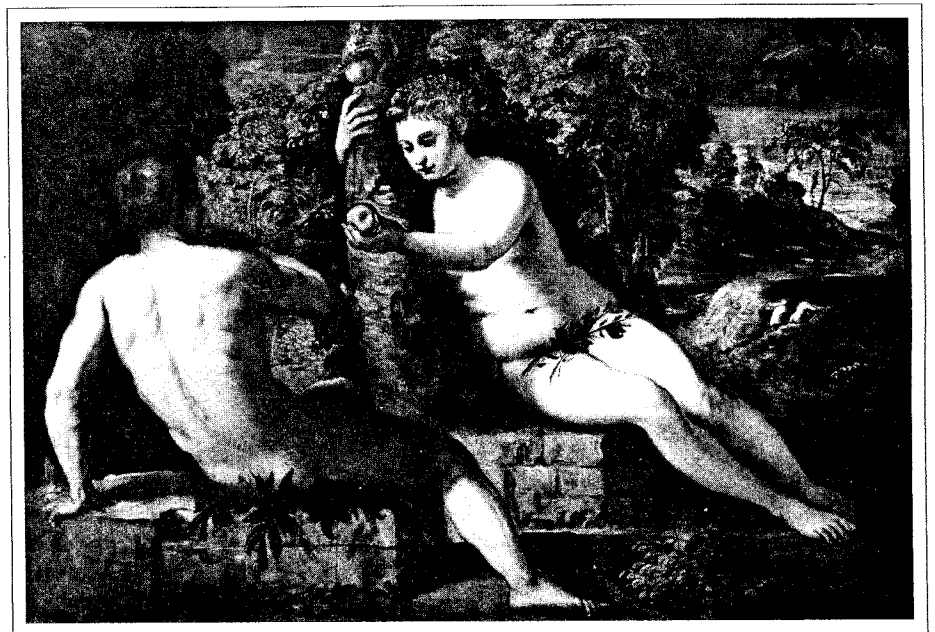

Fig. 6. Tintoretto, *Adam and Eve*. [© 1999 Alinari/Art Resource, NY]

> Far from the Vitagraph practice of actors turning their backs to camera, the early films of Asta Nielson show a staging where the main actress tends to gaze towards the camera, or rather towards a point somewhere over the spectators' heads, and this characteristic was picked up and exaggerated in the Italian cinema with the development of the *diva*, so that in films like *Assunta Spina* (1915), Francesca Bertini spends a lot of her time looking at us while the male characters gaze at her in adoration and at each other in jealousy.[19]

Diva cinema then, though it stages in depth, centres itself upon an acting style that tends to orient its stars toward the front. For this reason, films such as *Ma l'amor mio non muore!* afford only limited opportunities for diagonal recessional alignments of the sort that Wölfflin describes.

Furthermore, when diva cinema did present a figure seen from the rear, it was often one that aimed to be the magnetic centre of attraction. In *Theatre To Cinema: Stage Pictorialism and the Early Feature Film*, Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs describe in detail one such appearance, a use of the back that is quite characteristic of Borelli's interpretation of film diva conventions. Borelli makes an exit into the far back of the film's luxuriously deep three-room set. Her exit, they point out, takes much longer than the exits of two other actors who have also gone out that way; compared with these other two, her exit 'makes full use of the extreme depth of the set'.[20] In this lingering retreat Borelli slowly and carefully displays her back to the camera, and the movement is punctuated by moments in which she turns or half-turns to face front and assume a pose or make a highly deliberate gesture. The authors also describe Borelli investing the same delicate intensity into poses and gestures – which, they stress, never quite freeze into stillness – with her back to the camera, including, for example, the moment when 'at the penultimate stair, she turns back to camera, arches her back, leans her head back, and pauses briefly'.[21]

Fig. 7. *The Cricket on the Hearth.* [Biograph, 1909]

Fig. 8. *The Cricket on the Hearth.*

Likewise, the path-making work of D.W. Griffith beginning at Biograph in the late 1900s made only limited and, as in diva performance, most notably quite *dramatic* uses of rear-facing figures. Many of these films demonstrate the commitment to keeping facial expressions in view which Roberta Pearson relates to Griffith's movement toward restraint in film acting.[22] This movement, which helped direct Griffith to his bold innovations in closer views, also encouraged a pronounced frontality in his stagings.[23] This frontality is evident in his 1909 film *The Cricket on the Hearth*.

In this film, two men converse in front of the King George Inn. (One has his back to the camera, but he is not in the foreground and, like his pipe-smoking friend and the hats they wear, is hardly more than a picturesque detail.[24]) Into the foreground from the left walks Edward (Owen Moore), a major character. Moore has some acting to do before going inside, namely, to mime having come to his final destination. Moore integrates his performance of this recognition with patting a dog. The patting action splits Moore's attention between the sign hanging behind him and the dog standing in front of him. The dog, as Tom Gunning points out, represents a touch of realistic detail in the scene[25], but it also helps justify the actor keeping his shoulders forward while swiveling his head back towards the sign and then looking fully around again, twice, before turning and going inside (Figs. 7–8). The desire to keep frontal also seems to inform some staging business in a later scene, when Dot (Linda Arvidson) leads the disguised Edward to the weeping May (Violet Mesereau) by tugging him around to May's seated figure, a choice that helps justify Arvidson backing in a semicircle – even after she has let go of Moore – and thus avoiding having to turn her back on the camera (Fig. 9).

More generally, throughout this film one can note actors who are always or most of the time facing forward and arranged in loosely lateral fashion across the frame. Salt suggests how this 1909 film is also characteristic of later Griffith films: 'amongst American film-makers, D.W. Griffith was notable for the way he persisted with a frontal organization of his stagings right through into the 'twenties, even when everyone else had followed the Vitagraph example'.[26] *The Cricket on the Hearth* also illustrates Brewster's characterisation of Griffith's Biograph stagings as 'eminently shallow'.[27] I suggest that this commitment to frontality and these shallow stagings help account for the scarcity of reverse-angle cuts that Salt finds running even into Griffith's 1920s films.[28] A turn to Vitagraph will help explain why this is so. However, first a brief consideration of some rear-facing figures that Griffith does deploy will further suggest why shot/reverse shot did not appear in his Biograph films with any regularity.

Griffith does place some rear-facing figures to striking effect, as Gunning has shown. One example is in *The Awakening* (1909), when Mary Pickford's character expresses grief at the departure of her husband. Of this moment Gunning writes that,

Fig. 9. *The Cricket on the Hearth.*

Fig. 10. *Vanity Fair.* [Vitagraph, 1911]

'instead of turning then to the camera and miming out her grief as [Florence] Lawrence frequently did, Pickford remains with her back to the camera, drops her arms, and bows her head in despair'.[29] Here viewer attention is calculated to be primarily aimed at this back, not past it. Gunning sums up the technique that produced the most memorable rear-facing figures in Griffith's Biograph films, and attributes a meaning to them related to the larger development of what he calls Griffith's 'narrator system':

> The Biograph actors' technique was to play key emotional scenes with their back to the camera, very different from the Vitagraph practice of actors having their backs to the camera at undramatic moments. For example, Wilfred Lucas sits with his back to the camera as he beholds the charred ruins of his plantation on his return from the Civil War in *Swords and Hearts* (1911). The practice indirectly acknowledges the pressure exerted by the voyeur camera.[30]

At such moments, characters with nowhere to hide use their backs to shield themselves against the camera's 'single probing eye'.[31] To perform such a function, these backs must have appreciable bulk and opaqueness. As Gunning writes, 'these private moments solicit audience involvement, in part by blocking it', and this is the opposite of the function 'the Vitagraph back' could perform. The Vitagraph figure solicits involvement by acting as a guidepost, a visible but not obtrusive deflector against which the viewer's attention glances on its way into the scenographic space beyond, and from which it often picks up some narratively pertinent colouration.[32]

Gunning's example from *Swords and Hearts* illustrates that looking *at* versus looking *past* are far from being 'either/or' propositions, but rather a matter of gradation.[33] Still, we can note, as Gunning does, some characteristics of the two sorts of rear-facing figure that mark them as distinct practices.

Gunning locates a key to the functional capacity of the Vitagraph figure to send attention past itself in referring to the *undramatic* moments in which this figure often appeared. In Vitagraph films in the first half of the 1910s, appearances of rear-facing figures were more profuse and, for the most part, less carefully worked out – less significant – than in other films, such as Griffith's Biograph productions, and Italian diva cinema, and – as Salt has indicated – European cinema on the whole at this time.[34] Both this profusion and this lack of significance left the Vitagraph figure comparatively more available to appropriation by functions that would not become concrete until later.

Referring to developments and directions in staging techniques as they were practiced in the late 1900s and early 1910s, Brewster writes:

> These same impulses, deriving largely from *La Mort du duc de Guise*, led to slightly different

Fig. 11. *Vanity Fair.*

Fig. 12. *The Re-Incarnation of Karma.* [Vitagraph, 1912]

Fig. 13. *Red and White Roses.* [Vitagraph, 1913]

results outside France, in the USA and Denmark. In the USA, Vitagraph adopted the low camera position, but combined it with a much closer forward camera position in the main action of the shots ('American foreground' or '*plan américain*') and the possibility of the principals in the foreground turning their backs to the camera.[35]

Whatever impulses concerning staging and camera placement that Vitagraph might have derived from *L'Assassinat* accorded well with developments that Jon Gartenberg finds well underway in the company by 1907. Already by then, he finds the studio angling set walls, placing furniture, and staging action in planes at various distances from the camera, all so as to significantly enhance the viewer's sense of depth.[36] The Film d'Art impulses combined with these developments at Vitagraph and, as Brewster notes, the possibility of principals in the foreground turning their backs to the camera.[37] All in all Vitagraph stagings of the period stand in marked contrast to the more persistently frontal blocking styles broadly characteristic of European and Griffith's films at that time. Figures 10 and 11 from *Vanity Fair* (1911), Fig. 12 from *The Re-Incarnation of Karma* (1912) and Fig. 13 from *Red and White Roses* (1913) show both the closer camera of the American foreground and Vitagraph's distinctive approach to figural placement and orientation.[38]

Two developments figure significantly in the development of shot/reverse shot. These are the closer camera of the American foreground (combined with the lower Film d'Art camera), and a blocking style in which down-stage actors, including principal ones, turn around at undramatic moments. These adjustments affected a shift, a local surge, in the potentials and tendencies that, speaking in the broadest sense, composed 'film style' in the first half of the 1910s. These potentials and tendencies offered filmmakers a number of options in combining some of these stylistic elements and putting them to use, and also presented viewers with options in construing their effects. Let us first consider how the rear-facing figure contributed to this shift.

Vitagraph's efforts to make staged actions look more natural gave rise to an almost certainly unanticipated opportunity.[39] One approach to

thinking about it is suggested by Colin Bailey in his discussion of *Moonrise over the Sea* (1822), a work in which the nineteenth-century German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich depicts three rear-facing figures looking at some ships:

> The people gazing wistfully at the vessels outlined ethereally against the moonlit sky convey through their bodily attitudes their common involvement in the natural spectacle before them. As in so many of Friedrich's pictures, the figures have their backs toward us, and because we participate in the same visual experience we identify closely with them.[40]

Many another artist could help make this basic point, Vermeer for example, of whose *Painter With Model* Wölfflin writes that 'the model is placed far back in the room, but lives only in relation to the man for whom she poses'[41] (Fig. 14). So, let Friedrich or Vermeer suggest a potential that opens up when the film spectator sees a figure – preferably one in the near foreground and accommodatingly to one side – from behind. The potential is for the spectator to regard her view on a scene as a view shared with one or more of these figures. This is a potential enhanced by the American foreground and ignited by Vitagraph stagings.

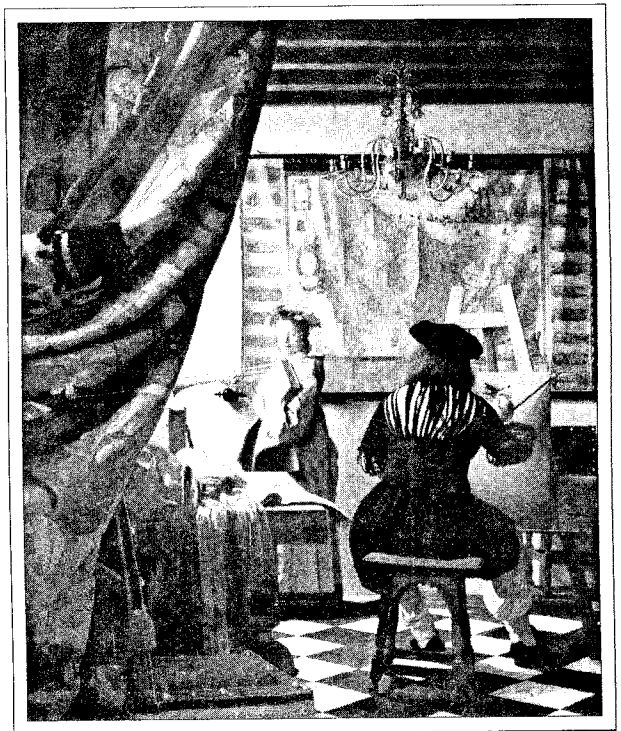

Fig. 14. Vermeer, *Painter With Model.* [© 1999 Foto Marburg/Art Resource, NY]

By making this claim about spectators and characters *sharing* viewpoints, I am not suggesting that such a figural orientation necessarily functions as an identificatory mechanism in the way that, say, a perceptual point-of-view shot often does. Rather, this figural orientation *associates* the viewpoint of the spectator with that of a character. This association works similarly to the way that a gazing rear-facing figure can function to keep spectators spatially oriented as they follow along in a shot/reverse-shot exchange.[42] We have seen how a rear-facing figure can act as such a visual marker. Now let us consider how the closer camera of the American foreground enhances this figure's potential anchoring effect.

The American foreground was created when the camera was moved from around twelve feet away from the action in to around nine feet.[43] Eileen Bowser has referred to the former as 'stage distance'.[44] From twelve feet away the scene does appear more stage-like, since the further back from the lens the action is staged, the less pronounced is the camera's narrowly 'funnel-like' field of vision which sees only part of the action.[45] From such distances staging approximates the spectator's view in the theatre, where action must be legible from all (or most) seats. In contrast, at nine feet the line demarcating the front boundary of the action,

Fig. 15. *His Official Appointment.* [Vitagraph, 1914.]

Fig. 16. *The Vengeance of Durand, or The Two Portraits.* [Vitagraph,1913.]

i.e. the foreground, narrows to just four-and-one-half feet across.[46] A rear-facing figure standing or sitting in this foreground position looks upon a scene that is, compared to the twelve-foot camera position, more 'optically inscribed' as belonging to himself and to the viewer.

Moreover, the closer camera compounds the effect of the lower Film d'Art camera in that it too enlarges foreground figures more than it does background ones. A figure so enlarged can begin to effectively block out and single out other elements in the composition. This larger figure's gazing registers with viewers as more salient than would a smaller one's, and so this figure's suitability to proffer itself as a 'guidepost' to a view on a scene is correspondingly increased. This suitability would be decreased, however, if the figure drew *too much* attention to itself – that is, if it absorbed more attention than it deflected. The Vitagraph figure avoids this problem through having its back to us. As Bordwell writes in a general discussion of the film director's knack for making images intelligible: 'The director learns that, all other things being equal, the viewer will tend to watch the actor's face, especially the eyes and mouth. The director also learns that an immobile, silent, watching figure can call our attention to another character.'[47] The Vitagraph figure, by generally sticking close to a three-quarters rear orientation, hides its potentially distracting eyes and mouth while still communicating the direction of its watching.[48] (See, for example, Figs. 10 and 11.) So enlarged, oriented and placed, the figure becomes well suited to direct attention on purely compositional and also narrational levels. This is what the figure does in Vitagraph films, as I will show.

In *His Official Appointment* (1914), five state department clerks play a joke on the Colonel (Charles Kent), who anxiously awaits word of a possible state appointment.[49] One clerk sits on a desk with his back to the camera and writes on an envelope. Another, seated behind the desk and facing forward, drafts a fake appointment (Fig. 15). The clerk sitting on the desk partially masks important action, the drafting of the fake. He carves out a rounded region of frame that contains within itself no important or distracting details. He frequently looks at the one seated behind the desk, and at his writing, and the direction of his attention appropriately directs the viewer's. In this way this figure's looking works in conjunction with the looking of the other four clerks, in that all five pairs of eyelines frequently converge on the 'hot spot' of the scene's central action, the desktop. Both the masking and the directional cueing effects of this rear-facing figure would have been weaker from a vantage point further back, from which point the clerks would have been smaller and nearer in size to each other. From there, the graphical interplay of all five figures would have been swallowed up in considerably more 'dead' space overhead, and the saliency of the rear-facing figure's looking would have been weaker. Compare the masking effect and the saliency of the directed look in Fig. 15 to Fig. 1 from *L'Assassinat*, which presents a roughly similar arrangement viewed from farther away.

Fig. 17. *Ma l'amor mio non muore!*

Fig. 18. *The Re-Incarnation of Karma.*

Likewise, in *The Vengeance of Durand, or The Two Portraits* (1913), Marion (Julia S. Gordon) sits for her portrait. The back of the painter (Earle Williams) is near enough in the foreground to block our view of it. Then he moves aside and we see the portrait from over his shoulder as he puts some finishing touches on it. He and Marion admire the painting together, leaving a gap through which film viewers – somewhat like beholders of Vermeer's painting – can see it as well (Fig. 16). A camera positioned further back would have taken in more empty space above the figures and the painting, and the sense of looking between beholders, through an opening, would have been weaker. Compare Fig. 16 to the view between the shoulders pictured in Fig. 17, from *Ma l'amor*.

Another source of the power of this figure to pull viewers into stories is the obliviousness to viewers that it seems to flaunt. For example, in the opening scene of *Vanity Fair*, Amelia (actor uncredited) introduces her brother Joseph (John Bunny) to Becky (Helen Gardner). The two women turn their backs to the camera while Amelia (cut off at the knees) makes the introductions and Becky (closer, cut off at midthigh) bows (Fig. 10). A moment later we see Becky's excitement at meeting Joseph from a viewpoint that both filters the sight over Amelia's shoulder and allows us to catch Joseph eavesdropping on the private moment (Fig. 11). This viewpoint privileges and steers viewers but it also takes in actors who seem to be indifferent to the camera.[50] Of such stagings, a Vitagraph director might proudly point out that they look natural. He might indicate that they fall on the favourable side of distinctions such as ones *The Film Index* was reiterating at that time – for example, where it stated that 'in the spoken drama and its various branches the mediocre player is always playing "at" the audience instead of playing "for" it. When the same class of player gets into a picture the play is "at" the camera.'[51]

A student of art history might find these stagings recalling another distinction, one Michael Fried makes in his study of eighteenth century French paintings. In his study, Fried finds certain works reflecting 'the desire to escape the theatricalizing consequences of the beholder's presence'.[52] He finds these works '*anti*-theatrical, which is to say that they treated the beholder as if he were not there'.[53] Fried characterises the absorptive qualities of these paintings in considerably more involved and complex ways than the one that I am suggesting characterises our Vitagraph figure. Still, a sense of his distinction between *theatricality* and *absorption* maps loosely (and ahistorically) onto one that I want to make: on the one hand we have Leonardo's Christ and Apostles, and Uncle Josh, and some figural arrangements broadly characteristic of European and Griffith's cinema in the 1910s. These are 'theatrical' insofar as they exhibit a frontality which could only be for the benefit of viewers. On the other hand the Vitagraph stagings align loosely (and provisionally) with what Fried refers to as 'the pursuit of absorption', underlying which is:

Fig. 19. *The Re-Incarnation of Karma*

Fig. 20. *Red and White Roses*

> the demand that the artist bring about a paradoxical relationship between painting and beholder – specifically, that he find a way to neutralize or negate the beholder's presence, to establish the fiction that no one is standing before the canvas. (The paradox is that only if this is done can the beholder be stopped and held precisely there.)[54]

Fried helps us to understand how, through these stagings, Vitagraph was rehearsing aspects of the highly 'absorptive' shot/reverse shot pattern – for some film theorists have found that *holding the spectator precisely there* is epitomized by shot/reverse shot's pinning (or 'suturing') the spectator into the spatial system of the classical narrative film. However, to consider this operation with respect to Vitagraph stagings, we must depart from painting-based models and consider how these components of shot/reverse shot work together with aspects of film editing.

The beholder's apparent absence that Fried argues is a prerequisite for the absorptive effect in certain paintings can produce troubling effects when, in a film, this absence is insisted upon by a character who turns his back on the viewer for too long. I have suggested that the perception of sharing one's view with a character is a potential effect of the Vitagraph figure. However, some film theorists have maintained that so orienting the spectator's viewpoint with respect to such a figure – one who is, while inscribed filmically, pictured barely or not at all – can actually prevent absorption unless a counterweight is added to it. They describe an operation that hinges on filling in an absence which, if left unchecked, would block spectatorial pleasure. In the canonical example, this threat is neutralised when the absence is filled in with the presence of the figure pictured in a reverse shot.[55] Skirting every concern with ideological effects that informs such a position and, again, not claiming that shot/reverse shot causes viewers to alternate their *identification* back and forth from one character to another, I will borrow this theoretical position in its roughest outlines to make two points: first, Shot A in a shot/reverse-shot exchange can create a tension that is relieved with the cut to a reverse angle, Shot B; and second, a shot and its reverse shot 'ticking and tocking against one another', as Bordwell puts it,[56] is one of the classical cinema's most powerful tools for moving viewers closely along with the pace and action of a film narrative.

Fleshing out the first point just a bit, we can note shot/reverse shot alternating two views, each of which is cued to the viewpoint of a character whose face, directors know, the spectator is going to want to see again. We can also see Vitagraph stagings creating an absence very similar to the one created by Shot A in a shot/reverse-shot exchange. These stagings permit the spectator to discover, as Daniel Dayan wrote with respect to Shot A in a shot/reverse-shot exchange, 'that he is only authorized to see what happens to be in the axis of the glance of another spectator, who is ghostly or absent'.[57] We can also see Vitagraph stagings angling to fill this absence in.

The effects of masked regions of the frame and directed glances can often be described with re-

Fig. 21. *Red and White Roses.*

Fig. 22. *Red and White Roses.*

course to little or no plot summarising. However, the Vitagraph figure and the American foreground function within the context of more than one shot, and they require a consideration of narrative context to be fully appraised. For example, *The Re-Incarnation of Karma* presents the story of Qunitreea (Rosemary Theby), the unrequited lover of Karma (Courtney Foote), High Priest in a nondescript ancient locale. In the opening scene, she waits outside a doorway as a procession of white-robed worshippers file through it. Her figure is fully in frame. When Karma emerges, last in the procession, Qunitreea runs ahead of him, coming close enough to be cut off just below the hip. From this spot she greets Karma with a deferential swirl of the arms. Her back is to the camera and her body so angled as to present some of her profile some of the time (Fig. 18). Meanwhile Karma, unimpressed, continues forward. Rosemary Theby has to rush to hit her mark – on or close to the nine-foot line – before Courtney Foote exits frame left.[58] Thanks to her fast feet, we catch Karma over Qunitreea's shoulder at just the moment when both figures reach the largest sizes they will attain in the shot.

Following a title, the next shot is from a position further out in the courtyard space that we have just watched Karma and Qunitreea enter into. Karma continues forward and slows at the edge of a pool. There he turns his back three-quarters to the camera while Qunitreea takes up a three-quarters frontal position across a diagonal traversing the pool (Fig. 19). While now neither character is close to the nine-foot line, the two have just rearranged themselves in space across a (nonreverse-angle) cut.

This rearrangement and cut together accomplish the rough functional equivalent to a shot/reverse shot exchange. Karma and Qunitreea's manoeuvres do not approach the often elegant alternatives to editing that Brewster and Jacobs find European depth stagings elaborating throughout the 1910s.[59] Rather, the staging and editing combination shows one company edging down a path on which the American cinema as a whole was moving in this decade, as Brewster explains in a comparison of deeper staging and faster cutting:

> In a sense they can be seen as alternatives – once a simple shallow staging of action in long tableaux began to be felt (by audiences and/or film-makers) as tedious, variety could be introduced either by increasing the rate at which tableaux are replaced, or by creating more complicated settings and more complicated staging of the action in those settings. And, broadly speaking, the American cinema took the first road, and has consistently faster (and accelerating) cutting rates than those characteristic of Europe during the 1910s, whereas the tendency to emphasize depth is European.[60]

I would place Karma and Qunitreea on this 'first road' and, more particularly on the route taken by Vitagraph (though I am aware that one could choose to highlight more going on in this exchange than a prefiguration of shot/reverse shot).[61]

Fig. 23. *Red and White Roses.*

Fig. 24. *Red and White Roses.*

In *Red and White Roses*, a pair interrelate in recession even more elaborately.[62] Morgan Andrews (William Humphrey), 'the reform party's choice for nomination as governor' (title), visits the parlour of temptress Lida de Jianne (Julia S. Gordon), the opposition candidate's sister. From over his right shoulder, which is in the left half of the frame, we watch the two join hands (Fig. 20). Then Lida draws forward and crosses diagonally into the foreground, and we watch them join hands again, this time from over *her left* shoulder, now frame *right* (Fig. 21). This exchange, even more than the one in *Re-Incarnation*, unhurriedly accomplishes the rough functional equivalent to shot/reverse shot. Both alternations loosely fit the description in Thompson and Bordwell's glossary entry for the term in *Film History: An Introduction*:

> Two or more shots edited together that alternate characters, typically in a conversation situation. In *continuity editing*, characters in one framing usually look left, in the other framing, right. Over-the-shoulder framings are common in shot/reverse-shot editing.[63]

The two exchanges in *Re-Incarnation* and *Red and White Roses* seem to suggest that narrative cinema, before it adopted shot/reverse shot as one of its major figures, already possessed an interest in reversing the foreground/background relations of two interrelating characters. This type of switching back and forth is distinct from another type, parallel editing, which is what film scholars usually mean when they refer to *alternation*.[64] However, *character* alternations within undivided and comparatively small spaces (such as parlours or courtyards) are arguably as much at the centre of the classical cinema's character-focused narrative system as any other form of alternation. Burch makes the straightforward claim that shot/reverse shot 'developed as an essentially narrative procedure',[65] and perhaps one could add that the technique serves the essentially narrative interest in alternation.[66] In these Vitagraph sequences, such an interest is served by the American foreground camera as well as by staging manoeuvres.

Along with these developments at Vitagraph that were agreeable to the innovation of shot/reverse shot (the American foreground camera, the Vitagraph figure) it seems likely that set constructions and prop placements also played a role in shifting filmmakers and viewers from a pattern of *mise-en-scène* to a pattern of editing.[67] *Red and White Roses* contains some interesting reverse-angle cuts that suggest this.

Morgan and Lida are in rooms separated by a small court. The title, 'The next evening. Across the court', delineates a temporal break and also marks a jump through space to be made by a reverse-angle cut.

> Shot 1: Lida stands with lace curtains behind her and smells a flower. The window behind is glimpsed through a space between the drawn curtains. She gazes off frontally, then turns to face the window, slowly begins to part the curtains, and peers through. (Fig. 22)
>
> Title: 'Lovers'
>
> Shot 2: Across the court, Morgan and his fiancée are in the foreground. He begins to escort her toward the left rear of the room.
>
> Shot 3: Lida, having spied them together, leaves a hand on the still-only-slightly-parted curtains and turns to gaze off frontally some more. She smells the flower again.
>
> Shot 4: Morgan, now alone, crosses from the rough midground to the window in the rear of the room. He begins to part the lace curtains hanging in front of the window.
>
> Shot 5: (Joined to the preceding shot with what works like a match-on-action cut, even though the action in progress at the start of this shot is Morgan raising his window, not parting curtains.)
>
> A reverse view from across the court, through Lida's window. The curtains in front of her window are now sufficiently parted for us to see Morgan clearly from below the waist to above the head. Lida turns from facing us to slide up her window and look at him (Fig. 23).
>
> Shot 6: Reverse-angle cut to Morgan's back, which blocks our view of Lida (Fig. 24). He turns away from the window and faces front.

After this wordless exchange, action resumes briefly in a parallel fashion back and forth across the court.

In this sequence camera positioning, actor blocking, and parallel editing are 'forced' into a proto-shot/reverse-shot couplet. The view of the action depicted is tightly constrained by windows that require the camera to line up behind Lida, who looks at Morgan through her window, the view through which is considerably narrowed by curtains hanging to either side. Lida's and our view, then, is through a window, across the court, and through another window to Morgan. Her back is to us, she is standing just enough to the side for us to see the object of her gaze, and the only view that could possibly take in both characters is through this diegetic tunnel. This tunnel opens up when first Morgan and then Lida part curtains and slide up windows, and after Lida has moved far enough aside for us to see (Fig. 23). Then, perhaps in an only partially worked-out response to this narrative's interest in alternation, there is a cut to Morgan's back – a reverse angle that does not return a view of Lida because Morgan's body is in the way.[68] This enlistment of the profilmic to naturalise some reverse-angle cutting was not a singular occurrence at Vitagraph. Citing examples, all from Vitagraph films, Brewster observes:

> a number of instances of 180-cutting round doors or windows (e.g. *Yens Yensen*, 29 Oct. '08, *Oliver Twist*, 10 May '09), and this is then extended, expanding the size of the windows until it is essentially a single space looked at from opposite sides (e.g. *A Spanish Romance*, 6 Oct. '08, *Romance of an Umbrella*, 28 Sept. '09).[69]

Along with set constructions and prop placements, lighting developments at Vitagraph also nudged the company to the vanguard of readiness to adopt the pattern. Salt describes changes he starts seeing in films in general at this time, lighting arrangements effecting a 'marked figure modeling as well as separation from the background'.[70] In 1912 he locates 'a definite move in all the major film-making countries towards having the majority of the lighting in studio scenes provided by artificial light, rather than by the diffuse daylight through the studio roof and walls'.[71] Under these improved conditions for exercising control, both figure and set lighting were increasingly coordinated to lock visual emphasis onto figures by sculpting them in sharper relief than before, and by setting them against comparatively darker backgrounds.[72] In the process lighting was molding figures to the developing requirements of a character-centred narrative cinema. Salt also finds that, at this time, 'as far as standard studio lighting was concerned, Vitagraph was the most advanced company'.[73] He singles out as exemplary of 'best practice' in 1912 a Vitagraph film in which the lighting 'gives a fairly natural fall-off in light intensity towards the walls of the set, and much improved modelling of the features. It also gives fairly good separation of the figures from the background.'[74] Compare Fig. 10 from *Vanity Fair* to Fig. 17 from *Ma l'amor* to see how much more evenly lit the shot in the Italian film is. Lighting, then, was increasingly emphasising the front and rear anchor points of the diagonal reces-

Fig. 25. *His Girl Friday*. [Columbia, 1940.]

Fig. 27. *His Girl Friday*.

sional alignments that were so common at Vitagraph, pulling these alignments out of the background depths into which they had earlier been placed. Into this visually privileged zone, shot/reverse shot would insert itself and articulate its pattern of alternation.

In *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film*, Gunning describes how Griffith transformed existing editing practices so as to join together contiguous spaces (adjoining rooms or side-by-side exterior locations, as in early chase films), and non-physically adjoining ones (through parallel editing), and also to cut up single spaces through intrascene editing. Gunning shows how Griffith's early Biograph films marked the earnest beginnings of the analytical cutting style that was to become integral to classical cinema.[75] I have suggested that certain practical preconditions were

Fig. 26. *His Girl Friday*.

lacking in Griffith's cinema to foster the innovation of one keystone of classical style. This is to cut from one character's approximate viewpoint to the approximate viewpoint of the character she or he is looking at – a reverse view that presents the character whose rough viewpoint we just shared. I call it a rough viewpoint because it is rarely a perceptual point of view and often one from over the shoulder. Three enlargements from *His Girl Friday* (1940) illustrate this familiar figure (Figs. 25–27).

Shot/reverse shot was the more likely outgrowth of the American foreground than of the wider French foreground because in the former the camera was better situated to produce a rear-facing figure that was visually salient enough in frame to associate the spectator's viewpoint unambiguously with the viewpoint of a character. The device emerged more directly out of Vitagraph films, which conventionalised the over-the-shoulder view, than out of films built around divas and other films featuring similarly frontal acting styles. But to make this last claim is to go where Brewster has already been – and return us to his rich essay on depth staging, where he explains that 'the framing with the star in the foreground gazing off towards camera also encourages fixity, in that, in a certain sense, such a shot cannot have a reverse shot, for that would give something mundane for the heroine to be looking at'.[76] And shot/reverse shot was articulated more fully and often in Vitagraph films than in Griffith's Biograph films and other films with similarly frontal and shallow staging styles.

Perhaps another way to understand why shot/reverse shot took root so firmly specifically at

Vitagraph is that this company provided a middle ground between certain European and American practical and stylistic contexts for representing two characters in face-to-face interaction. While staging in less depth than generally practiced in European cinema (but more than in Griffith's), Vitagraph staged in *some* depth; and while cutting less frequently than Griffith (but more frequently than in European cinema generally), Vitagraph used *some* cutting. It would seem that shot/reverse shot – a pattern that, unlike parallel editing, presumes some depth at least as much as some latitude – found favourable conditions at the crossroads of *enough* depth and *enough* cutting.[77]

David Bordwell's essay on shot/reverse shot, 'Convention, Construction, and Cinematic Vision', does not take into its account the sort of historical and company-related pattern of emergence that I have explored.[78] It calls on 'sensory triggers' (stimuli that produce automatic responses, such as directed glances and their automatic indication of the object of attention) and 'contingent universals' (for example, conversational turn-taking in every known culture) to explain shot/reverse shot's nearly universal adoption and comprehension, and why filmmakers would try the device in the first place.[79] His argument reaches back before the rudest beginnings of art to stake its account and to locate the sources of the device.

I agree with many of Bordwell's speculations, for example, that 'it would seem likely that this alternating editing grows out of an effort to capture the [conversational] turn-taking phenomenon in cinematic form'.[80] However, in the case I have made, *grows out of* has a different meaning, one that I hope seems not in conflict with his. He writes that 'the shot/reverse-shot device deserves to be called a stylistic invention',[81] to which we could add that it was not one so self evident that it broke out in a dozen spots at once. Before it became one of the major figures in classical cinema, shot/reverse shot was tested and modified, and made viable through repeated uses. Various contingencies (including, of course, ones external to strictly practical and stylistic concerns) promoted and inhibited shot/reverse shot's innovation and integration into the contexts of a constituted practice and a general style. All of this preceded and shaped both 'trying out' and 'catching on'. Bordwell builds a powerful explanatory framework for why the pattern was ever devised, why it was ever adopted, and why it continues to make sense to viewers. However, other factors and events, some quite indifferent to shot/reverse shot and to the types of exchange that it is so well engineered to represent, also played a part in this devising, proliferation and comprehension.

In *On the History of Film Style*, Bordwell speculates that the lowering of the Film d'Art camera 'probably arose from a desire to bring figures forward while keeping both head and feet in the frame'.[82] Brewster's conjecture is that 'the aim may have been to produce a theatrical effect, a view from the stalls, or perhaps even simply to create an illusion of the principal character's height; whatever it was, it stuck.'[83] Similarly, Bordwell gives a formalist rationale for why an actor in a diagonal recessional alignment might be instructed to turn around:

> Recessional staging creates compositional difficulties. Bring one actor diagonally forward and you may unbalance the frame, since he or she will probably loom larger than the other players. You will therefore need something to give the distant figures more visual weight. A simple expedient is to have the nearest figure turn from the camera; the lack of frontality, aided by the act of looking, can steer our attention to the distant plane.[84]

The compositional difficulties that Bordwell points to might certainly have motivated the solution he outlines, at Vitagraph and elsewhere. However, a too-narrowly defined problem/solution model of stylistic change might fail to see that this particular problem, and its solution, also motivated solutions to problems posed further down the line and in other places.

I do not suggest that Bordwell proposes such an overly limited model. Nor am I saying that the continuity and universality that he often finds reaching back and spreading uniformly wide must contradict or exclude accounts in which solutions to problems are fabricated in a piecemeal fashion along crooked assembly lines by workers with altogether different, and multiple, solutions and problems on their minds. That I am not proposing a philosophy of stylistic change that is necessarily, or

best, understood as oppositional to Bordwell's is perhaps suggested in a comment he makes in his book on the history of film style, in which he complements my main thesis:

> On a broader scale, we can see that a 1910s depth formula – foreground desk or table, background door – was recruited to serve as an establishing shot in later cinema. There the shot would give way to closer views and shot/reverse-shot cutting.[85]

The development that I have been attempting to trace is one that trails behind a potent and mischievous agency in film history, and one that Bordwell recognises in his grand scheme of stylistic change, if fleetingly, as 'the possibility of errors, accidents (happy or unhappy), unintended consequences, spontaneous and undeliberated actions, and decisions made for reasons not wholly evident to the agents'.[86]

My goal has not been to pinpoint the time and place of an invention, and valorise an inventor, but to sketch the development of some practical and stylistic conditions that made favourable both the adoption of shot/reverse shot and its general integration into a narrative film style. Bordwell sums up the broad versatility of the device as it is applied in classical cinema:

> The filmmaker has this ready to hand for representing any two figures, groups, or objects within the same place. This schema can be fitted to many situations, whatever the differences of figure placement, camera height, lighting, or focus; whether the image is in widescreen ratio or not; whether the figures are facing one another or not; etc.[87]

However, the current usage of an established figure does not necessarily reflect any special qualities of its historical development, and initially of course, it may have been employed tentatively and infrequently. As Brewster and Jacobs observe of editing in general:

> Although most of the editing patterns typical of the cinema of the 1920s and later are already to be found in films made by 1911, these occurrences are usually isolated, both in the sense that the films in which they occur are rare, and in the sense that they are infrequent or unique in the films in which they do. By contrast, the typical classical narrative film has large numbers of examples of reverse shots, alternations, or cut-ins, and they occur in almost every film.[88]

Unremarkably then, shot/reverse shot entered into the paradigm after making some scattered appearances and then crystallising and broadening out from a narrower course.[89] This was by a process of transformation and integration in which, Salt believes, Vitagraph director Ralph Ince played a major and largely unrecognised part.[90]

Vitagraph in the first half of the 1910s discloses less a pristine moment of origin than a set of conditions and tendencies which, in hindsight only, one could call 'fertile.' It discloses less a site of invention in the old Edisonian sense than a solidifying practice in which certain stylistic combinations and applications became increasingly likely, convenient, and potent choices than others, and than elsewhere. At Vitagraph, when a pair of windows make a tunnel to hold the narrational oscillation of shot/reverse shot, this is part of a process by which diverse filmmakers have fashioned a pair of crutches while attending to mostly unrelated business: calling attention to depth; making a scene look more natural; getting viewers at a precise moment to understand that now they were across the court looking back in the opposite direction. These accidental crutches would fall away when the cinema of narrative integration embraced shot/reverse shot as a standard technique and a keystone of its storytelling architecture.

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Notes

1. David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 208.
2. Bordwell, 'Convention, Construction, and Cinematic Vision,' in Bordwell and Noël Carroll, eds., *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 99–104.
3. Ben Brewster, after touching on the sorts of cutting that D.W. Griffith practiced, notes that Vitagraph, by contrast, used shot/reverse shot and point-of-view cutting ('Deep Staging in French Films, 1900–1914,' in Thomas Elsaesser, ed., *Early Cinema: Space – Frame – Narrative* (London: British Film Institute, 1990], 50). Noël Burch is another to count this innovation among Vitagraph's achievements (*Life to those Shadows*, trans. and ed. Ben Brewster [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990], 131). Barry Salt suggests that Vitagraph director Ralph Ince was responsible for many early appearances of the device at Vitagraph – including in outdoor fiction filmmaking, a site of this device's development that I do not explore in this essay (*Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis*, 2nd ed., rev. [London: Starword, 1992], 93–95, 137, and 238; see this essay's last footnote for more on Ince and reverse-angle cutting). Instances of non-Vitagraph applications of the shot/reverse shot are many. Perhaps the best known is *The Loafer* (Essanay, 1911; see Salt, *Film Style and Technology*, 94). In addition, the device's general adoption was preceded by a scattering of reverse angles appearing in films dating back to before the turn of the century, as Stephen Bottomore has found ('Shots in the Dark: The Real Origins of Film Editing,' in Thomas Elsaesser, ed., *Early Cinema: Space – Frame – Narrative* [London: British Film Institute, 1990], 108–109).
4. Salt describes another way this film was influential, specifically on Vitagraph films: 'The Vitagraph company signalled that they had taken note of *L'Assassinat du Duc de Guise* by giving two of their films made just after *L'Assassinat du Duc de Guise* had appeared in New York, namely *The Judgement* [sic]*of Solomon* and *Oliver Twist*, the extra descriptive subsidiary title "A Vitagraph High Art Film."' (*Film Style and Technology*, 88).
5. Ben Brewster, 'Deep Staging,' 45.
6. Salt and Brewster discuss the waist-level camera of *L'Assassinat* (Salt, *Film Style and Technology*, 88; Brewster, 'Deep Staging,' 46). Eileen Bowser finds the camera lowered from eye to chest level in some films around 1909–1910 (*The Transformation of Cinema, 1907–1915* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990], 94).
7. Ben Brewster, 'Deep Staging,' 48. See also Salt, *Film Style and Technology*, 88.
8. *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, trans. M.D. Hottinger (1932; reprint ed., New York: Dover Publications, 1950) 94.
9. As Bordwell writes: 'Making action thrust diagonally to the foreground is a very old principle in painting, but moving pictures gave it a new force' (*On the History of Film Style* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997], 171). Also, of the 1895 Lumière film *Arrivée d'un Train à La Ciotat*, and its imitations, Burch remarks on 'the extraordinary effect of *depth* produced by a framing that makes the train arrive towards the spectator' (35).
10. On Borelli's performance, extended-length shots, and depth staging in this film, see Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs, *Theatre to Cinema: Stage Pictorialism and the Feature Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 111–116.
11. Salt, *Film Style and Technology*, 95.
12. Wölfflin, 74.
13. Burch goes so far as to claim that 'the cinema in some sense recapitulated the history of the pictorial representation of space in the West' (168).
14. Burch, 164.
15. Wölfflin, 73.
16. I specify *dramatic* and *interior* because, as Brewster points out, exterior-shot comic chase films staged action in depth much earlier than dramatic films on interior sets did ('Deep Staging,' 46; see also Jon Gartenberg, 'Vitagraph Before Griffith: Forging Ahead in the Nickelodeon Era,' *Studies in Visual Communication*, vol. 10, no. 4 [Fall 1984]: 11). Another reason to specify *dramatic* is that, as Brewster notes, scenes of spectacle in films made by Méliès and others were often staged in depth ('Deep Staging,' 46).
17. Wölfflin, 73.
18. Ibid., 76.
19. Brewster, 'Deep Staging,' 49.
20. Brewster and Jacobs, 114.
21. Ibid. See 112–115 for their general discussion of this scene, and 112–113 in particular for more instances of Borelli acting with her back to the camera.
22. *Eloquent Gestures: The Transformation of Performance Style in the Griffith Biograph Films* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). See also Bowser, 88–93; and Tom Gunning, *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 107, 225–229, and 259–260.
23. On the restrained style linked to closer views, see: Bowser, 'Chapter 6: Acting: The Camera's Closer View,' 87–102 – especially beginning 93; and Pearson – especially 93–94 and 126–127, but also 10, 51, and 156 n. 11.
24. Gunning finds this scene reflecting Griffith's growing interest in environmental detail (*D.W. Griffith*, 176).
25 Ibid.
26. Salt, *Film Style and Technology*, 88.
27. Brewster, 'Deep Staging,' 50. Bordwell describes how this shallowness in staging extended to Griffith's editing constructions, characterizing 'Griffith's delight in multiplying and repeating ... lateral cuts, prolonging movement by lining up rooms like railroad cars' (*History of Film Style*, 132; see also Brewster and Jacobs, 189). It might also be noted that, in contrast to Biograph's Manhattan brownstone studio – which afforded limited possibilities for depth staging – Vitagraph opened a spacious new studio in Brooklyn in 1906 (Gartenberg, 8). See Gartenberg on how shooting in the new studio gave Vitagraph ample opportunity to explore depth staging.

28. Salt, *Film Style and Technology*, 93–95. Of *Ma l'amor* specifically, Brewster and Jacobs note that there is no shot/reverse shot in the film (112).

29. Gunning, *D.W. Griffith*, 228.

30. Ibid., 263.

31. Ibid., 264.

32. The sort of rear-facing figure that Griffith popularized was not unheard of at Vitagraph. Salt describes a type of character that actor/director Ralph Ince liked to play: 'A part of the characterization involves playing the scene where he is really right at the emotional bottom with his back to the camera.' ('Ralph Ince,' 2. English-language copies of papers prepared for the 1987 Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, Pordenone, Italy – which, in this year, held a Vitagraph retrospective. The papers I consulted are Tom Gunning's copy; hereafter they are cited as 'Pordenone papers'. A collection of essays associated with this retrospective was published in Italian as: Paolo Cherchi Usai, ed. *Vitagraph Co. of America: il cinema prima di Hollywood* [Pordenone, Italy: Studio Tesi, 1987]). Also, in his book on film style and technology, Salt writes, after referring to Gunning's discussion of rear-facing figures in Griffith's Biograph films, that 'the back-turning technique is also used in Vitagraph films in an expressive way, for instance in *Daisies*, when one of the girls has just received bad news in a letter' (90).

33. Brewster and Jacobs describe an entrance in *Ma l'amor* that further illustrates this gradation. A character appears at the top of some stairs, visible between Elsa and another character, and 'although her back is to camera, Borelli visibly starts at [Emilio] Petacci's entrance, hunching up her shoulders' (112; see also 113).

34. Salt writes that, 'throughout the years 1907–1913 most films, including those of D.W. Griffith, but largely excluding Vitagraph films, had the grouping of the actors oriented towards the camera and the putative audience after the manner used on the legitimate stage' (*Film Style and Technology*, 105). He finds that up until 1914, scenes in which actors play 'directly to the camera lens' are common in European dramatic films (88). And, after describing the Vitagraph rear-facing figure, he writes that, 'despite the fact that this kind of natural staging with some of the actors having their backs to the camera had first appeared in a French film, French and other European filmmakers proved unable to develop the idea' (90).

35. Brewster, 'Deep Staging,' 49. Brewster uses an alternate title of the film.

36. Gartenberg, 13–16.

37. Or maybe the French impulses introduced this possibility to Vitagraph, as Salt claims (*Film Style and Technology*, 88). Whether a particular aspect of the Vitagraph look is derived or original is not a primary concern in this essay. I am interested in locating times and places in which certain practices were used consistently and/or influentially. It might never be known to what extent Vitagraph came up with certain stylistic adjustments on their own and how much they aggressively duplicated what they observed in films that have not survived. As Gunning writes in the introduction to an essay he prepared for the 1987 Pordenone Vitagraph retrospective: 'My work on Griffith at Biograph took advantage of the fact that for the period 1908–1913 (the period of D.W. Griffith's work at this company) nearly all of the films have been preserved. And for the period of my greatest concentration (1908–1910) the available sample comes close to 99 per cent. The situation with the Vitagraph company is, of course, very different. A much smaller percentage of the company's films have been preserved and there does not exist (as in the case of Biograph) a large run of copyright prints which are likely to preserve the original form of the films' ('Building an Ending: Vitagraph Films and the Cinema of Narrative Integration,' Pordenone papers, 2–3). Also shedding light on the uncertainties inherent to studying Vitagraph films in the late 1900s and 1910s, Bowser writes, in reference to the nine-foot line: 'Barry Salt believes that this practice began with some Vitagraph films in 1909 and was gradually adopted by most of the other companies the following year. It is not really possible, of course, to be certain about such matters, since so few films survive, but there is some evidence to suggest that other companies also introduced the practice in 1909' (94). Faced with such gaps and uncertainties, one can, for example, place one's faith in the recollection of veteran Vitagraph actor James Morrison: 'We were the first ones to bring people up to within nine feet of the camera...The next innovation in the movies was when Griffith did the close-up. We thought of the nine-foot line, but we didn't think of the close-up' (quoted in Kevin Brownlow, *The Parade's Gone By* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968], 16). Instead, I have chosen to build a case on the secondary-source statements of film historians, mainly Brewster and Salt – both of whom have screened many, many, more surviving 1910s Vitagraph films than I have. My goal is to mount an argument that makes no bones about its reliance on such secondary-source statements and that grounds its assertions more in logical than empirical bases.

38. This staging was a notable contribution to a movement, launched most vocally by *New York Dramatic Mirror* film reviewer Frank Woods in 1909 – the year the Vitagraph figure was starting to become characteristic – towards eliminating the practice of actors looking directly into the lens (see Bowser, 89–91). Woods primarily championed Biograph in his promotion of this crusade, one he waged in the name of making the illusion of the filmed fiction more complete. The debate carried into other publications, including *The Film Index*, which warned that the impression of realism would be botched also by actors *too* eager to avoid looking into the lens: 'If the performer sacrifices the natural pose to either look at or look away from the camera he or she is in error' ('Dodging the Camera,' 25 June 1910, 2). In a series of assertions, rejoinders, and clarifications of the emerging position, *The Film Index* quoted

letter writer Herbert Waterbury, who singled out one company for its actors' avoidance of this 'fault of "camera dodging,"' a fault the editors found as egregious as 'camera consciousness': 'The Vitagraph players seem to have the correct idea in this regard, as they move their eyes naturally' (23 July 1910, 2 for the preceding quote; 'A Little More on "Camera Dodging,"' 2 July 1910, 3, for the reference to 'the fault of "camera dodging"'; *The New York Dramatic Mirror*, 10 July 1910, 15–16 for the reference to 'camera consciousness', quoted in Bowser, 90. 'Camera consciousness' is repeated in 'A Little More on "Camera Dodging,"' 3). However, in a reflection on one of Waterbury's letters, *The Film Index* noted – without naming names – that 'there have been pictures in which we have observed the movement of the players to be mainly up and down stage, so to speak, thus presenting a full rear view too frequently' ('A Little More on "Camera Dodging,"' 3). Such a criticism suggests that Vitagraph stagings struck some tastes as going too far in avoiding camera consciousness, and – contrary to Waterbury's opinion – committed the sin of camera dodging. (My thanks to Stephen Bottomore for bringing these *Film Index* references to my attention.)

39. Pearson places the intense acting with the back that Gunning describes within the set of 'verisimilar' codes that Griffith and his troupe were then elaborating (46, 51, 104). That these intense rear-facing figures were at Biograph part of a restrained and verisimilar acting style, and the casual ones at Vitagraph part of a natural staging style, should remind us that we are in neither case speaking of a style that is necessarily more realistic or natural than the other one. Pearson shows care and sensitivity in her definition and use of such terms, and underscores her point that 'verisimilitude should not be equated with reality' (28).

40. 'Caspar David Friedrich: An Introduction,' in John Leighton and Colin Bailey, *Caspar David Friedrich: Winter Landscape* (London: The National Gallery, 1990), 21.

41. Wölfflin, 77. Interestingly, Michael Fried quotes a contemporary art critic of an eighteenth century French painting who seems to miss the connection between the quality in the painting that he admires and what he considers to be an obstacle the painter had to surmount in order to achieve it: '[The painting] represents a young man engaged in copying a drawing. ... One sees only the young draughtsman's back. In spite of this, the author has captured so well the truth and the nature of the young man's situation that it is impossible not to feel, on first viewing of the painting, that this draughtsman pays the greatest attention to what he is doing' (*Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980], 14).

42. Edward Branigan describes 'a "reverse angle" – from behind the subject, usually over one shoulder. In addition to being 'less subjective' than the POV shot, it is a more stable articulation since we view the direct spatial relation of subject and object' (*Point of View in the Cinema: A Theory of Narration and Subjectivity in Classical Film* [Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1984], 110).

43. See Bowser, 94–95; Bordwell, *History of Film Style*, 184; and Brewster and Jacobs, 169.

44. Bowser, 94.

45. See Brewster and Jacobs, 173–174. Bordwell relates how narrow this funnel is: 'The standard lens of the silent era, the 50mm or two-inch lens, yields about 28 degrees of horizontal coverage – as compared with the 200-degree field available to two-eyed humans' (*History of Film Style*, 182). For a clear description of the cinema's optical pyramid, see *History of Film Style*, 181–184. For a more technical one, and a helpful diagram, see Brewster and Jacobs, 170–171

46. Bordwell, *History of Film Style*, 184.

47. Ibid., 164.

48. Gartenberg's essay on Vitagraph films in the 1900s describes how the studio was making significant headway towards directing viewer attention already in 1907, the year of a film in which he notes: 'The composition and movement in interiors control the path of observation of the viewer down the center of the image toward the rearground, a change in concept from earlier films' (15).

49. Kent also directed the film (Brewster and Jacobs, 127).

50. Frank Woods knew that the actor's lack of awareness of the viewer is, of course, a game: 'Should there not be absolute unconsciousness that the camera is there – or rather should there not appear to be this unconsciousness?' (*The New York Dramatic Mirror*, 10 July 1910, 15–16; quoted in Bowser, 90).

51. 'Dodging the Camera,' 2.

52. Fried, 4, specifically in reference to a painting outside the focus of his study – Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*.

53. Ibid., 5, specifically in reference to paintings and sculptures outside the focus of his study.

54. Ibid., 108.

55. See for example Daniel Dayan, 'The Tutor-Code of Classical Cinema,' in Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, and Leo Braudy, eds., *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 179–191; and Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 53–54 and 95–97.

56. Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, 66.

57. Dayan, 188.

58. Bordwell writes that the nine-foot line 'could cut the actors off at midthigh or at the waist' (*History of Film Style*, 184). Pearson finds that the line could cut actors off at the ankles (162 n. 112).

59. See Brewster and Jacobs, 124–127 for a description of how ensemble acting in Evengii Bauer's films, and films by other European directors – mostly of the later

1910s – skillfully orchestrate character alternations through staging.

60. Brewster, 'Deep Staging,' 49.

61. To my claim that Karma and Qunitreea are on this 'first road,' one could counter that the two are also creating a dramatic alternation through staging – simpler but not wholly unlike later European ones. Likewise could one place Karma and Qunitreea's alternation against a comment made by Brewster and Jacobs, and make a similar objection: 'To an even greater degree than in the diva's gestural soliloquy, then, ensemble acting in the European cinema performed functions which were fulfilled by editing in the American cinema: singling out important aspects of a scenic space, providing a structure of alternation and repetition within scenes' (127; they qualify somewhat this notion of the two as alternatives on page 14). Clearly Karma and Qunitreea here bear a relation to *both* paths to fulfillment, and I am not suggesting that relations to paths that go the furthest are the most important or interesting ones to investigate. Walter Benjamin might voice the most damning criticism of any project serving intentions similar to mine, where he describes the '"appreciation"' or apology, in which 'what matters is the reconstruction of continuity. It lays stress only on those elements of the work which have already become part of its influence. What escapes it are the rough outcrops and jagged prongs which call a halt to those who wish to go beyond' ('Central Park,' trans. Lloyd Spencer and Mark Harrington, *New German Critique* 34 [Winter 1985]: 33). The only defense I would offer to such a charge is to admit that my hindsight is trained on continuity and that it views events in the light of a development that, if one likes shot/reverse shot, one could call 'progress.' I recognize that a venture onto those rough outcrops and jagged prongs that Benjamin describes might turn up much more interesting results than I have.

62. Bordwell incorporates this scene and nine enlargements from it into a discussion of staging strategies in the 1910s in *On the History of Film Style*, 185–187. He calls this scene a '*pas de deux* of temptation, hesitation, and acquiescence,' and points out that a slightly higher than typical camera height helps to keep the two moving figures in view (185). See also Brewster and Jacobs, 120–121, on this film.

63. Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), 823.

64. See for example: Burch, 157–158; Gunning, *D.W. Griffith*, 95–96; and Salt, *Film Style and Technology*, 99–100.

65. Burch, 245.

66. Other interests would function increasingly to constrain and transform expressions of this narrative interest: ones to rationalize production and standardize product; to transfer control of the film from the on-set domain of directors to the post-production domain of producers; and to tell stories efficiently, which generally would favor collecting comparatively short shots and reverse shots for later assembly over choreographing complicated stagings. Bordwell briefly discusses the appeal of editing over depth staging to an industry moving quickly towards standardization in *On the History of Film Style*, 198–199. See Gartenberg, 8–9, on how Vitagraph set early precedents and standards of studio organization and film production. See the same pages for Gartenberg on Vitagraph and the emerging central producer system.

67. I do not suggest that the cinema shifted wholesale from alternations by stagings to ones by editing. Bordwell describes a scene in *Fallen Angel* (1945): 'Preminger's four-and-a-half minute *plan séquence* needs no shot/reverse shot. Characters take turns assuming an over-the-shoulder stance with utter naturalness' (*History of Film Style*, 233).

68. It would be just as easy to argue that the filmmakers here are not simply botching a returned view of Lida. The viewer at this moment knows full well what Morgan is looking at, and also has a good idea of his tortured thoughts. There is no need to put Lida in view beyond Morgan's shoulder; his still and centered figure, which absorbs all our attention, implies what lies beyond the court.

69. Brewster, 'The Vitagraph Fragments in the Library of Congress Paper Prints Collection,' Pordenone papers, 20. In a discussion of early reverse-angle cuts in exterior-shot films, Salt seems to describe the same phenomenon: 'occasional films made through the next few years which show successive scenes with action through a door or window from opposite sides of the wall containing the opening, nearly all of them made on studio sets' (*Film Style and Technology*, 56; see also Brewster and Jacobs, 168). Salt also writes: 'To return yet again to *L'Assassinat du Duc de Guise*, the sort of set-up where a scene is shown from two opposed directions in succession immediately caught on in a small way. Vitagraph used the idea from time to time, as in *Romance of an Umbrella* (1909) and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1910), and so did other people' (94). Brewster and Jacobs discuss this usage in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (191). Brewster and Jacobs also helpfully distinguish two types of 180-degree cutting: '"centripetal", the camera remaining outside the space of the action,' and 'centrifugal,' in which 'the camera stands in the middle of the field of action, and looks outward at different fragments of it in turn' (69).

70. Salt, *Film Style and Technology*, 74.

71 Ibid., 76. Gartenberg describes significant gains in Vitagraph's control over lighting as early as 1906, the year they completed the new Brooklyn studio (8). He also writes that 'making films in the new Vitagraph studio made more composition in depth in interiors possible' (17) and that 'making dramas in the new studio had challenged Vitagraph to find new ways of representing space and time in a continuous narrative flow' (18).

72. Salt describes a means other than lighting by which figures were set off against backgrounds. Also around 1912 – and especially at Vitagraph – he finds the rear walls of sets painted so to be rendered a uniformly dark grey on film. On this he writes: 'I can only conjecture that it was intended to produce extra visual separation of the figures from the background' (*Film Style and Technology*, 104).

73. Salt, *Film Style and Technology*, 76–77.

74. Ibid., 77.

75. Gunning makes equally clear how Griffith's system was *not* like classical cinema.

76. Brewster, 'Deep Staging,' 50.

77. The enlargements from *His Girl Friday* indicate that shot/reverse shot does not have to include the foregrounded back of the character whose rough viewpoint we are taking, but often it does. In fact, curiously, Thompson finds the backs of shoulders pictured in more shot/reverse-shot exchanges in films in the 1930s than in films in the 1910s (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, 210). Salt finds this also, and distinguishes the variations with names that suggest that, for both of them, the figure seen from the rear remains a prime conceptual and practical antecedent. He calls them *'behind the shoulder reverse-angles'* and in *'front of the shoulder reverse-angles'* (*Film Style and Technology*, 94).

78. Bordwell, 'Convention, Construction, Cinematic Vision,' 87–107.

79. Ibid., 97.

80. Ibid.

81. Ibid., 87.

82. Bordwell, *History of Film Style*, 177 .

83. Brewster, 'Deep Staging,' 48. Salt also describes the camera height in this film as suggestive of a 'from the stalls' viewpoint (*Film Style and Technology*, 88).

84. Bordwell, *History of Film Style*, 174.

85. Ibid., 152.

86. Ibid., 150.

87. Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, 8.

88. Brewster and Jacobs, 168.

89. For example, Stephen Bottomore finds the functional equivalent to a reverse-angle cut in the 1900 British film *Ladies Skirts Nailed to a Fence* ('Shots in the Dark,' 108; it is a functional equivalent because the alternation to a view from the other side of the fence is accomplished by stopping the camera and turning the fence around; see also Burch, 225–226, on this cut in this film, and Salt, *Film Style and Technology*, 55–56 – and also Salt, 55–57, for a general discussion of early reverse angles). Bottomore finds an actual reverse-angle cut in *The Early Morning Attack* (Edison, 1899), and reverse angles and point-of-view shots even in magic lantern slides from before the invention of film (108). And not merely do reverse-angle cuts turn up outside of Vitagraph films, but shot/reverse shot full blown. Salt cites a well-known example in another exterior-shot film, *'The Loafer* (Essanay, 1912)...in which there are repeated cuts between Medium Shots of two men talking, both taken from the front with the camera just off their eye-line so that they do not look into the lens' (*Film Style and Technology*, 94; see Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, 209, for more on shot/reverse shot in this film). Also, Burch finds shot/reverse shot in the British fiction film *Desperate Poaching Affray*, of 1903 (102).

90. For the 1987 Pordenone Vitagraph retrospective, Salt prepared a paper with a section titled 'Reverse Scenes and Reverse Angles,' in which he wrote: 'Small framing pans and tilts of the camera to keep the actors well placed in the frame when they made small changes in position are also to be found in Vitagraph films with increasing frequency after 1910, and together with the features already mentioned such as the use of dialogue titles, the "Vitagraph angle", etc., the ground was prepared in 1912 for someone at Vitagraph to work at putting all this together in the final polished form that we unthinkingly accept as the normal way films are constructed. This someone turned out to be Ralph Ince, and he did it in the films he made between 1912 and 1916' ('Vitagraph Films – A Touch of Class,' Pordenone papers, 26) I lack the access to Ince's surviving films to explore Salt's provocative claim. However, taking his word for it, in *Film Style and Technology*, that 'the early history of the use of this device really began in the work of Ralph Ince from 1913 to 1915, for he was the first to get an appreciable number of reverse-angle cuts into his films' (238), I can speculate that Ince was at the center of the mid-1910s galvanization and transformation of favorable conditions that I have described. Salt wrote more about Ince and shot/reverse shot in another paper for the retrospective, one devoted exclusively to Ince. In this essay he makes strong claims for Ince as an important and overlooked figure in film history, and includes many comments on the director's handling of shot/reverse shot and, more generally, reverse-angle cutting ('Ralph Ince,' Pordenone papers, 1–13; see also Salt, *Film Style and Technology*, 95 and 137). Salt also describes Ince's applications of this device in outdoor fiction filmmaking (*Film Style and Technology*, 93–95), suggesting that, possibly, the developments on indoor sets that I have described were instrumental in the transitioning of this device onto indoor sets (where fiction filmmaking in the United States was increasingly coming to be shot). Salt suggests that Ince was an important figure in this transition: 'Films that [Ince] made at Vitagraph in 1915 such as *The Right Girl* and *His Phantom Sweetheart* show him putting the final polish on the technique of using a large number of reverse-angle cuts in interior, as well as exterior, scenes' (*Film Style and Technology*, 137). Regarding the timing of shot/reverse shot's integration into general narrative film style, Thompson refers to the occasional use of the device in 1911 and to its increasing use from 1914 on ('Narration in the Early Transition to Classical Filmmaking,' *Film History*, vol. 9, no. 4 [Winter 1995]: 414 and 433, respectively).