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

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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, and it is, as David Bordwell has explained, an enormously flexible and versatile technique. Some of the first appearances of shot/reverse shot are in films made by the Vitagraph Company of America in the 1910s. 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 were L'Assassinat du Duc de Guise (The Assassination of the Duc de Guise, 1908). 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. 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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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. 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 Wolfflin. 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 emphasize depth, and he notes that ‘recession speaks most intensely when it can reveal itself as movement.’ This is the case in films also, only less abstractly so since figures in films can actually move. 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 I 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 Mo 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 Lydia Borelli) and her father slowly make their way into the recesses of a richly appointed set (Fig. 2). 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-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. 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.

Consider briefly Leonardo da Vinci’s Last Supper, in which Wolfflin finds a ‘wall-like compactness which forces the plane upon us’ (Fig. 3). He describes many formal aspects of the transformation from this Bar 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. 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 baby misses 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
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 Noel Burch believes characterises many pre-1906 films.14 In its staging we see something of what distinctly comparable to Wölflin’s Renaissance ‘will to the plane’.15

Now, as the dramatic playing areas on interior film sets become deeper, how was this visual flatness overcome?16 In his consideration of Tiepolo’s The Last Supper, a Baroque work, Wölflin points out one way in painting the plane was broken down. In this type of painting, Wölflin writes, “the spectator is compelled to relate in recession”17 (Fig. 5). Note that Tiepolo’s arrangement of figures includes a figure seen from the rear. Elsewhere Wölflin 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 recession figure alignments that Wölflin 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:

Far from the Vitagraph practice of actors turning their backs to camera, the early films of Asta Nielsen 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’ramor mia non muore! afford only limited opportunities for diagonal recessional alignments of the sort that Wölflin 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
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.) 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 putting a dog. The potting 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 scene25, 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 Mersereau) by towing him around to May’s seated figure, a choice which 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 characterization 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), where Mary Pickford’s character expresses grief at the departure of her husband. Of this moment Gunning writes that, “instead of turning than 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 backs to the camera, very different from the Vitagraph practice of actors having their backs to the camera at undramatic moments. For example, William 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 an 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 intrusive 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 coloration.32

Gunning’s example from Swords and Hearts illustrates that looking at versus looking past are far from being ‘alternative’ 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—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
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.34

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 angling action in planes at various distances from the camera, all so as to significantly enhance the viewer's sense of depth.35 The Film d'Art imparts combined with these developments at Vitagraph and, as Brewster notes, the possibility of principals in the foreground turning their backs to the camera.36 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.37

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 in 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 eternally 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 Wollkin 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 ignored by Vitagraph stagings.

By making this claim about spectators and characters sharing viewpoints, I am not suggesting that such a figural orientation necessarily functions as an identifying 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 'tunnel-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,
The figure seen from the rear

Likewise, in The Vengeance of Durand, or The Two Portraits (1913), Monon (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 haunt. 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 mid-thigh) 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. Of such stagings, a Vitagraph director might proudly point out that they look natural. He might indicate that they fall on the favorable 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.’

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’.

54 He finds these works ‘anti-theatrical, which is to say that they treated the beholder as if he were not there.’ Fried characterizes the absorptive qualities of these paintings in considerably more involved and complex ways than the one that I am suggesting characterizes our Vitagraph figure. Still, a sense of his distinction between theatricality and absorption maps loosely (and inhistorically) onto one that I want to make: on the one hand we have Leonardo’s Christ and Apostles, and Uncle Josh, and some figurative arrangements broadly characteristic of European and Griffith’s cinema in the 1910s. These are ‘theatrical’ insofar as they exhibit a frontalitiy 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:
the demand that the artist bring about a para-
doxal relationship between painting and be-
holder — 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.] 39

Fred helps us to understand how, through
these stagings, Vitrograph 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 ‘sutting’) the spec-
tator into the spatial system of the classical narrative film. However, to consider this operation with respect to
Vitrograph 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 Fred
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 shar-
ing one’s view with a character is a potential effect of the Vitrograph figure. However, some film
theorists have maintained that so orienting the spec-
tator’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
neutralized 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 char-
acter 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 ‘tickling and locking 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 wanting to see again. We can also see Vitrograph
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
angle of another spectator, who is ghostly or ab-
sent’.57 We can also see Vitrograph stagings or-
ging to fill this absence in.

The effects of masked regions of the frame and
directed glances can often be described with re-
course to little or no plot summarising. However, the Vitrograph figure and the American foreground
function within the context of more than one shot, and they require a consideration of narrative con-
text 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 an-
cient locale. In the opening scene, she waits outside
a doorway as a procession of white-robed worship-
ers 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, Qunitreea, 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 cam-
era while Qunitreea takes up a three-quarters fron-
tal 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 (nreverse-angle)
cut.

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

In a sense they can be seen as alternatives —
one a shallow staging of action in long
Tableaux began to be felt (by audiences and/or
film-makers) as tedious, variety could be intro-
duced 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 charac-
teristic of Europe during the 1910s, whereas
the tendency to emphasize depth is Euro-
pean.60

I would place Karma and Qunitreea on this
‘first road’ and, more particularly on the route taken
by Vitrograph [though I am aware that one could
choose to highlight more going on in this exchange
than a prefiguration of shot/reverse shot].54
In Red and White Roses, a pair interrelate in recession even more elaborately. 42 Morgan Andrews (William Humphrey), 'the reform party's choice for nomination as governor' (title), visits the parlour of temptress Lida de Janeiro (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-Poster, 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.

The two exchanges in Re-Poster 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. 43 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', 44 and perhaps one could add that the technique serves the essentially narrative interest in alternation. 45 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 acceptable 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. 46 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. 47

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. 48 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. Yans Yens, 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 locked at from opposite sides (e.g. A Spanish Romance, 6 Oct. '08, Romance of an Umbrella, 28 Sept. '09). 49

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 how he starts seeing in films in general at this time, lighting arrangements effecting a marked figure modeling as well as separation from the background. 50 In 1912 he locates a definite practice 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. 51 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. 52 In the process lighting was moulding 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'. 53 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.' 54 Compare Fig. 10 from Vanity Fair to Fig. 17 from Ma t'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-
The figure seen from the rear

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, "Conventions, Construction, and Cinematic Vision", does not take into 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 to the earliest 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 Brewer's conjecture is that the aim might 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 look 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 frontaliy, 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 individuality that he often finds resulting back and spreading uniformly wide contradictions 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. Unremarkably then, shot/reverse shot entered into the paradigm after making some scattered appearances and then crystallising and broadening out from a narrower course. This was by a process of transformation and integration in which, Salt believes, Vitagraph director Ralph Ince played a major and largely unrecognized part. Vitagraph in the first half of the 1910s discloses a pristine moment of origin than a set of conditions and tendencies which, in hindsight only, one could call ‘telling.’ 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 narratorial 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.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Yuki Tawara, Stephen Battimore, and especially Tom Gunning for their input on various drafts of this essay.

Notes
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, 1995], 59). Noël Burch is another to count this innovation among Vitagraph’s achievements (Life to Lies, 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: BFI, 1992), 29–35, 137, and 23B (see this essay’s footnote 4 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 Lodger (Essex, 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 Battimore 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 reverse-angle cuts. ‘The Voice of Guise’ shot of the Duc d’Alençon appeared in New York, namely The Judgement (Nigel Solomon and Oliver Twist), the extra descriptive title on Vitagraph High Art Film (Film Style and Technology, 88).
9. As Bordwell writes: ‘Making action thrust diagonally to the foreground is a very old art 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 Arrêté d’un Tram 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’ (53).
11. Salt, Film Style and Technology, 95.
12. Wolfkin, 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).
15. Wolfkin, 73.
16. I specify dramatic and interior because, as Brewster points out, exterior shot/ reverse shot film staged action in depth much earlier than dramatic films on interior sets did (‘Deep Staging,’ 46; see also Jon Gorter, ‘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. Wolfkin, 73.
18. Ibid., 76.
21. Ibid. See 112–115 for their general discussion of this scene, and 112–113 in particular for more instances of close shots with long takes.
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 92–94 and 126–127, but also 10, 51, and 156 n. 11.
24. Gunning finds this scene reflecting Griffith’s growing interest in environmental detail (W.D. 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 rows like railroad cars’ (History of Film Style, 132; see also Brewster and Jacobs, 189). It might also be noted that, in contrast to Biographic’s Manhattan brownstone studio—which afforded limited possibilities for depth staging—Vitagraph opened a spacious new studio in 1910 at 936 (Gartenberg, 8). See Gartenberg on how shooting in this new studio gave Vitagraph ample opportunity to explore depth staging. 
28. Salt, Film Style and Technology, 93-95. Of Mo Ftimer specifically, Bierwiler and Jacobs note that there is no shot-reverse-shot in the film (112).


30. Ibid., 263.

31. Ibid., 264.

32. The sort of rear-facing figure that Griffith popularized was not unheard of in Vitagraph. Salt describes a type of character that actor/director Ralph Ince liked to play: "A part of the characterization involves players who are refreshingly honest, but that is really at the emotional bottom with his back to the camera." (Ralph Ince, 2. English-language copys of papers prepared for the 1987 Los Angeles Gim Certo Motto, 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 Italy as: Paolo Cherchi Usai, ed. Vitagraph Co. of America: il cinema primo di Hollywood [Pordenone, Italy: Studio Testi, 1987]. Also, in his book on film style and technology, Salt writes, referring to Gun- ning's discussion of rear-facing figures in Griffith's Biographic films, that "the back-turning technique is also used in Vitagraph films in an expressive way, for instance in Dussey, when one of the girl's has just received bad news." (113)

33. Brewster and Jacobs describe an entrance in Mo Ftimer that further illustrates this gradation. A char- acter appears at the top of some stairs, visible behind Eba and another character, and although her back is to the camera, Booss visibly starts at [Emilio] Felacci's entrance, bunching up her shoulders (112; see also 113).

34. Salt writes that, "throughout the years 1907-1913 many filmmakers, including D.W. Griffith, but largely excluding Vitagraph films, had the grouping of the actors oriented towards the camera and the perspective audience 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 (108). And, after describing the Vitagraph rear-facing figure, he writes that, despite the fact that this kind of natural staging with some scenes of the cameraman had first appeared in a French film, French and other European filmmakers proved unable to develop the technique.


36. Gortenberg, 13-16.

37. Or maybe the French influence introduced this pos- sibility 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 replicated what they observed in other films. They have not survived. As Gunning writes in the introduction to an essay comprised for the 1987 Pordenone Vitagraph retrospective: "My work on Griffith at Biograph took advantage of the fact that at the period 1907-1913 (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, the available sample comes close to 99 per cent. In con- junction with the Vitagraph company is, of course, very different. A much smaller percentage of the company's films have been preserved. They are available in the cases of copyright prints which are likely to preserve the original form of the films. And even the best existing prints, Vitagraph Films and The Cinema of Narrative Inte- gration," Pordenone papers, 2-3. Also shedding light on the confusion that exists in studying Vitag- graph films in the late 1990s and 1910s, Bowser writes in reference to the nine-foot line: "Barry Salt believes that this practice began with some Vitag- graph films in 1909 and was gradually adopted by most of the other companies the following year. It is not, 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 puzzles and uncertainties, one can, for example, place one's faith in the records of Vitag- graph actor James Morrison: "We were the first ones to bring people up to within nine feet of the cam- era..." Also, according to Salt, the Vitagraph films of Griffith did keep 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: An Unofficial History of the New York Dramatic Mirror, 1907-1910, 8). That these intense rear-facing figures were at Biograph part of a restrained and visceral actor style, and the casual ones at Vita- graph part of a restrained stage styling, should remind us that the difference in style of a film is one that is more necessary or realistic or natural than the other. A film in which care and sensitivity in her def- inition of the close-up is not a point that 'verisimilitude should not be equated with reality' (28).


41. Wallis, 77. Interestingly, Michael Friedman quotes a contemporary art critic of an eighteenth century French painter who seems to miss the connection between the fact that he admires and what he considers to be an obstacle the painter had to surmount in order to achieve it: "[The paint- ing 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 The attention: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 14.)

42. Edward Branigan describes a 'reflection angle' from behind the subject, usually over one shoulder. In addition to being less subjective than the PV shot, it is 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 (Burlington: Mouton Publishers, 1984), 110).

43. See Bowser, 94-95; Burwell, History of Film Style, 184; and Brewster and Jacobs, 169.

44. Bowser, 94.

45. See Brewster and Jacobs, 173-174. Burwell re- lutes how narrow this tunnel is: "The standard lens of the Biograph era is the 16mm, which yields about 28 degrees of horizontal coverage — as com- pared with the 200-degree field available to two- eyered humans" (History of Film Style, 103). For a clear description of the cinema's optical phenomena, see History of Film Style, 181-184. For a more technical one, and a helpful diagram, see Brewster and Ja- cobs, 172-174.

46. Burwell, History of Film Style, 184.

47. Ibid., 164.

48. Gortenberg's essay on Vitagraph films in the 1900s describes how the studio was making significant roadways 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 rear, a change in concept from earlier films" (15).

49. Kent also directed the film (Brewster and Jacobs, 121).

50. Frank Woods knew that the actor's lack of aware- ness of the viewer is, of course, a game: 'Should there be total unconsciousness that the cam- era is there — or rather should there not appear to be 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 out- side the focus of his study — Gericault's Raft of the Medusa.

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

54. Ibid., 108.


56. Bordwell, Steiger, and Thompson, 66.

57. Dayan, 188.

58. Bordwell writes that the nine-foot line 'could cut the actors off at midnight 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 Evering Bauer's films, and films by other European directors — mostly of the later
Robert Spadoni

1910s — skillfully orchestrate character alternations through staging.


61. To my claim that Karma and Quintra are on this ‘fast road,’ the designer that the scene is also creating a dramatic alternation through staging — simpler but not wholly unlike later European ones. Liane was created in Karma and Quintra's alternation against a comment made by Brewher and Jacobs, and make a similar objection: ‘To on an even greater degree than in the diva’s gesticulatory soliloquies, then, ensemble acting in the European cinema performed functions which were fulfilled by editing in the American cinema: singling out important aspects of a scene, providing the structure of alternation and repetition within scenes’ (127). They qualify somewhat this notion of the two as alternations on page 14. Clearly Karma and Quintra have a relationship to both paths to fulfillment, and I am not suggesting that relations to paths to go the furthest are the most important or interesting ones to investigate. Walter Benjamin might voice the most donnor criticism of any project serving intentions similar to mine, where he describes the “ap-presentation” or apogee, in which ‘what matters to the reconstruction of continuity. It lies stress only on those elements of the work which have already become part of its influence. What escapes it are the rough outlines of the story, the rhythm, the dream, the more interesting aspects that have taken a slight wish to go beyond’ (“Central Park,” trans. Loyd Spencer and Mark Harrington, New German Commentary, 1991). The only defense I would offer to such a charge is to admit that my insight is trained on continuity and that it views the films on development that, if one theory, or shot/reverse shot, one could “call progress.” I recognize that a venture onto those rough outlines and jotted prongs that Benjamin describes might help to hold up much more interesting aspects than 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 “par de deux of temptation, hesitation, and acquisition,” and points out that a slightly higher than typical camera angle helps to keep the two moving figures in view (185). See also Brewher and Jacobs, 120–121, on this film.


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

65. Burch, 245.

66. Other interests would function primarily to constrain and transform expressions of this narrative interest: ones to rationalization of introduction and standardize product; to transfer control of the film from the on-set direction to the post-production domain of producers; and to fall stories efficiently, which generally would favor collecting comparatively shot shots and reverse shots for later assembly over choreographing complicated stag-
ning. Bordwell briefly discusses the approach to doing so in his book On the History of Film Style, 195. On how Vitagraph set such precedents and standards of studio organization and film production. See the same pages for Gartenberg on Vitagraph and the emerging central production system.

67. I do not suggest that the cinema shifted wholesale from alternations by to shots by ones, Bordwell describes a scene in Fafen Affair (1945): “shifting the light to a half minute plan sequence needed is not a reverse shot cut. The fact of alternation without significant new view points we are taking, but often do in fact. In fact, Gunning makes equally clear how Griffith’s system was not like classical cinema.


69. Bordwell, ‘The Vitagraph Fragments in the Library of Congress Paper Print Collection,’ Pordenone papers, 20. In a discussion of early reverse-angle cuts in exterior-shot films, Salt seems to describe the same phenomenon: “occasional scenes made through the next hour before the back of the characters, who rough and view point we are taking, but often do in fact. In fact, Bordwell, Salt, and Thompson, 210. Salt finds this also, and distinguished the variations with rams 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).


71. Ibid., 97.

72. Ibid., 87.

73. Bordwell, History of Film Style, 177.

74. Brewher, ‘Deep Staging,’ 48. Salt also describes the camera height in this film as suggestive of a ‘from the stalk’s viewpoint’ (Film Style and Technology, 88).

75. Bordwell, History of Film Style, 174.

76. Ibid., 152.

77. Ibid., 150.

78. Bordwell, Steiger, and Thompson, 8.

79. Brewher and Jacobs, 168.

80. For example, Stephen Batchelor finds the functional equivalent to a reverse-angle cut in the 1900 British film Shite, Nailed to a Fence (‘Shits in the Dark,’ 108); it is a functional equivalent because the alternation to a view from the other side of the fence is equivalent to looking through the fence and turning the fence around; see also Burch, 225–226, on this cut in this film, and Salt, Film Style and Technology, 55–57. (Salt also, Salt, 55–57, for a general discussion of early reverse angles). Batchelor finds an actual reverse-angle cut in The Evening Attack (Edison, 1899), and reverse angles and point-of-view shots (as in 1899) are listed from before the invention of film (108). And not merely do reverse-angle cuts turn up outside of Vitagraph films, but short/reverse shot of a film (Salt cites a well-known example in another exterior-shot film, The Loafer (Eassouny, 1912), in which there are repeated cuts between Medium Shots of two men talking, both taken from the front to the camera just off their eye line so that they do not look into the lens (Film Style and Technology, 195). Also, Burch finds short/reverse shot in the Blind Flick, the melodrama film Desperate P Seahaven, of (1903–1904).

81. For the 1987 Pordenone Vitagraph retrospective, Salt prepared a paper with a section titled ‘Reverse Scenes and Reverse Angles,’ in which he wrote: ‘Shifting the light to a half minute plan sequence needed is not a reverse shot cut. The fact of alternation without significant new view points we are taking, but often do in fact. In fact, Gunning makes equally clear how Griffith’s system was not like classical cinema.

82. Salt, Film Style and Technology, 174. Salt finds this also, and distinguished the variations with rams 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).

83. Salt, Film Style and Technology, 174. Salt finds this also, and distinguished the variations with rams 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).

84. Bordwell, History of Film Style, 174.

85. Ibid., 152.

86. Ibid., 150.

87. Bordwell, Steiger, and Thompson, 8.

88. Brewher and Jacobs, 168.

89. For example, Stephen Batchelor finds the functional equivalent to a reverse-angle cut in the 1900 British film Shite, Nailed to a Fence (‘Shits in the Dark,’ 108); it is a functional equivalent because the alternation to a view from the other side of the fence is equivalent to looking through the fence and turning the fence around; see also Burch, 225–226, on this cut in this film, and Salt, Film Style and Technology, 55–57. (Salt also, Salt, 55–57, for a general discussion of early reverse angles). Batchelor finds an actual reverse-angle cut in The Evening Attack (Edison, 1899), and reverse angles and point-of-view shots (as in 1899) are listed from before the invention of film (108). And not merely do reverse-angle cuts turn up outside of Vitagraph films, but short/reverse shot of a film (Salt cites a well-known example in another exterior-shot film, The Loafer (Eassouny, 1912), in which there are repeated cuts between Medium Shots of two men talking, both taken from the front to the camera just off their eye line so that they do not look into the lens (Film Style and Technology, 195). Also, Burch finds short/reverse shot in the Blind Flick, the melodrama film Desperate P Seahaven, of (1903–1904).