

Panopticon Perspective: Visual Analysis of a Film

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The Kyoto Conference on Arts, Media & Culture 2023
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Bent Hamer's movie *Kitchen Stories* (2003) is a Norwegian movie that is a combination of the post-war context within the research storyline of daily life practices. Kitchens are places where parts become wholes: where various ingredients could be combined and turned into a new form. In the film, space turns into a research field about a story of the growing relationship between two men, the story of post-war peoples, and the story of a scientific attempt in the movie *Kitchen Stories* (2003). In the visual analysis of the film, the focus is the roles and visual storytelling to analyze the power relations between characters that are an observer (Folke) and an observed (Isak). The steps of the storyline are considered to understand the roles and individual struggles by highlighting visual perspectives, and individual breaks of the gaze. Thus, composition and challenges provide a change in power relations between characters. Its cinematography gives ideas about how the tactics in daily life become a way to fight against the system and how the character improves individual solutions to cope with power in the kitchen. Overall, the analysis aims to explain the structure with the Foucault Panopticon perspective, surveillance, and gaze. Michel de Certeau took a different approach to daily life practices, in the film, as Individual Solutions, Isak improves some tactics in daily life to struggle with the power system that is settled in his personal space.

Keywords: Panopticon, Film Analysis, Visual Analysis

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Introduction

During the late 1970s and 1980s, the media and social sciences started to focus on different approaches rather than mainstream and dominant paradigms. Ethnographic approaches in social sciences create a broad field to work with various practitioners in multiple methods. Researchers have concentrated on micro-perspectives to understand the whole picture, so these methods have become critical points for visual storytelling. Bent Hamer's movie *Kitchen Stories* (2003) is a Norwegian movie that is a combination of the post-war context within a research storyline of daily life practices. The study focuses on the movie to analyze the power relations between the observer (Folke) and the observed (Isak) and aims to explain it with the Foucault Panopticon perspective, surveillance, and gaze. As individual solutions, Isak improves some tactics in daily life to struggle with the power system that is settled in his personal space. The kitchen turns into a research field about a story of the strong relationship of two men, the story of post-war peoples, and the story of scientific endeavor in the movie *Kitchen Stories* (2003). Thus it opens a new door for a concept to analysis of panoptic view and tactics in everyday life. The role of Folke could be considered as an example of a panoptic view which represents the power supplied by the government. The following steps of the storyline break the gaze and it becomes possible to see a change in power relations between Folke and Isak. Also, tactics in daily life become a way to fight against the system. Isak improves individual solutions to struggle with power in the kitchen. These practices also change their communication and help them interact with each other.

The film's director prefers to craft an array of themes and perspectives by using a research project storyline. Primarily, it is essential to cover the social and historical context of the country in the 1950s to interpret the story. Throughout the post-war period, the government invested in rebuilding their nation to recover the social, economic, political, and social effects of the war. Within the complexity, gender roles took place on the table. According to the UNESCO report, "in 1950, only 28% of adult women were working outside the home compared to 34% in 1920. The number of women who married increased during the whole of this period, but of this only 3% were economically independent in 1920 and 6% in 1950." (Norwegian National Commission, 1989). In the movie where the impact of the historical process is seen, the new ways of the roles in the kitchen, and the system circulation in daily life are taken into consideration in different ways with the storyline.

In the movie storyline, The Swedish government sponsored a mass observation project and there is a drawn schema that shows Sweden housewife's kitchen routines and movements in the kitchen during six weeks. In the chart, the thickness of the lines increases or decreases with the intensity of the traffic, they aim to decide the locations of items in the kitchen. Their focus is to decrease the amount of traffic in the kitchen if more rational designs and layouts for these food preparation areas could be devised. Instead of the habits of Swedish housewives, the research part starts to focus on the gentle study of male loneliness. The observers live in the caravans next to the house, and observers can enter and leave the environment at any time, but the order is to avoid personal interactions with his subject and they cannot interfere with daily habits in the house. The plan consists of basic principles: an inspector installs himself on a stepladder in the volunteer's (Isak) kitchen and for weeks logs all movements and business in the kitchen. The scientist *Folke (Tomas Norström)* is sent to a rural Norwegian town, where he becomes an observer of the kitchen odd single man Isak (Joachim Calmeyer) who dreams of getting a horse with the research corporation, but only a doll causes him to refuse to cooperate. Folke is granted entry into the kitchen where he sets up an umpire chair in a corner to observe Isak. At the beginning of the process, Isak refuses

to stay in the kitchen and cook upstairs and starts to observe Folke through the little hole in the ceiling. Folke obeys the rules at the beginning and avoids patient interaction. Ultimately, they start to share a couple of things and become friends in the end. Folke's boss finds out about the friendship between the two and fires him from the job. When Folke decides to come back and live with Isak, he witnesses an ambulance at the door, letting the audience speculate Isak's (or merely his horse's) death. The last scene is a blank telephone call in the kitchen, notifying Folke of Grant's visit. The movie reflects the critical points in terms of the power system between characters and a story for the observational method used in the movie. Thus, this paper will focus on the layers of meaning power relations between Folke (Observer) and Isak (Observed) in the practices of "Everyday Life" with Foucault's gaze and interpretation of the panoptic view.

The System of Power Relationship Between Observer and Observed in The Kitchen

The power relationship is discussed from different perspectives and Foucault brings multiple terms to define relationships and systems in the 1970s. A Panopticon which is a theoretical model of a disciplinary power structure is defined as a ring-shaped building that contains a central observation tower surrounded by cells or rooms arranged in a circular. The design of the system allows a single watchman to observe all inmates without the inmates being able to tell whether or not they are being watched. In terms of the psychological effect of constant surveillance, the uncertainty of being watched opens a chapter for the panoptic gaze that becomes the ruler and the subject becomes the object being the subject. Foucault also mentions that man's gaze is panoptic because he objectifies what he is looking at. "It is an important mechanism, for it automatizes and deindividualizes power. Power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up" (Foucault, 1979, p.202). He defines that because of this structure, individuals fall into the trap of a non-personal power relationship that individualizes the individual, which exacerbates him/herself as a result of continuous surveillance.

The Panopticon serves as a powerful metaphor for highlighting the dynamics of power, and surveillance in modern societies. In this paper, the movie *Kitchen Stories* (2003) is analyzed in terms of a panoptic perspective by looking into cinematography and storytelling. In the movie, there is a reflection of the panopticon both physically created with the chair and research task ruled by the government. While the design of the surveillance concept in the movie works with the observer located in the corner, the concept of power works with a similar purpose. The researcher (Folke), who is assigned by the government, collects data about Isak by observing his daily activities when he is in his kitchen. He occupies Isak's personal space in the kitchen and he becomes a dominant mechanism as happens in the system of the watchtower. In addition to the power system, Foucault states the surveillance by arguing the gaze. With rules about the scientific attempt, both of the characters know roles and rules for how they should act to each other. According to Folke's assignment, his role is to look at him by sitting on his chair in the corner and record Isak's daily activities in the kitchen. As a neutral observer, Folke has been assigned to collect data in a non-judgmental manner free of personal opinions, or curiosity and he is not allowed to go beyond the boundaries of the kitchen. Folke as an observer role starts the speaking eye and reflects on a paper what he sees in the kitchen. Isak struggles to stop him watching by turning off the light, not cooking in the kitchen, and hanging up the clothes in the middle of the kitchen. Without interaction, Isak becomes the object of an overarching gaze and the character roles and movie sets are supporting points of the domination. Firstly, Folke takes place in a high position with

the chair which allows him to look from a high angle which provides a dominant position. Secondly, he records what he sees around the kitchen and about him. As the story unfolds Folke's new attempts, his standpoint evolves from neutrality to a growing curiosity and active engagement with Isak's life. He first takes the salt from the shelf, shares his tobacco with Isak, and the first time Folke leaves his chair to drink coffee. Thus, the power relationship starts to change and Isak tries to do the same thing like sitting in the chair and trying to draw some lines on the record.

“Tactics” of Isak to the Practice of Everyday Life

Everyday situations as micro-structures like families had turned into a working field to draw macro perspective. “A healthy respect for the importance of studying culture at the level of everyday life has been at the core of cultural studies from the beginning.” (Gibson, 2000, s.255). With ethnographic research, “The Everyday” has become an important perception of understanding people, behaviors, and cultural references (Droner, 2006). The French scholar Michel de Certeau took a different approach to daily life practices and made an explanation about the struggle in daily life. He defines the activities and strategies as a "way of operating" because ordinary life is a side of struggle against the grand institutions of the dominant order (Droner, 2006). “Must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the property powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse. In short, a tactic is an art of the weak” (De Certeau, 1988 as cited in Droner, 2006, p.349) Certeau makes an important critical distinction between strategies and tactics in this battle of repression and expression. Strategies are used by small or large institutions and organizations to deal with some external entity. Tactics are defined as defensive and optimistic physical and psychological actions in more narrow spaces for individuals (De Certeau, 1984).

In the movie, the character Isak tries to keep himself away from the observer. He keeps his daily routines like smoking or drinking coffee in the kitchen at the first step. Following days, he changes his attitude and starts to cook upstairs to keep himself away from the observer. As a further step, he drills a small hole in the ceiling to watch him from the top because of his curiosity about what he records. He tries to stay away from his look and observation while taking advantage of the observer's limited movement in the home. Another tactic is the turning light off while both of them sitting in the kitchen not to let him observe while he is eating. Also, Isak starts to hang wet clothes in the middle of the kitchen to interrupt the connection and limit his point of view. So, Isak is not able to change or control a research project held in his space, but he applied small and destructive tactics to fight agonies against Folke and the program. Also, Isak's different daily activities in the kitchen like cutting Green (his neighbor) and bathing create a struggle for the observer. Further interactions help the development of a relationship between people who have not known each other before. They start to spend time together, so it becomes a process of developing a strong relationship. They have dinner, smoke pipe, and celebrate Isak's birthday. Then step-by-step, the relationship grew and got close. Isak lied to Folke's boss to keep his research safe. In other words, they lose the hierarchy and power relations in the research process and their friendship causes Folke to lose his job in the research program.

Conclusion

Kitchens are part of houses where different ingredients can be mixed and cooked to have new forms. In the movie, kitchen is the center of storyline and it turns into a research field about a

story of the interesting relationship between two men, the story of post-war peoples, and the story of scientific endeavor in the movie *Kitchen Stories* (2003). Thus, the movie plot and cinematography open a new chapter for a concept to analysis of panoptic view and tactics in everyday life. The role of Folke could be considered an example of a panoptic view which represents the power supplied by system. The following steps of the storyline break the gaze and it becomes possible to see changes in power relations between Folke and Isak. Also, tactics in daily life become a way to fight against the system. Isak improves individual solutions to struggle with power in the kitchen. These practices also change their communication and help them interact with each other. Lastly, the movie emphasizes and criticizes the observational neutrality in research by showing us the irrepressible human tendency to communicate. The story shows both the panopticon and tactics in daily life that are essentials of surveillance and the uncertainty in modern societies.

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