

## Style as Meaning in de Palma's *Snake Eyes*

I will relate a sequence from a 1998 film called 'Snake Eyes' to larger thematic concerns associated with the film. I should clarify, however, that I am thinking of 'thematic concerns' in this case as ideas relating to the director of the film, Brian de Palma, and not necessarily relating to the content or storyline in any regard. 'Snake Eyes' is the perfect example of a film in which internal characterization is subordinated to an argument maintained by the author. De Palma has often spoken of how he considers storyline to be a secondary issue in cinema while 'visual ideas' (Knapp, pg. 6) should always be of higher importance. The opening shot of 'Snake Eyes' manages to clearly express this concern, laying down the framework for what we'll come to realize the film is essentially about – the camera's eyes.

There is no 'relationship' here between the style and the meaning. The style *is* the meaning. *What* we see isn't of as much concern to de Palma as *how* we see it. After all, the storyline could be obtained through another medium such as literature; it is in the visual presentation potential that separates cinema from the other forms. There is nothing 'empty' about this approach - audiences are just too unwilling to believe that anything rewarding can be experienced in cinema if it's overshadowing character and plot. The remarkable opening of 'Snake Eyes' – an unbroken shot that alternates between static and moving camera stances and lasting nearly twenty minutes (Greven, pg. 52) – is de Palma's way of showing (rather than just saying) why he feels this way. We have a camera that is not bound to its characters: the frame often drifts away from the protagonist (Nicolas Cage) as if it has whimsically decided to explore an architectural

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space. These moments of camera freedom are surprising and exhilarating as the viewers are given a sense that they aren't merely limited to what has been neatly staged in front of the camera frame. We are free to explore whatever this cinematic world has to offer, both in front of and beyond the frame whenever we might feel like doing so.

These moments of spatial exploration within the opening shot are cinematic in the truest sense of the word as we track across walls, floors, ceilings; sometimes vertically, sometimes horizontally, sometimes in complex movement patterns. And then we might decide to reattach ourselves to a character and therefore the storyline but never do we have a feeling of imprisonment to the narrative; to the text; to what is written that practically all other films give. With 'Snake Eyes,' de Palma pulled off his greatest feat as a director by managing to give the audience a real sense of visual freedom.

It should also be noted that the opening shot does in significant (though less important) ways serve a narrative purpose as well. By strategically providing us with only a certain amount of narrative information, it sets up a mystery and provides the framework for a number of later flashbacks from different perspectives on this same event. Certainly some part of the appreciation of this shot should be attributed to how it serves the storyline by introducing a puzzle; however, the highly-deliberated nature of the film's form ultimately shines out over it.

Audiences should be more appreciative of what de Palma has decided to make his main concern here: the camera and the way in which it behaves. This is not to be brushed off as a purely stylistic or formal decision. If anything, de Palma is giving more

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consideration to *you* as the viewer and to *your* cinematic experience than anything else. After all, the camera defines us and our role(s) as viewers. De Palma asks some very clever questions here: should the viewer be an omniscient God? Or should the viewer be duped just like a character within the plot? Or should the viewer be a passive observer? Or should the viewer 'walk' with the participants as an invisible character? (Internet Movie Database) With 'Snake Eyes,' de Palma has decided to let us be all of these things and more; sometimes simultaneously as we go into split-screen and visual layering techniques. Camera stances are constantly switching; the personality of the camera constantly changing and in this sense we are perhaps the most dynamic character within the whole enterprise. Why should one need interesting and well-developed characters within the storyline when we actually get to be one ourselves?

The sheer ambition and audacity of this opening shot are what audiences first notice; as it goes on and on, we inevitably begin to focus our attention away from the storyline and onto how incredible this opening shot is rather than anything within it. Character interactions going on within the shot are of secondary interest to most viewers as we marvel at the cinematic artistry. But where the opening of 'The Player' was mostly constructed in service to the storyline and setting up relevant characters, this shot at times deliberately strays its attention away from characters and the plot altogether by veering off into random spaces. With this de Palma is making his statement clear to us from the very beginning: this film is not about storyline; it is about sight and exploring the possibilities open to you as the viewer in seeing a cinematic world. The camera here

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clearly has a mind and thought processes of its own; it is not merely a recording device used in order to convey the content. Here the camera allows us as viewers to become a character, a narrator, and/or a God. It can lie, be fooled, search curiously, document, play jokes, etc. (Internet Movie Database) The 'Snake Eyes' camera is not only an actor in its own right – it is the real star of this film. Nicolas who...?

To make things a little more overt, de Palma seems to have informed screenwriter David Koepp of his intentions behind the film and in this regard we have certain clues planted within the content: a girl's glasses are crushed so she *sees* less than the audience. The whole plot revolves around what a satellite *sees*. We are repeatedly reminded of the thousands of cameras around the casino as our *eyes* co-opt them. And lastly, the storyline is framed by another *camera eye* – a television crew. (Internet Movie Database) This evidence within the storyline helps to reinforce exactly what the main concerns here are.

Of course 'Snake Eyes' did not receive much positive critical reception. Many reviewers noted that there seemed to be something interesting going on but couldn't get their minds off of criticizing the storyline. The 'something interesting' is what should have been noticed on a larger scale and perhaps was on some subliminal level. But de Palma's decision to place emphasis upon the life of his camera is not a trivial one as it defines nothing less than *who we are* within the cinematic experience.

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