

Performance Criticism Meets Perspective Criticism:  
Critiquing the Use of Point of View in David Rhoads' Performance of Mark

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It is an undeniable fact that a live performance of a biblical text has the potential of making a significant impact on its audience. The nature of the impact felt by the audience will, of course, be determined by the interpretation of the text that has informed the crafting of the performance; and the sounder the interpretive work, the better the chance the impact felt by the audience will match the impact intended by the narrative itself.

However, the soundness of the interpretative work informing the crafting of performances of biblical texts must be called into question when it is realized that one crucial component of narrative interpretation—the literary concept of “point of view”—has never been afforded any serious attention. In this paper, I will first lay out the basics of a methodology for analyzing point of view in biblical narratives--what I call “perspective criticism”--and then will explore the significance of point-of-view analysis for the performance of a biblical narrative.

Technically speaking, point of view in a narrative has to do with the angle from which the audience experiences the events of the story line. Imagine the filming of a scene involving a woman standing on a curb, waiting to cross a busy downtown street. The shot could be taken from many different angles. For example, it could be taken from a sixth-floor window above her looking down on the top of her head, or it could be taken from directly across the street revealing her turning her head from side to side as she looks up and down the street, or it could be taken from inside her head looking out through her eyes revealing the traffic coming from one direction, and then from the other. These are all different angles. . . different points of view.

In cinema, point of view is immediate for the audience; the audience actually experiences views from the different angles. However, in written narrative, point of view is mediated. . . mediated through words arranged in various linguistic constructions. Through linguistics, a writer is able to position an audience to view a scene—in their “mind’s eye”—from different angles: from a distance, or from beside a character involved in the action, or even right from inside the character’s head looking out through their eyes.

Being aware of the point-of-view dynamics in a piece of narrative is essential in the task of discerning the effect a narrator wants an audience to experience, for point of view controls the crucial distinction between whether the audience experiences a given character “subjectively” or “objectively.” The inclusion of certain linguistic devices trigger point-of-view moves that lead the audience to experience a character as a mere object to observe, whereas the use of other linguistic devices trigger different point-of-view moves that lead the audience to have a subjective experience of the character.

A narrator’s providing the audience with such a subjective experience carries exegetical significance. Literary theory has established that when an audience does undergo a subjective experience of a character, the audience will feel a sense of empathy with the character. Regular moviegoers will undoubtedly have experienced this dynamic. Viewers find themselves drawn to a particular character, siding with that character in whatever he or she does, and this experience can inevitably be traced back to the fact that the audience has been given a subjective experience

of this character or, to put it point-of-view terms, the audience has experienced the story elements as filtered through the point of view of this character.

What is more, this sense of empathy with a character will occur even if the character has been negatively characterized. Consider a heist movie like *Ocean's Eleven* where we, the audience, find ourselves siding with a group of thieves as they attempt to breaking into a Las Vegas casino vault. Or consider the TV show *Dexter*, where we experience a strange sense of identification with a medical examiner who is a serial killer. Or consider *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, where we pull for the title characters, notorious bank and train robbers, to elude the pursuits of a posse of law-enforcement officers. In each case, point of view is filtered through these characters who would normally be considered negative, and as a result, we find ourselves siding with them. Such is the power of point of view in a narrative.

And this includes *biblical* narratives. A biblical narrative can lead the audience to side with a particular character simply by filtering the details of the story through that character's point of view. Conversely, if linguistic devices are used to prevent a story's details from being filtered through a given character's point of view, the audience will feel a sense of distance from that character, and thus, will be predisposed *not* to side with that character.

A perspective-critical analysis of a passage will show the exact point-of-view dynamics in play at every point in the narrative. And since these dynamics have the potential of prompting the audience to side with, or against, any given character in the story world, attention to these point-of-view dynamics is a necessary preparatory step for any performer whose goal is to have the audience react to the characters in the way intended by the narrative itself.

At this point, we turn our attention to an actual piece of biblical narrative—Mark 9:2-8 (Mark's account of the Transfiguration). I will proceed through the passage, segment-by-segment, providing a perspective-critical analysis of how point of view is functioning in each segment, then showing David Rhoads' 1986 performance of that segment, then evaluating of how well his performance captures the point-of-view dynamics of the segment. (On the "handout," you will find Rhoads' own translation of this passage, broken up into the seven segments to be covered.)

< After six days, Jesus took along Peter and James and John, and brought them up to a high mountain privately, by themselves. (v. 2a) >>

This segment sums up a significant distance in travel in a mere few seconds. Summary statements such as this are distance-producing, designed to position the audience at a distance from the action being described. Here, the Markan narrator is positioning the audience on the sideline to observe these characters from a distance, as mere objects. This being the case, a performer presenting this material should be giving the audience the impression that they are viewing these characters off in the distance.

<<TAPE 51:39-51:48>>

Note that Rhoads is walking as he describes Jesus and the disciples walking up the mountain. In doing so, Rhoads mimics the actions of the characters, thus promoting a subjective experience for the audience, leading the audience to imagine themselves walking along with the characters. So, contrary to the Markan narrator's lead of giving the audience the impression these characters are off in the distance, Rhoads is having the audience feel they are right in the midst of these characters.

< And he was transformed before them, and his clothes became dazzling, intensely white, like no launderer on earth is able to whiten. And Elijah appeared to them with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. (vv. 2b-4) >

Here, the characters have split into two separate locations, thus leaving the narrator with three options for positioning the audience. First, it could be a subjective stance, with the audience taking up residence inside Jesus' head to experience the events from his point of view, all the while losing awareness of the narrator's presence. However, the first two clauses ("And he was transformed before them, and his clothes became dazzling. . .") eliminates this as a possibility, for these words reflect the point of view of someone looking at Jesus, not the point of view of Jesus himself.

Second, it could be a subjective stance, with the audience taking up residence in the heads of the disciples to experience the events from their point of view, all the while losing awareness that the narrator is reporting the events to them. However, note the words following the mention that Jesus' clothes became dazzling: ". . .intensely white, like no launderer on earth is able to whiten." This is narrator commentary, a literary feature that has the effect of reminding the audience of the narrator's presence, thus preventing the audience from being lulled into merging with the consciousness of a character. The narrator's inclusion of such material is a clear indication it is not his intention to be positioning the audience in a subjective stance in the heads of the disciples.

Rather, the insertion of this narrator commentary is definitive evidence the narrator is choosing the third option for the audience: an objective stance on the sideline, to observe the disciples and Jesus as mere objects, with the audience conscious of the narrator's presence at their side, explaining to them what they are observing. This being the case, a performer should again be giving the audience the impression that all four of these characters are off in the distance.

<<TAPE 51:48-52:05>>

Notice Rhoads' hand gestures to his right upon his mention of Jesus' being transformed, his mention of Jesus' clothes becoming dazzlingly white, his mention of Elijah's appearing, and his mention of Moses' appearing. Each of these gestures indicates that what is being mentioned is "over to the right," at some distance. Therefore the point of view being established by Rhoads for the audience is one *at a distance from Jesus, Elijah and Moses*, who are "over there," thus conforming with the Markan narrator's objective stance "on the sideline."

< "Peter spoke up and said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it's good *we* are here, and we should make three shelters—one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." (v. 5) >

The report of direct discourse is generally neutral when it comes to analyzing point of view. Point-of-view analysis is all about determining in what position the narrator is placing the audience vis-à-vis the events of the story line, and in cases of direct discourse, this simply means the positioning of the audience as they watch someone speaking, with the formula introducing the speech ("and she said. . .") being the only place to look for clues as to the narrator's audience-positioning intentions. This formula is almost always bereft of any such clues, meaning the narrator simply desires the positioning prior to the formula to remain intact. On rare occasions, the narrator may insert an adverb that draws attention to the speaker's inner state ("and she said sorrowfully. . .") which has the effect of drawing the audience in for a subjective experience of the speech. However, that is not the case here, and so, the positioning of the audience that existed in verse 4 (an objective vantage point, looking on from the sideline) continues here.

<<TAPE 52:05-52:18>>

In his report of Peter's speech, Rhoads essentially becomes Peter—changing his voice and manner of speaking to mimic Peter's way of talking, and making hand gestures to mimic

Peter's hand gestures. As a result of this, the audience is not led to experience Peter as the faceless character "over there" to be observed as an object, as the Markan narrator intends him to be experienced; rather, the audience is drawn right into Peter's emotions for a subjective experience of this character.

< "For he did not know how to respond. For they were so afraid." (v. 6) >

Here, the Markan narrator provides the audience with two inside views: the first into Peter's mind for a glimpse at what was behind the statement he just made, and the second, into the collective fear of the three disciples. These incursions into the inner lives of the disciples are significant, for they represent the narrator's first attempts to draw the audience in for a subjective experience of the disciples.

<<TAPE 52:18-52:21>>

Note that Rhoads makes no attempt to mimic what the disciples are going through: no being at a loss for words, no being so afraid. In other words, at this point where the Markan narrator is leading the audience to have a subjective experience of the disciples, Rhoads draws the audience back, to a vantage point at a distance, for an objective experience of the disciples. < And a cloud came overshadowing them, and there was a voice from the cloud, 'This one is my only son. Hear him.' (v. 7) >

The opening clause does not contain any point-of-view markers indicating either a drawing in toward, nor a drawing back from, the characters involved in the scene. Therefore, the audience is left in the same position they occupied coming into this clause, that is, close to the disciples. As a result, the words "a cloud came, overshadowing them," would give the audience the subjective sense of having the cloud coming down upon themselves, as they stand with the disciples. Likewise, the words "and there was a voice from the cloud, 'This one is my only son. Hear him'" has the audience imagining this voice descending upon them from the cloud above them, another subjective experience.

<<TAPE 52:21-52:36>>

For the part about the cloud overshadowing them, Rhoads mimics the actions of the disciples, looking up and making gestures as if a cloud is coming down upon him. This is entirely fitting for the subjective experience the Markan narrator intends for the audience. Note, however, the way Rhoads handles the voice from the cloud. He mimics God, through changing his voice, and extending his arms downward as an indication the speaker is directing these words down upon the disciples. By doing so, Rhoads effects a change in the positioning of the audience, transporting them to a position with God, looking down upon the disciples from above. Therefore, immediately upon having a subjective experience of the cloud coming down upon them as they stand with the disciples, the audience suddenly finds themselves far above the disciples, observing them as objects down below.

< And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone at all but Jesus alone with them (v. 8) >

Note that the narrator here describes what the disciples are seeing . . . or not seeing. This is another "inside view," the narrator essentially transporting the audience into the characters' heads, this time to have the audience look out the characters' eyes at what they are seeing. Thus, the narrator is here continuing the subjective experience for the audience.

<<TAPE 52:36-52:42>>

Here, where it would have been appropriate for Rhoads to mimic the disciples' "looking around," by casting his eyes from side to side as if he were looking around, thus providing his audience with a subjective experience of the disciples, Rhoads foregoes this opportunity, and

instead, simply gives the audience an objective “at a distance” experience of the close of the scene.

**TO SUMMARIZE**, in his recitation of this passage, Rhoads incorporates a number of voice modulations and hand gestures to mimic characters, and these features do serve to engage the audience. However, he does this for *every character* who has a speaking part, and this results in the audience’s being drawn in to have a subjective experience of each of these characters. This would be fine, if such were the Markan narrator’s intention for the audience. But a perspective-critical analysis of the point-of-view moves in this passage indicates this is not the case.

Rather, the point-of-view moves indicate the narrator’s intention is to provide the audience with an objective experience of the events of the first half of the passage, holding the audience at a distance as Jesus and the three disciples go up the mountain, as Jesus is transformed before them, as Jesus is joined by Elijah and Moses, and as Peter make his suggestion to build shelters for the three of them. This objective distanced position is appropriate for this material, which does not contain anything the narrator would deem crucial enough to warrant special point-of-view manipulation to draw the audience into the centre of the action to identify with the characters as they experience it. In fact, the last part (Peter’s suggesting he make booths for Jesus, Elijah and Moses) so misses the point of the event that the narrator would want to ensure the audience *does not* identify with him in his making of this utterance.

Of course, the narrator does not keep the audience locked in this objective distanced position for the whole episode, for the following report of the disciples’ fear, the cloud overshadowing them, the voice of God emitting from the cloud, and the disciples’ looking around to find no one but Jesus is all filtered through the point of view of the disciples, thus drawing the audience in for a subjective experience of the events along with the disciples. Again, this subjective close-in position is appropriate for this material, for the content of God’s message—“This one is my only son. Hear him”—is given just as much for the audience’s benefit as it is for the disciples’ benefit.

In contrast to this single shift from objective to subjective positioning, Rhoads starts his audience with a subjective positioning for the introduction of the passage, but then pulls the audience back to an objective positioning for Jesus’ being transformed, for Elijah and Moses appearing, for Peter’s inappropriate suggestion to Jesus, and for the description of Peter’s confusion and the disciples’ fear. Then Rhoads draws his audience back in for a subjective experience of being overshadowed by the cloud. However, the sense of affinity with the disciples is short-lived, as Rhoads pulls his audience out from in the midst of the disciples, and up to a vantage point at God’s side for the report of God’s words spoken from the cloud, and then pulls the audience back from all the characters in the scene for an objective experience of the conclusion of the passage. The net effect for Rhoads’ audience of being jerked “back and forth” and “up and down” is that they are not able to establish the sense of identification and empathy with the disciples that the Markan narrator intends for the second half of the passage. As a result, the audience does not experience the words “This one is my only son. Hear him” coming down right upon them, as the Markan narrator intends the audience to experience.

**TO CONCLUDE**, the degree to which Rhoads mimics characters in his performance of Mark’s gospel clearly enhances the degree of engagement enjoyed by his audience. However, I would suggest that deviation from a narrative’s intended empathy dynamics is too high a price to pay for enhanced engagement. To remain faithful to a narrative’s intended empathy dynamics

requires acquaintance with perspective-critical principles, and the volume *Watching a Biblical Narrative* (listed on the hand-out) is the most complete treatment of these principles. A consideration of the point-of-view dynamics of a passage is a necessary step in the crafting of a performance if the goal is to make it ring as true as possible to the original narrative.