

Point of View in *No Bikini* - A Cinematographic Analysis

Henrik Juel

Abstract:

The short film *No Bikini* (director Claudia Morgado E., 2007) contains a variety of generically different camera positions establishing different points of view. Cinematographic features like these are hardly noticed the first time you see this charming short; they are well-crafted and transparent. A close analysis ventures to show that the camera positions in this film are intriguingly well chosen, skillfully supporting the viewers' experience of seeing with the eyes of a child confronted with some strange norms of the adult world.

Keywords: cinematography, camera work, point-of-view, montage.

During the Autumn semester of 2021, I had the opportunity to show *No Bikini* to a class of international students (mainly of Western background) at my Danish university. They generally liked the film and called it well-made. When I asked them what they meant by "well-made," they said that it was charming, it had some humor, and then they went into talking about gender roles and how certain norms and dress codes were being imposed on children by parents and by society.

As this was part of a general culture course and not a class dedicated to video and film production, I realized I should probably not expect these students to readily entertain me with a specification of the camera work and other cinematographic peculiarities justifying the overall impression that this short film was well made. But below are some of the points I could have made if I had been a teacher prepared to answer my own questions.

When I first saw the film not knowing anything about it, I was naturally trying to figure out what it would be about. Not much of a clue in the opening shots, I thought, as what I saw and also heard was just a swimming pool. Recalling that the title was *No Bikini*, it just seemed to be something about a swimsuit, a missing one, most likely. The music came in and indicated something rather lively and playful, and when the voice-over during the second shot began speaking about "sex change", which could sound like a trouble-loaded theme, it did speak in a light, calm and relaxed tone of voice. So, I imagined it would probably not be a long sad documentary type of story nor an overtly agenda-setting film.



Shots 1 and 2

Having seen the film a couple of times now, I do, however, notice something of a clue as to what it may all be about even in the very first shots. I have a nerdy interest in

looking not just at the motifs, shown to us by the camera, but also “behind” the camera, at the camera work: Where is the camera placed, and why, what are the angles and framing trying to “tell” us? And when the camera is moving, panning, zooming, or shaking, what does it “say”?

In this opening the camera in the first shot shows us a section of a pool from above, it is a very steady and “geometrical” shot exactly aligned with one of the straight painted lines at the bottom of the pool. The fixed grid structure stands out, somewhat in contrast with the lively small ripples and light reflections in the water. A small human figure enters from the top of the frame—swimming along well within the chosen lane of the pool.

The next shot is closer to the surface of the water and more vertical, and now the camera has been turned so that the swimmer is moving across the frame in a diagonal line (top right to bottom left). As this is also where the voice-over starts talking about “sex change,” I am tempted to see a symbolic significance in this change from a fixed grid and straight lines to a diagonal movement within the frame. My students would probably complain that I am wildly overinterpreting, and I will have to come up with more evidence.

So, I would point to more instances of contrast between static straight lines and dynamic cross movements. The swim teacher, Mrs. Delaware, likes some discipline and lines up the children in an almost military fashion, reminding me of several soldier films, e.g., *Full Metal Jacket* (Kubrick 1987). This is clearly shown to us by the camera in shots 15, 17, and 19a (here and in the following the shots of the film are numbered in accordance with Cynthia Felando’s *A schematic breakdown of No Bikini* (Felando, 2022)), but then also contrasted by the following scene of children playing freely in the pool. Here the shots from 19b to 26 show us many cross movements, most notably perhaps shot 21 of children happily yelling as they slide down the yellow ramp. Also, the camera is placed underwater showing us the lively kicking legs and myriads of bubbles, and the camera itself begins to move, panning along from left to right in shots 23 to 26 (where it even back-pans to the left too). Thus, I would like to argue that the camera work and montage actually enhance for us a contrast between straight, static lines and cross-movement, between discipline and free play, and in that way help us to see the theme my students so nicely had extracted from the film: it is something about “norms being imposed on children.”



Shot 38

In line with that, in shot 38 the camera is looking down at the fixed grid at the bottom of the pool, but now with many children floating and moving peacefully across that pattern. The voice-over says “I didn’t need to worry about anything,” and again in shot 39, “It was... perfect,” where Robin is floating happily along, alone. Here the painted grid appears not as confinement or limitation, but as something that can be crossed and playfully overcome. These two shots can be seen to encapsulate a major theme or idea of the film, and for this interpretation, I find support in the specific camera placement. Like in the opening shots, the camera is high up, looking almost vertically down on the water. This is not like any other normal view of a third-person observer—this is not a normal position for a visitor to the pool. It is a special and significant camera position, perhaps involving the use of a crane, ladders and wires, or a drone, but the technical-practical arrangement is not what the film viewer should experience; it should work as “invisible” or transparent. It is like a god-like meta-view, something peculiar to the way film can show us things. Here, forming a calm moment in the film, it leaves us time to reflect.

Some of my students said that they kept fearing something bad might happen, that the “gig” would be out, and Robin would “get busted”. The element of water may in itself call for a number of interpretations from the psychological or symbolic catalog, and the camera work may intensify the sensual and dramatic impact, e.g., by filming close to the surface of the water, and sometimes both over and under (shots 61, 62).

Dramatic tension is felt when Mrs. Delaware inspects the line of children and comments on their looks, shots 9-15. Close-ups of the faces in a dialogue or confrontation scene intensify the empathy effect on the audience—this is, of course, a common cinematographic feature, though not always noticed. The inspection scene here could have been filmed with only total shots from a fair distance, but choosing such a camera position would definitely not have increased our involvement in the story.



Shot 54

In shot 54 we see close-up from a very low angle the marching feet with blue sandals. In a well-made film, an unusual camera angle is there for a purpose, and here we get a chance to notice that one pair of sandals sticks out from the otherwise quite uniform standard: a pair with a flower decoration. Perhaps Robin’s sandals, in any case here is

something that goes against the norm. There is, after all, some room for individuality here, and also Mrs. Delaware is soon (in shot 59) seen to be not all that militaristic, she even comes across as having a good sense of humor: her starter pistol does not fire with a bang—it only pops out a little flag with “BANG” written on it, and then she says “Bang!” to start the swimming contest. In shot 68 she is seen cheering along with the children: “Yay! You did it!” So, she is not the villain of the film, she is not being shown as an unfair, oppressive person that Robin has to fight. The problem Robin is facing is perhaps far bigger, more structural.

A dramatic scene evolves around the high dive and the challenge it presents to Robin. In shots 43 and 45 we see again the grid at the bottom of the pool, this time the water is relatively still, but the camera adds to the feeling of fear: the camera takes the point of view of Robin, and transmits the subjective feeling of being terribly high up and afraid by not being stable but handheld and somewhat shaking during recording—just as Robin is heard to be trembling while breathing, and we also see Robin’s body trembling in the adjacent shots. Shot 42 shows us Robin looking down, and we immediately understand that shot 43, shows us not only *what* but also *how* Robin sees the pool below. Again, as I see it, the camera is not shaking because the photographer happened to be cold or afraid too—but because the film is well made: it is not only the voice-over and the action of the characters (and here also some suspense-horror-like music on the soundtrack) that create the mood and the drama, it is also the particular handling of the camera.



Shots 42 and 43

We talk about a “subjective” camera or a first-person point-of-view (POV) (Bordwell & Thompson, 2004) when it appears to take on the position and movements of a human character within the film universe and perhaps even mimics the movements characteristic of a specific mood like agitation, anxiety, or panic. Slanting the camera or changing the field of depth and focus can be used to indicate nausea or vertigo, and even so the use of special light, filters, cranes, and drone movement can contribute to the mood of a scene. Highly subjective shots like 43 and 45, where the camera/Robin is looking down on the pool from the five-meter springboard, are usually recognized as such by the audience—the students in my class had noticed the shaky camera shots here, and that they were generically different from the other normal shots from “outside” of the characters. This they considered not a flaw in the film, but part of good story-telling.

However, I could point out to my students that there are also examples of what might seem like a hybrid between third-person and first-person points of view in this film. In the concluding car scene, the camera is looking a little upwards at the mother (shots 75, 77, 79, 81), whereas the camera in shots 74, 76, 78, 80, and 82 is looking down on Robin and thus sort of taking the position of the mother. But not quite, the camera is not completely in

the position of either of the two, because we see neither Robin nor the mother look directly into the camera, but always a little to the side of it: Robin looks to the right of the frame, mother to the left. This is quite normal and in line with the 180-degree rule and perfectly understandable. This shot/reverse shot schema is typical in a conversation situation (Bordwell & Thompson, 2004). The camera is showing us the scene from over the shoulder of a character, i.e., more or less, but not exactly from the point of view of that character (but even so, it has sometimes, perhaps confusingly, also been called a “point-of-view” shot (Mascelli, 1965)).



Shot 72

When the camera is completely outside and away from the characters and filming as if it were a “neutral” and not-participating bystander watching the action, it is sometimes, as mentioned, called a third-person perspective. But it should be clear that the camera is not here meant to imitate or indicate that there is an actual third person present, e.g., shot 70-72 of Robin and the boy reaching an understanding in the locker room. We should note in the analysis, however, that the camera is here kept at eye-level with the kids.

In shot 12 the camera is filming over Robin’s shoulder looking up at Mrs. Delaware. One could then expect the next shot to be a normal reverse shot filmed from over the shoulder of Mrs. Delaware and looking down on Robin. And shot 13 is a reverse shot (or one might call it a reaction shot), filmed somewhat from behind, but not over the shoulder of Mrs. Delaware, but at the height of her elbow. To me that is significant: The camera stays at the level of Robin who is seen looking up at Mrs. Delaware.

Due to this positioning of the camera, the film can be said to be in line with the children’s perspective—and that is part of the charm and idea. In my interpretation, the cinematography thereby invites the audience to “level with the kids” – this being not just a trivial metaphor, but a feature phenomenologically significant for the reception. Actually, my students did report that the film “took them back” —they began recalling and reflecting on their own childhood memories of pools, gyms, showers, and emerging gender awareness.



Shots 12 and 13

Besides these three different common types of camera positions (point-of-view of character, over-the-shoulder or shot/reverse-shot, and third-person point of view), I have already touched upon examples of a fourth type in this film, namely what we could call the gods' or meta point of view. The rather "detached" vertical shots in 38-39 of the swimming children leave us room for reflection on the ideas of the film. And in the opening of the film, shot 2, the camera is also looking vertically down on the swimming child—from where? This is a sort of de-naturalized viewpoint, looking down from above, an introductory overview, quite conventional as countless feature films open with shots from a camera flying over a landscape or big city before diving into the actual events. It is, however, curious to consider how smoothly the camera can be relocated and how easily we, the audience, immediately adopt the different points of view.

To top the list with a fifth one, there is actually one more type of shot present in *No Bikini*, the iconic one of Robin in shots 31a and 31b swimming underwater towards the camera. What is remarkable here is not just that the camera is placed underwater (as it is in several other shots), but the distinct feature of Robin looking directly and continuously at the camera lens—and thus looking the viewer of the film directly "in the eye", or so it feels. In traditional Hollywood and generally in feature films this sort of "eye contact" is normally avoided as it seems to break up the "fourth wall".

This sort of camera gaze potentially takes the spectator away from the safe position of just watching without being truly involved (sometimes even called a second-person POV (McAfee, 2017)). When someone approaches and looks you directly in the eye, be it on film or not, you feel "confronted" and invited to "answer" that person—that's a deep-rooted reaction. And so, Robin's long gaze at the camera here just might be part of the film's "message": In a discrete, but strongly appealing way it invites the viewer to not just follow the story, but also to reflect on the viewer's own experience of being in the pool of childhood, play, and floating norms: "I wasn't pretending. I just was," the voice-over says. This leaves room for the viewer's personal reflections.



Shot 31b

The swimming contest (shot 60–66) is made intense not just by the swimmers but by the use of the camera. In the first shots, the camera is far away from the swimmers, in the last, it is closer. In shot 63 the camera pans from Robin to the boy next to her, her closest competitor, and then swiftly back again to Robin: this is to make us understand that the race is close (a technical detail for nerds of montage: there is a hardly noticeable cut in the swift back-pan, the camera has been moved a bit to the right, probably to get a better view of Robin’s last efforts). And to further intensify the scene, the sound-picture montage uses a few tricks of the trade: the sound of the swim strokes and splashing water, and especially the struggling breath of Robin is set to a relatively low-pitched high-volume level. The happy music here—the same genre as earlier—is also put to remarkable use in this montage as the rhythm of the music is faster-paced than Robin’s swim strokes. This has the effect of showing how hard and tiring it is—the swimmer seems to be lagging behind and in trouble. The same effect was used by Leni Riefenstahl when she edited the scene with marathon runners towards the end of part 1 of her 1938-released *Olympia* film.

Throughout *No Bikini* only the adults speak. Neither Robin nor any of the other kids are heard saying any lines or words as such, though they are heard to have voices and express themselves with sighs, breathing, yelling, etc. Perhaps the film reminds us that discursive formulations in language belong to the world of adults. The voice-over is Robin as an adult looking back and relating the experiences and feelings of young Robin without passing judgment. The two adult characters in the film, however, Mrs. Delaware and the mother, use language to define to Robin and the other kids how to act and behave, what is good and what is bad. Most notably of course the swim teacher has a lot to say about how to straighten up, walk in line, jump in the pool, and make an effort and swim well in order to win the award. Her directions and inherent norms are clearly formulated and easy to understand. Not quite so with the mother, even though what she is saying seems quite simple and easy to understand at first. But to me, there are some rather unclear warnings hidden in saying “You’re gonna have to watch out for that” (shot 4d), and the concluding remark of the mother in shot 81 is even more moralizing and obscure at the same time: “You can’t be trusted with a two-piece.” The mother may appear kind and easy to understand, but her lines are presupposing and not questioning certain pervasive norms about proper behavior, nakedness, and swimsuits for girls. Because, what does it really

mean—and should you feel ashamed of yourself—if you “can’t be trusted with a two-piece”?

So, perhaps this short film revives for a moment our “inner child” and makes us wonder about the strange and obscure language and norms of the adult world. In my analysis, the different camera angles, camera positions, and camera movements in *No Bikini* seem carefully chosen. Together with all the other qualities of the film that could be mentioned (like acting, setting, plot, humor, etc.), these cinematographic features skillfully support the viewer’s experience of seeing with the eyes of a child confronted with some strange rules and norms. And that could be my justification for the claim that it was “well-made”, as the students had said.

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Home: <http://www.henrikjuel.dk/>