Sample Film Essay

Finding Freedom Through the Lens of a Camera

Filmmakers use many techniques to illustrate ideas, stress emotion, and supplement action. While many of the techniques that involve music or lighting are often recognized, many times the perspective of the camera goes unnoticed. While the angle from which the camera approaches the action may seem unimportant, it too can be used to communicate ideas. In the movie Finding Forrester, the camera perspective in several shots reinforces ideas about the lives of the characters. Forrester’s disconnect with the world, Jamal’s confinement, and their eventual connection with freedom are reiterated by the angle of the camera.

In the first several scenes, the man who the audience eventually learns is William Forrester, is referred to as “the Window” by Jamal and his friends. This is because he observes the world through his fifth story window with the aid of his binoculars, always watching but never really connected. He sees the world in part, but the view is obstructed by the circular confines of the binoculars and all sound is muted by the pane of glass. Forrester has locked himself in and cut off all unnecessary contact with the world outside his apartment. When Jamal first comes to apologize, Forrester peeks out through the peep hole, which he can easily slam shut if he doesn’t like what he sees, instead of opening the door and facing life, unprotected by a solid piece of wood. This is demonstrated by the obstructed view provided by the camera.

While Forrester has locked himself away from the world, Jamal was born into a life where he is not encouraged by his peers to live up to his full potential and this is demonstrated by the obstructed point of view from which we observe some of his activities. One of his teachers notes, “Basketball is where he gets his acceptance; the kids here don’t care about what he can put down on paper.” (10:31) However, the second part of this statement is not entirely accurate. The kids do care what he puts on paper; by maintaining a C average he fits in with the crowd, if he did his best on the assignments he would stand out. Twice Jamal’s bedroom is viewed from the outside with the window frame splitting the screen in half, making his room look like a prison.
Despite the unique situations that Jamal and Forrester are in, they both discover freedom through their unlikely friendship. As their relationship develops, the camera is often obstructed by binoculars, trees, windows, chain-link fences, doors, and peep holes, but, as the story progresses, this occurs less and less often. After Forrester shows up at Jamal’s school and reads one of Jamal’s essay in front of the class he says, “When I read these words…words of hope and dreams, I realize that the one wish that was granted to me, so late in life was the gift of friendship.” (2:00:28) By stepping up and doing something for his friend, Jamal, Forrester not only clears Jamal’s name, freeing him to continue his studies, but he also frees himself as he realizes that all those years that he locked himself in his apartment, he was missing the gift of friendship and freedom. The camera perspective is no longer obstructed, but clear and open; following Forrester as he sets off to explore this newfound freedom in a tour of Scotland.

Toward the end of the film, Forrester cleans his window again, but it is no longer good enough. He is no longer contented with having his view obstructed by a window, a peep hole, or a pair of binoculars. He pumps up the tires on his bike and goes for a ride, finally feeling the air rushing through his hair; having found the courage to live freely through his friendship with Jamal. The angle of the camera throughout the film makes statements about the lives of William Forrester and Jamal Wallace through obstructed visuals, as they, together, move from confinement to freedom.