

Essay:

Fisheye Lenses in Yorgos Lanthimos' *Poor Things* (2023)

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Where characters in Yorgos Lanthimos' films may avoid excessive emotion in their facial expressions, the director's choice of camera lens rises to fill the void. When emotion is absent from the faces of the actors, it usually finds its way into the motion and perspective of the camera. With cinematographer Robbie Ryan, Lanthimos conveys various feelings with limited lenses. In their 2023 film *Poor Things*, fisheye lenses indicate extreme emotion, confusion, and disconnect.

Fisheye lenses have appeared in cinema for decades. The Nashville Film Institute (NFI) details the history and use of the fisheye lens in their article "Fisheye Lens – Everything You Need to Know". As the name suggests, the lens design was based on the perspective of fish underwater. Early iterations in the 1920s studied clouds, but mass production did not occur until the 1960s. In 1966, director John Frankenheimer brought fisheye lenses to the big screen in his film *Seconds*. In Figure 1, a shot from *Seconds* expresses confusion, fear, and panic. The character is dreaming without control of his actions. Warped sets and music amplify the effect of the fisheye lens, making the character seem disconnected from his surroundings. In Figure 2, the culmination of visual effects makes the scene feel otherworldly. By moving away from the realism of conventional lenses, the director projected the character's discomfort onto the viewer. This is the power of the fisheye lens.



Figure 1: *Seconds*. Paramount, 1966.



Figure 2: *Seconds*. Paramount, 1966.

The NFI article also covers fisheye lenses in the 2018 film *The Favourite*. The article discusses the impossibility of these perspectives since the lens did not exist at the time. Instead, the fisheye “increases the emotions of the characters” and “highlights the bizarreness of Queen Anne’s court.” This effect is seen in Figure 3 when Emma Stone’s character walks in on nobles pelting their naked friend with oranges.



Figure 3: *The Favourite*, 01:13:54. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2018.

Before that, and less than three minutes into the film, Lanthimos and Ryan use a fisheye shot to suggest unease without detail. An exterior shot of a carriage (Figure 4) rolling by implies that something is off, even if the audience has not seen what's happening within. The visual tension breaks when the audience sees the interior discomforts of the carriage.



Figure 4: *The Favourite*, 00:02:50. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2018.

In *The Favourite*, the effects of the fisheye lens are not limited to one character. Instead, the lens amplifies the feelings of all of Lanthimos' characters. *The Favourite* was the first collaboration between director Yorgos Lanthimos and cinematographer Robbie Ryan. Their choices in their 2018 film likely inspired their more experimental and targeted decisions in their 2023 film *Poor Things*. In Figure 5, the lens emphasizes the solitude of Queen Ann (played by Olivia Colman). In Figure 6, the lens emphasizes Stone's rage at being rebuked. In Figure 7, the lens shows the confusion of Rachel Weisz's character when she wakes up in a brothel.



Figure 5: *The Favourite*, 00:38:10. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2018.



Figure 6: *The Favourite*, 01:44:55. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2018.



Figure 7: *The Favourite*, 01:17:05. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2018.

Fisheye lenses are a novel practice for both Lanthimos and Ryan. Lanthimos' filmography included minimal lens variation until recent projects with Ryan. In early films like *Dogtooth* (2009) and *Alps* (2011), Lanthimos' camera hardly moved. Fixed tripod shots with wide frames were the default. Yet this consistency sets the stage for the viewer to feel emotion

through the camera's movement. One of the most memorable shots in *Dogtooth* features a sudden handheld shaky shot that follows the actors on a run through their large yard. That scene would not have held the emotion if it hadn't broken a pattern. In contrast, one of Ryan's recent films is almost entirely handheld footage. In *American Honey* (2016), the camera makes the audience feel like bystanders. They follow her down the street, ride with her in the van, and share her experiences. The film almost feels like a found footage project pieced together by recordings from her friends and coworkers.

The Favourite combines these two practices in unsettling and creative ways. Ryan's voyeuristic perspective shots are one of the most common shots in the film. Set in a palace, countless guards and attendants stand in every hallway. The camera often takes their position and perspective. The main characters walk past panning shots that track them as they go. In other shots, the camera poses in the back corner of a room, out of the sight and mind of the protagonists. The emotional movement of Lanthimos' vision brings the audience from the guard's bodies into their minds. Together, Ryan and Lanthimos produced the imagery of *The Favourite* (2018) and then of *Poor Things* (2023).

In a 2023 interview with IndieWire, Robbie Ryan discussed selecting lenses. Ryan explained that Lanthimos prefers to limit the number of lenses on set. They tested many lenses beforehand so that decisions for each shot were faster. Ryan explained that limiting options made shooting more efficient. It helped that Lanthimos "knew he only had four lenses to choose from." With one of those four lenses, they created the severe vignettes seen throughout the film. They achieved the startling effect by attaching a 4mm lens made for a 16mm camera to a 35mm sensor. In the interview, Ryan recognized that those shots get a lot of attention. He joked that "it's quite a funny lens." But that lens created a lot of serious feelings on screen. Lanthimos

would request it for scenes that required an emotional edge. Ryan told IndieWire: “Usually when the scene gets a bit heightened, that lens came out” (Shachat). Ryan expanded on the effect of the 4mm lens in a 2024 interview with *Below the Line*. Ryan said that Lanthimos wanted the vignette to feel like a porthole. The director's vision was for viewers to feel like they could “see into another world.” The duo worked to achieve many of the alien visuals in *Poor Things* in camera. Ryan praised the 4mm lens for creating such an extreme vignette. He emphasized that “[i]t really looked lovely because you catch all the edge flare” and other aspects of the lens lost in negative space (Giroux). In Figure 8, the frayed characteristics of the lens are on full display.



Figure 8: *Poor Things*, 02:08:58. Searchlight Pictures, 2023.

In his interview with *British Cinematographer*, Ryan said that the inspiration for these fisheye visuals came from Lanthimos' curiosity for contemporary visuals. *Poor Things* occurs in an alternate version of Victorian London. Lanthimos was intrigued by the product of the relatively new art of photography. Ryan explained that Yorgos was excited to replicate the warped images that limited technology created. Since it was the product of curiosity, Ryan

restated his approval of the response to the fisheye shots. He was happy when everybody enjoyed those shots because “it’s quite obviously a statement type of lens” (Mottram). The duo eased viewers into the statement shots by including wider fisheyes first. Many early fisheye scenes pair the lens with establishing shots of the world around them. In Figure 9, the audience sees a Victorian-era neighborhood warped by the lens.



Figure 9: *Poor Things*, 00:06:24. Searchlight Pictures, 2023.

Another use of the fisheye lens echoes the style of *The Favourite*. As Ryan mentioned, scenes of heightened emotions incurred a warped visual that brought the viewer closer to the character. Like *The Favourite*, the lens did not discriminate between characters. Emma Stone’s Bella Baxter experiences it the most (Figure 8), but Mark Ruffalo’s character Duncan and Ramy Youssef’s character Max get time in the distorted spotlight. In Figure 10, the 4mm lens amplifies Max’s confusion. In Figure 11, Duncan enters the unknown world of Bella Baxter; the lens amplifies his curiosity.



Figure 10: *Poor Things*, 00:22:23. Searchlight Pictures, 2023.



Figure 11: *Poor Things*, 00:32:48. Searchlight Pictures, 2023.

However, the most thematic uses of the lens are for Bella Baxter. Throughout the film, the lens often designates feelings of confinement or confusion. Since Bella is a child transplanted into an adult body, the extreme vignette acts as her peephole into the world. The further she feels from the people around her, the tighter the lens constricts. In the beginning, when she is infantile,

she is fully enclosed. In Figure 12, the audience sees Bella struggle to play the piano. Her mental age restricts her physical interactions with the world, and the lens reflects that. Later in the film, Margaret Qualley's character, Felicity, is confined to the same fate as Bella. This parallel is shown visually in Figure 13 when her finger painting inhabits the same vignette.



Figure 12: *Poor Things*, 00:03:08. Searchlight Pictures, 2023.



Figure 13: *Poor Things*, 01:44:08. Searchlight Pictures, 2023.

As Bella grows, her mind advances. Yet parts of humanity still shock and confuse her. Missteps that she unknowingly makes cause severe reactions that she doesn't understand. The audience is cued into these misunderstandings when they see the fisheye lens. In Figure 14, Ruffalo's Duncan hits another man for winking at Bella. In Figure 15, the owner of Bella's brothel bites her. In Figure 16, the husband of her body - but not of her mind - comes to reclaim her. Figure 17 shows Bella intoxicated for a more physiological example. The wide fisheye shot shows her inebriated distance from the world around her. In all these shots, Bella feels confused by and alienated from humanity. The visuals from Lanthimos and Ryan amplify those feelings by warping the image.



Figure 14: *Poor Things*, 00:56:10. Searchlight Pictures, 2023



Figure 15: *Poor Things*, 01:46:39. Searchlight Pictures, 2023.



Figure 16: *Poor Things*, 01:59:53. Searchlight Pictures, 2023.



Figure 17: *Poor Things*, 00:53:06. Searchlight Pictures, 2023.

While confusion is a common cause of the fisheye effect, Bella's confinement is the most consistent. When Bella feels trapped, physically or mentally, the shot contracts to match. In Figure 18, Bella rides a carriage home. The wide fisheye represents her mental confinement. When she asks to stop for ice cream, they refuse her request. Her physical imprisonment is made clear. Figure 19 shows how the scene collapses when she realizes how trapped she is.



Figure 18: *Poor Things*, 00:16:25. Searchlight Pictures, 2023.



Figure 19: *Poor Things*, 00:19:37. Searchlight Pictures, 2023.

When Duncan first meets Bella, he lets her roam free. But he changes things when the freedom allows her to act in ways he disapproves. In Figure 20, Duncan directs Bella to get into a large trunk. This literal manifestation of confinement causes a severe vignette to form around her. Later, she is released to move as she wishes around the confinement of a boat. Now that her prison grows, Figure 21 shows it with a broader fisheye and the metallic walls of the ship's underbelly.



Figure 20: *Poor Things*, 01:01:15. Searchlight Pictures, 2023.



Figure 21: *Poor Things*, 01:03:34. Searchlight Pictures, 2023.

The movie repeats the first act's visuals when Alfie takes Bella. Figure 22 traps Bella in a vignette when she returns to the confinement of a carriage. Narratively, Bella acts as if she is unconcerned, but the audience sees that she feels otherwise. When they arrive at Alfie's home, the vignette follows. The audience sees the door and gates of his home through the fisheye, foreshadowing the prison they will create (Figure 23).



Figure 22: *Poor Things*, 02:01:47. Searchlight Pictures, 2023.



Figure 23: *Poor Things*, 02:01:42. Searchlight Pictures, 2023.

Roles are reversed in Figure 23 when Max finds Duncan locked in a psych ward. The visuals mirror Bella's when they show Duncan in his cell (Figure 24). The same lens that trapped Bella traps him when he is driven to madness by his inability to control her.



Figure 24: *Poor Things*, 01:48:56. Searchlight Pictures, 2023.

Bella's visual revenge continues during the film's falling action. When Alfie is defeated and brought to Bella's home, she chooses to save his body's life. As they drag him toward the

surgery, the lens reveals his fate before the dialogue does. In Figure 25, the fisheye closes in around him. The kind of prison he created for Bella now awaits Alfie.



Figure 25: *Poor Things*, 02:12:04. Searchlight Pictures, 2023.

Robbie Ryan and Yorgos Lanthimos use a 4mm lens on a camera too large for it to convey severe emotions in their 2023 film *Poor Things*. Using a fisheye lens to present a character's emotions dates back decades, but Ryan and Lanthimos have taken the practice and honed it in their collaborations. Whether their characters feel trapped or confused, their lens brings those feelings into the audience's minds. Bella Baxter's journey in *Poor Things* is predicted and broadcasted by the visuals that entrap her.

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