Subjective Point of View and External Observation: The Camera as the Primary Narrator in

*Mulholland Drive* and *In the Mood for Love*

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If cinema is compared to literature, the most evident difference is that films are narrated through the lens of a camera. Although the recipient often encounters an embodied narrator in both types of media, one of the idiosyncrasies of film is the following: The primary narrator is the camera because it determines what the audience’s eyes get to see and how. In the subsequent paragraphs, I will argue that this fact is of central importance for two of the most significant motion pictures of the early 21st century ("The 21st century’s 100 greatest films"), namely *Mulholland Drive* (Edelstein et al., 2001) and *In the Mood for Love* (Kar-wai, 2000). More precisely, I will illustrate how aspects of narrative, cinematography, and editing in both films contribute to two contrary categories of the camera’s narrative point of view (POV): on the one hand, taking up the subjective perspective of a character, and on the other hand, adopting the role of an autonomous observer.

**Basics of Narrative and Point of View**

Morgan (2016) specifies the general role of the camera in films, stating that “the camera functions as a surrogate for our apprehension of the film’s world” (p. 226). This statement addresses two points that underline the crucial role of POV in films: On the one hand, it highlights that the way the viewer experiences the narrative—including the scope of the story, the order and hierarchy of plot events, and the motives and emotions of its characters—is primarily determined by what filmmakers let the viewer see through the camera lens. On the other hand, it illustrates that the camera’s spatial position along with other cinematographic properties imply a particular perspective the viewer intuitively adopts while following the story. As Branigan (1984) explains, spatial information generally serves as a reference point for filmic
narration (p. 63). POV does not only refer to adopting the position of vision, but also to identifying with personal features of a perspective, such as emotional state, attitude, or motive (see Branigan, 1984, pp. 8-9). Due to the broad range of techniques in cinematography and editing, filmmakers are able to let the camera reflect various kinds of POV, even the perspective of an animal or a mere object.

David Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive* presents a dream of the ambitious actress Diane—a dream which involves herself as an amnesiac woman and a mysterious conspiracy in Hollywood, as well as which reveals Diane’s unfulfilled desires for professional success and personal appreciation. Wong Kar-wai’s *In the Mood for Love* tells of the neighbours Su and Chow who engage in a secret romance that finally remains unfulfilled in the face of remorse and fear of social discredit. The expression of POV is equally significant for the narrative of both films, though differently realised. In what follows, I will elucidate how the camera can adopt the POV of a character and will focus on this realization in *Mulholland Drive*. I will also elaborate on techniques that let the camera appear as an external observer, as especially well-implemented in *In the Mood for Love*.

**Taking Up the Subjective Point of View of Characters**

While watching a film, people naturally tend to identify with a particular character and to “feel sympathy for his or her vision or situation” (Verstraten & van der Lecq, 2009, p. 90). Thus, filmmakers frequently display subjective perspectives and let the camera project the state of mind, feelings, and thoughts of characters. One way to visualize a character’s internal state or thought process is using the Kuleshov effect (Barsam & Monahan, 2015): Viewers tend to assume a narrative relationship between joint shots (Verstraten & van der Lecq, 2009, p. 89), so cutting between images can evoke particular associations. This editing technique partly
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contributes to Lynch’s associative style of film narration in *Mulholland Drive*. For instance, the juxtaposition of shots in the shower scene lets the audience comprehend how the amnesiac woman (or, on a meta-level, Diane in her dream) comes up with the name Rita after reading it on a film poster. Another relevant technique is the mirror shot: As Branigan (1984) describes, integrating mirrors through a combination of creative mise-en-scène, camera setup and framing is a common method to illustrate a character’s state of self-reflection (pp. 127-128). This happens in *Mulholland Drive* (e.g., when Diane’s alter ego makes Rita adopt her hairstyle), but plays an even more important role for Kar-wai, who frequently shoots the protagonists of *In the Mood for Love* through multiple mirrors, especially when they ponder their relationship.

In addition to the examples above, the primary method to visualize a subjective perspective is POV editing. Although this multifaceted technique has many variants (see Branigan, 1984, Chapter 5), it essentially joins two shots using an eyeline match cut: one shot of a character who looks at something (usually offscreen) and one shot that reflects this view while roughly adopting the position and direction of the glance. As Carroll (1993) argues, POV editing is the ideal instrument to convey feelings. The viewer discerns a character’s emotional state on the basis of facial expression and assumes it while seeing the next shot that usually reveals the cause of that emotion. In *Mulholland Drive*, Lynch repeatedly uses POV editing to create feelings of curiosity, excitement, confusion, or fear, most powerfully so in the Silencio Club scene. In shot/reverse shot sequences of close-ups, the audience sees Betty and Rita deeply moved and crying as well as the singer’s emotive performance—a performance that is actually tape recorded. Although a host explicitly warns the audience against the illusion, the scene elicits feelings of consternation and sorrowfulness for the viewer. By illustrating the potential of cinematic POV, Lynch also addresses the magic of films in general, which is to make viewers
believe and cherish an illusion.

The representation of subjectivity in films culminates in images that represent the imagination, a hallucination, or a dream of a character (see Verstraten & van der Lecq, 2009, Chapter 6). Apart from POV editing, expressive or even strange means of cinematography and editing can visualize such extreme states, as in the unnatural lighting and the superimposition of images during Diane’s mental breakdown at the end of *Mulholland Drive*. Moreover, Lynch demonstrates how a state of dreaming can also be expressed very subtly. Among other techniques, he utilizes unsettled camera movements, saturated colours, reappearing visual motifs, and disturbing non-diegetic sound to create a distinctive atmosphere of surrealism and, thereby, evokes dreamlike qualities. This cinematic subtlety is substantial for the multilayered narrative structure of *Mulholland Drive*: It allows the resolution (that the audience watches a dream) to be a stunning plot point, while the viewer is, as Verstraten and van der Lecq (2009) notice, “not necessarily able to solve the riddle” (p. 124).

**Adopting the Role of an External Observer**

The natural tendency of the audience to assume the camera’s viewpoint (e.g., Barsam & Monahan, 2015, Chapter 1) is not necessarily followed by identifying with a particular character’s perspective. Instead, filmmakers sometimes relinquish the shot/reverse shot patterns of POV editing and deliberately let the camera narrate from the perspective of an autonomous observer. The central factor that supports this impression of a third person narrator is camera movement because, as Ernest Lindgren explains, “[it] draws attention to the imaginary observer whose movement it reproduces” (as cited in Branigan, 1984, p. 122). Particular operations, such as those that characterise a wandering camera (Johnson, 1993), create a sense of humanity and autonomy of the camera. This occurs frequently in *Mulholland Drive*, for example, when the
A handheld camera approaches the Club Silencio with shaky movements.

A camera functioning as a third person narrator does not necessarily act as a neutral observer, but often comes along with a certain degree of subjectivity. Autonomous camera operations allow the audience to infer meaning from how it “reacts” to a situation (Verstraten & van der Lecq, 2009, pp. 74-75). In *In the Mood for Love*, Kar-wai makes use of a wandering technique to imply the moral dubiousness when the two protagonists interact: In several scenes, the camera observes a conversation between Su and Chow and distances itself afterwards via a pan shot or a cut to a different scene. Although the images are caught from an external perspective, they still hint at the character, attitude, behaviour, and feelings of the imaginary observer.

Position and movement of the camera can sometimes even go beyond human mobility. Such instances challenge the spatial identification of the audience with the camera’s perspective (Morgan, 2016), but illustrate a certain omniscience and omnipresence of the camera. For instance, some scenes of *In the Mood for Love* are shot from extreme angles or from positions hardly occupiable for a person (e.g., under a low bed). Cinematographic features like these contribute to the film’s overall atmosphere of surveillance and underline the protagonists’ fear of falling out of favour with the everpresent landlords. Still, an omniscient filmic narrator does not necessarily mean that the camera shares all images with the audience. Selective framing and editing, through the lens of an independent camera, is a rather typical quality of narration, especially for *In the Mood for Love*. Using sophisticated framing and deep-focus cinematography, Kar-wai’s camera seems to deliberately decide which detail of an image is revealed to the audience. Such a process of selection culminates in drawing attention to the offscreen space (see Verstraten & van der Lecq, 2009, Chapter 4). The camera of *In the Mood*
for Love refuses to show images of the protagonists’ spouses and mostly relegates conversations of the couples to the offscreen space. This exclusion visualizes emotional distance and a lack of marital sincerity, but also implies moral condemnation of the adulterers.

One of the most intense impacts the observant camera can accomplish as a narrator is the expression of voyeurism. Films often invite the audience to observe intimate, precarious, or even indecent situations, which have the potential to create visual pleasure, as long as the narrative manages to allay the moral dubiousness of the voyeuristic act (Johnson, 1993; Verstraten & van der Lecq, 2009). Just as Lynch directly addressed scopophilia in his first popular motion picture Blue Velvet (Caruso & Lynch, 1986), he includes elements of voyeurism in Mulholland Drive. For example, juxtaposing relatively lengthy close-ups of Betty and Rita in bed, Lynch lets the camera and thus the audience become a peeping Tom in Diane’s homosexual fantasies and experiences. The camera’s voyeuristic POV is even more sophisticated in In the Mood for Love. First, Kar-wai’s exceptional use of framing, deep-space composition, and long focal-length camera work creates the view of a bystander observing Su and Chow secretly from behind curtains, windows, or house plants. Second, in sequences of close-ups and extreme close-ups, the camera invites the viewer to become a visual analyst as the camera almost stares at objects and looks for details, such as when it fixates on the recurring motifs of clocks and cigarettes. Last, the audience is forced to patiently linger in time whenever Kar-wai switches to his signature slow motion sequences, underscored by the melancholic waltz, “Yumeji’s Theme” (Umebayashi, 2000). Using these three methods to magnify the impression of hidden observation, the voyeuristic camera in In the Mood for Love narrates “an investigation into the nature of desire” (Blake, 2003).

Conclusion
Mulholland Drive and In the Mood for Love are cinematic paragons whose narratives are fundamentally sustained by particular POVs of the camera. For Lynch’s film, the camera behaves like an autonomous dreamer, but actually adopts the totally subjective perspective of the protagonist. Thus, the camera narrator remarkably projects processes of association, imagination, and dreaming, which maintain a narrative uncertainty that prompts the audience to resolve a mystery. For Kar-wai’s film, the camera invites the viewer to observe unaccomplished intimacy and secret desires. Therefore, the camera narrator visualizes the protagonists’ hopes, sorrows, and moral struggle, but never leaves the role of an external observer. Finally, narrative, editing, and cinematography of both films impressively demonstrate that the camera does not only serve as the primary narrator of a film but sometimes also acts as a mentalist, facilitator, bystander, or voyeur.
References


