



**JOMECS Journal**

Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies

Published by Cardiff University Press

**Seeing Oneself Speak:  
Speech and Thought in First-Person Cinema**

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**Keywords**

Inner Speech

Inner Thought

Cinema

First-Person Camera

First-Person Point of View

Subjectivity

## Abstract

Cinema struggles with the representation of inner-speech and thought in a way that is less of a problem for literature. Film also destabilises the notion of the narrator, be they omniscient, unreliable or first-person. In this article I address the peculiar and highly unsuccessful cinematic innovation which we can call the 'first-person camera' or 'first-person' film. These are films in which the camera represents not just the point-of-view of a character but is meant to be understood *as* that character. Very few such films have been made, and I will concentrate on the way in which speech and thought are presented in *Lady in the Lake* (Robert Montgomery, 1947) and *Dark Passage* (Delmer Daves, 1947). I use Jacques Derrida's critique of the idea of 'hearing oneself speak' and phenomenology's dream of direct experience to explore the generally understood failure of such films and conclude by considering the implications of such a technique for a homunculus theory of mind.

## Contributor Note

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## Citation

Sorfa, David. 2019. 'Seeing Oneself Speak: Speech and Thought in First-Person Cinema'. *JOMEK Journal* 13: 'Dialogue and Communication in Film', 104–121.  
<https://doi.org/10.18573/jomec.185>.

Accepted for publication 1st December 2018.

## Introduction: Showing Thought in Cinema

One of the challenges that cinema faces is the issue of indicating what a character may be thinking. The truism here is that literature is able to more easily show such thought since a novelist is able to explicitly describe what is going through a character's mind, whether that is in the first, third or possibly even second-person. Thomas Leitch identifies this as the sixth fallacy in adaptation theory and formulates it thus: 'Novels create more complex characters than movies because they offer more immediate and complete access to characters' psychological states' (Leitch 2003, 158). Cinema, apparently, does not have easy access to such novelistic devices and audiences either have to infer what a character is thinking from the facial expressions of actors and the general narrative context of the film, or characters can express their thoughts through speech. Here the options include the expression of thoughts during dialogue with other characters; the expression of such thoughts in a public oration of one sort or another, such as the best man's wedding speech, a speech at a political rally or address to a judicial court, such as Gary Cooper's famously long speech at the end of *The Fountainhead* (King Vidor, 1949). Film characters can also read out their letters or diaries to indicate to the audience their particular thoughts about various issues (*Bridget Jones's Diary* [Sharon Maguire, 2001]; *Badlands* [Terrence Malick, 1973]; *Diary of a Country Priest* [Robert Bresson, 1951] and many others).<sup>1</sup> In a version of the theatrical monologue, the character

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Kyle Barrowman for this suggestion.

can address the cinema audience either directly, as in Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* (1997 and 2007), or indirectly by literally speaking out loud to him or herself. Finally, the filmmakers can choose to use a voiceover which can either be retrospective, as a character recalls the events of the plot and the film then re-enacts those events, or the voiceover can function as what could be technically called 'internal diegetic voiceover',<sup>2</sup> meaning that the voice we hear is supposed to be understood as the internal speech of the character on screen.

Outside of these possible and literal expressions of thought as speech, we must remember that the basic elements of cinematic expression are also always helping us to form hypotheses about what any particular character might be thinking (see Bordwell 1985, 29–47). These include, of course, the basic building blocks of film style: *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, editing and sound. Here I wish to address the peculiar and highly unsuccessful cinematic innovation which we can call the 'first-person camera' film. These are films in which the camera represents not just the momentary point-of-view of a character, but films where the camera's view is meant to be understood as the literal and subjective view of that character more or less throughout the duration of that film. While many films

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Raskin outlines a number of terms used by various theorists to describe this phenomena under the general category of "subjective sound": "Called 'non-realistic' by Spottiswoode (185), 'metadiegetic' by Gorbman (450), 'intradiegetic' by Branigan (68) and 'internal diegetic' by Bordwell and Thompson (256), this class that I am designating as subjective involves sound which occurs in the mind of a given character, and which other characters present are normally unable to hear" (Raskin 1992, 45).

incorporate fleeting point-of-view shots, or shots that are 'restricted' or 'focalized' (cf. Branigan 1992, 80) to a single character, not many try to make this the central stylistic conceit.

Very few such films of feature length have been made and I will concentrate on the way in which speech, dialogue and thought are represented in *Lady in the Lake* (Robert Montgomery, 1947), *Dark Passage* (Delmer Daves, 1947) and *Hardcore Henry* (Ilya Naishuller, 2015).<sup>3</sup> While I pay most attention to *Lady in the Lake*, all of these films offer something interesting when trying to show us what a character is thinking. I am interested in such films because they are anomalous and indicate an aesthetic path not travelled. In general, cinema likes to present dialogue alongside gesture in order to overdetermine meaning (the literal meanings of words in speech are reinforced by gestures associated with specific emotions) and one of the defining characteristics of first-person cinema is that we cannot, for the most part, see the character's body. Thus, we have to make judgements about that character's state of mind without the aid of embodied cues.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Other significant examples include Julian Schnabel's *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (*Le Scaphandre et le Papillon*, 2007) and Gaspar Noé's *Enter the Void* (2009).

<sup>4</sup> In an interesting conclusion to one of his few direct discussions of cinema, Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests that film's power derives from its ability to give us a direct and external depiction of a character's body in the world: 'This is why the movies can be so gripping in their presentation of man: they do not give us his thoughts, as novels have done for so long, but his conduct or behavior. They directly present to us that special way of being in the world, of dealing with things and other people, which we can see in the sign language of gesture and gaze and which clearly defines each person we know'

Obviously, there are many films that employ subjective camera sequences, and I will mention some of these, but the discussion here is limited to those feature films that employ this technique completely or, at least, predominately. Out of the three films discussed here, it is only the most recent, *Hardcore Henry* that employs the device of the first person camera from the very beginning to the end, excluding only the title sequence. *Lady in the Lake* employs four sequences where Phillip Marlowe (Robert Montgomery) appears in the third-person and directly addresses the audience, mainly to explain some development in the increasingly absurd plot; while *Dark Passage* uses the first-person camera only in the first thirty-five minutes of the 107 minute long film. There may be something to say about Virtual Reality cinema, but many of the problems that beset the 2D version of first-person cinema will replicate absolutely in VR cinema and, like 3D, VR will likely produce a few novelty examples before quietly dying a well-deserved death, only to be periodically resurrected in a cycle of ten or twenty years. The issue of the success or otherwise of the first-person camera is not a technological problem but a narratological and philosophical one.

The main point to take from all this is to conclude that the first-person camera device just does not work, for whatever reasons, in feature length film. The analogy with literature and the first-person novel quickly breaks down since, while this form may work in novels, it certainly does not seem to do so in

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(Merleau-Ponty 1945/1964, 58). I am thus examining those outlier cases where film chooses not to follow this general pattern. See Daniel Yacavone (2016) for a detailed discussion of Merleau-Ponty and film phenomenology,

average length films. While novels routinely allow us to read the thoughts of a character, films that try to show the inner speech of their characters seem to struggle to do so but, nevertheless, the few examples available do highlight some fascinating aspects of the problems with the representation of thought, understood as speech or as inner speech, in visual media.

### **The Problem of a Subjective Cinema**

The issue of subjectivity in cinema is one that has exercised theorists from the very beginning of cinema and makes up a large part of the thinking around one of the first theoretical books about cinema, Hugo Münsterberg's *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*, published in 1916. Münsterberg identifies certain cinematic techniques as reflections of ways in which the real mind works. Noël Carroll's 1988 article in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* on 'Film/Mind Analogies: The Case of Hugo Münsterberg' investigates this early example of film psychology and technique in which the close up is thought to mimic attention; parallel editing functions in the same way as our ability to concentrate on and link a number of separate events; and emotions are reflected by 'the use of soft focus, rhythmical editing and camera movement' (Carroll 1988, 492). For Münsterberg, the cinema is a creation of human psychology and so its technology inevitably reflects the structure of that psychology.

Julio L. Moreno's article 'Subjective Cinema: And the Problem of Film in the First Person' published in 1953 in *The Quarterly of Film Radio and Television* is another early engagement with the

problem of subjectivity in cinema. Translated from the Spanish (Moreno was an attorney in Uruguay), he begins by identifying a trend in the contemporary novel towards 'an increasingly objective external presentation of the actions of the characters and, at same time, toward de-personalization of the narrative, reducing it to a purely impersonal statement of the facts' (Moreno 1953, 341). Moreno sees the novel developing in a realist mode that eschews the presentation of interior life in favour of the observable 'facts'. In contrast to this tendency, Moreno argues, cinema seemed to him to be more and more interested in presenting stories subjectively:

We may state that what is new is the conscious purpose of creating a motion picture narration technique modelled on the literary narrative in the first person. By thus personalizing the telling of a story, the film seeks to multiply its formal resources of construction and exposition. It proposes, as well, to gain another advantage of literary narration in the first person by increasing the identification between reader and protagonist. The film seeks to put the spectator in the position of a participant, involved in the world of the narrative, living as his own the experiences of the story (Moreno 1953, 341).

Cinema allows for greater 'identification' with fictional characters and there is increased empathy with the protagonist and a more immediate experience of the film's fictional world. Moreno discusses a variety of films that occasionally employ various techniques of subjective presentation, from F.W. Murnau's *The Last Laugh* (1924), Jean Epstein's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928), Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945), *Citizen Kane* (1941)

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and Orson Welles's planned *Heart of Darkness* in which 'the camera was to occupy Marlow's place, the action to be seen through his eyes' (Moreno 1953, 350). Moreno devotes much of his detailed analysis to *Lady in the Lake* and outlines the main technical difficulties with which the filmmakers had to contend. Montgomery used long sequences, a swaying camera to indicate when Marlowe was walking and 'actors were required to violate one of the first rules of their craft: they were made to face directly into the camera as they spoke their lines' (350–351). There was also the difficulty of filming the hands and feet of the detective when they came into his supposed line of view. Perhaps most interestingly for our particular interest in speech:

In the pursuit of realistic detail, even Montgomery's voice was recorded with a more muffled tone than his natural voice, since this is the way everybody hears his own voice (351).

Whether this is true or not is a question for a more phenomenologically experimental study but suffice it to say that when we hear our own voice, usually recorded, it seems different to the way in which others hear it. There is much more to say about Moreno's article, especially his discussion of Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Imaginary* (1939), but Moreno shows that narrative demands a split between the narrator and the narrative, between the person telling the story and the story itself, and that film generally keeps a clear distinction between the facts of the narrative and the way in which these facts are presented to us. First-person cinema confuses this distinction and so first-person cinema struggles to work well because it collapses the narrator into the narrative. In first-person cinema

it is unclear whether what we are seeing belongs to the subjective or objective world and this unintended ambiguity acts against the film.

In France, the engagement with subjectivity in cinema was particularly addressed by Jean Mitry, Christian Metz and Gilles Deleuze. Mitry's *The Aesthetics and Psychology of Cinema* (published originally 1963–1965) was the first book to 'legitimize film aesthetics as an object of serious study' (Brian Lewis's foreword to the English translation 1997, vii) and in the sub-section entitled 'Subjective Camera' (206–214), Mitry suggests that the terms 'personal' and 'impersonal' might be better suited to describe certain types of shot which allow 'the audience to "take the place" of the heroes, to see and feel "as they do"' (207) rather than merely observe the action as an 'invisible audience' (206). Mitry makes the important point that it is 'impossible to represent a mental image, since, having become visual, it ceases to be mental' (209) and that when cinema presents a 'subjective viewpoint', it merely gives the audience an 'aesthetic equivalent' to such thoughts and that spectators are only given the 'impression' that they are 'seeing or feeling "as though" [they] were the character in the drama' (ibid.). In other words, the image of thought in cinema is always a metaphor. In his discussion of *Lady in the Lake*, Mitry opines that in first-person novels the 'imaginary world is *created, constructed, by me*' (210, emphasis in original) and so is felt subjectively, but that in film, the camera 'conveys impressions not generated by me' (ibid.) and the viewer never feels as if they 'are' that character since, '[a]t no point am I able to recognize the *image of my own body*' (ibid., emphasis in original). For Mitry, then, film can never present

'subjective experience' and that any attempt to provide this experience 'dissolves into a vague and indistinct "nonself" (211).<sup>5</sup> In *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Deleuze finds a similar liquification between the objective and the subjective in the 'cinema of poetry' where:

the distinction between what the character saw subjectively and what the camera saw objectively vanished, not in favour of one or the other, but because the camera assumed a subjective presence, acquired an internal vision, which entered into a relation of *simulation* ('mimesis') with the character's way of seeing (Deleuze [1985] 1989, 148).

Deleuze's discussion continues to consider the space of 'free indirect discourse' in cinema but this takes us rather beyond the specific case of the first-person film. Suffice it to say that Deleuze does not find such films of particular interest. While Christian Metz engaged more fully with various techniques of filmmaking and their semiotic and psychoanalytic processes, it is in his final work *Impersonal Enunciation, or The Place of Film* ([1991] 2015) in which he addresses the issue of subjective image and sound in detail.<sup>6</sup>

Metz begins by stating that when a 'character looks (or listens), he always *knows*, or at least he acquires a kind of knowledge that tallies with that looking

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<sup>5</sup> In an extended discussion of *Lady in the Lake*, Catherine Williamson argues that the first-person technique "is used to enable the spectator the opportunity to *step into* the diegesis" (1996, 17), in fact the film dismantles "conventional voyeuristic visual pleasure" by "preventing any sort of suture" (18). As in *Mitry*, the film fails to achieve its aim on technical grounds.

<sup>6</sup> Metz lists a number of French language texts on this subject in footnotes 2, 3 and 4 (201).

or that listening' (90) and this chimes with Branigan's outlining of the 'hierarchies of knowledge' (1992, 72–76) that distribute comprehension amongst characters and audiences. Metz discusses *Lady in the Lake* explicitly with reference to *Mitry* when he says that, 'The idea is that, in order for the spectator to take in what a character is seeing, it is necessary for him to see that character himself, either just beforehand, just afterwards, or in some kind of accompanying shot' (91). Without such a shot there is no possibility for 'suture', as Williamson (1996) also notes. Metz summarises this argument by saying that, 'to slip into the gaze ("subjectively"), one must know the person ("objectively")' (90). Like *Mitry* and Deleuze, Metz does not find the first-person film very interesting since the technique, for Metz, fails on a psychoanalytic view which demands that the subject recognise itself only in its own reflection and the pure first-person film never allows for such a reflection. Metz continues by discussing Michel Chion's 'I-voice' (*voice-over* in English) and points to an important equivocality:

The I-voice presents us with constant ambiguity, whose principle is paradoxically quite simple: it is the voice of a character, but as long as it speaks and remains invisible, it blocks its absent body from accessing the Voice of the film; it substitutes itself for that Voice and mixes itself up with something that it is not – that is, the point of origin of the narration (Metz [1991] 2015, 109).

Here Metz identifies a confusion between the 'Voice of the film', which we can understand as the meaning of the film, with the voice of a character. It is this presentation of voice and speech as

inner-speech in film that we will consider here.

On this point, we should highlight Paul Willemen's detailed discussion of Boris Eikhenbaum's 'Problems of Film Stylistics' (1974) in which he analyses the problem of 'internal speech' in film, and Willemen returns to the issue in 'Cinematic Discourse: The Problem of Inner Speech' (1994). Willemen's argument is complex but his fundamental point appears to be that language underpins all meaning, but that language needs to be understood in its broadest possible way to encompass all meaning-making activity. This resembles the way in which Jacques Derrida understands language as 'arche-writing'; which includes all forms of communicating. He writes:

This arche-writing would be at work not only in the form and substance of graphic expression but also in those of nongraphic expression. It would constitute not only the pattern uniting form to all substance, graphic or otherwise, but the movement of the *sign-function* linking a content to an expression, whether it be graphic or not (Derrida [1967] 1997, 60).

However, leaving that discussion aside for the moment, let us move on to discuss Derrida and the problem of hearing, and possibly seeing, oneself speak.

### **Derrida and Auto-Affection**

In the collection of work called *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs* ([1967] 1973), Derrida carries out a dizzying critique of Edmund Husserl's phenomenological project. Derrida concentrates on the

distinction that Husserl makes between indication (*Anzeichen*) and expression (*Ausdruck*) and he pays particular attention to the difficulties and problems in translating these terms from German to French (notwithstanding the added complexity of reading this in an English translation). To simplify, Derrida argues that Husserl needs to say that speech and general communication mostly operate as *indication*, in that they use language to convey meaning from one person to another. Thus, when I say the word 'Derrida', I hope to indicate to you that I mean the French philosopher who wrote *Speech and Phenomena*. *Expression*, on the other hand, is the direct experience of meaning which occurs, for Husserl, only in what he calls 'soliloquy' or 'monologue', that is, in internal speech. But, what is crucial here is that this 'internal speech' in Husserl is not really 'speech' but rather that the phrase 'internal speech' functions as a metaphor for our experience of our own thought. While we may think that we 'speak to ourselves', that is merely a second order representation of thought to ourselves. We imagine that we speak to ourselves, but, on a first order level, we experience our thought directly, which means to say that we think without speech, or before speech. For Derrida, this must be impossible, but it is the impossibility on which the whole field of phenomenology is grounded: the self-presence of the self to itself.

If phenomenology is the philosophy of experience, the thinking of what it means to experience the world, then it must mean that experience exists before our own experience of the world. That is, the world appears to our experience and that experience, somehow, pre-exists that world. Derrida uses the term 'auto-affection' to describe this ideal



functioning of interior experience. He says:

As pure auto-affection, the operation of hearing oneself speak seems to reduce even the inward surface of one's own body; in its phenomenal being it seems capable of dispensing with this exteriority within interiority, this interior space in which our experience or image of our own body is spread forth. This is why hearing oneself speak [*s'entendre parler*] is experienced as an absolutely pure auto-affection, occurring in a self-proximity that would in fact be the absolute reduction of space in general (Derrida [1967] 1973, 79).

Or to put in another way: 'Hearing oneself speak is not the inwardness of an inside that is closed in upon itself; it is the irreducible openness in the inside; it is the eye and the world within speech' (Derrida [1967] 1973, 86). Derrida points to a difficulty in imagining observing our own thought which should be impossible since it implies a thinking of thought, which would quickly lead to an infinite regression. Leonard Lawlor glosses this argument:

In other words, in the very moment, when silently I speak to myself, it must be the case that there is a miniscule hiatus differentiating me into the speaker and into the hearer. There must be a hiatus that differentiates me from myself, a hiatus or gap without which I would not be a hearer as well as a speaker. This hiatus also defines the trace, a minimal repeatability. And this hiatus, this fold of repetition, is found in the very moment of hearing-myself-speak (Lawlor 2014).

The dream of first-person cinema is to close the gap between spectator and protagonist. Just as Husserl dreams of

experiencing one's own experience of the world in an absolute and unmediated way, so first-person cinema dreams that we will inhabit the world of the protagonist without any gap between self, other or world. We will, to put it another way, lose our minds.

The claim is that there is no direct experience of the world or of ourselves and so the problem with first-person film is not that it does not reflect the world in a proper way, but, on the contrary, that it magnifies the gap that exists at the centre of our experience of the world and it is a reminder of this anxiety – the highlighting of the non-presence at the very heart of what we imagine to be our presence, our self-presence – that makes watching such films a profoundly unsettling and, it would appear, unpleasurable experience.

### *Lady in the Lake*

In his introduction to Branigan's first book (1984), David Bordwell says that 'theorists and filmmakers have held tacit assumptions about narration' (x) and that it is important to make explicit such implicit norms. Referring back to Aristotle, Bordwell outlines two explicit theories of narration. The first is 'diegetic' and such theories 'conceive narration to consist either literally or analogically of verbal activity: a telling' (ibid.). The second is 'mimetic' and these theories 'conceive narration as consisting either literally or analogically of the presentation of a spectacle: a showing' (ibid.). Neither of these approaches is medium-specific since both concern the 'mode' of presentation, rather than the medium of presentation as such. So, a novel could 'show' a story if we understand that novel to function something like a play; while a

painting could ‘tell’ a story if we understood that picture as an analogy to ‘linguistic transmission’. We could see Raymond Chandler’s *The Lady in the Lake* (1944) as a novel that shows rather than tells, at least in parts. For instance, the opening paragraphs of the novel are almost obsessively descriptive:

The Treloar Building was, and is, on Olive Street, near Sixth, on the west side. The sidewalk in front of it had been built of black and white runner blocks. They were taking them up now to give to the government, and a hatless pale man with a face like a building superintendent was watching the work and looking as if it was breaking his heart. I went past him through an arcade of speciality shops into a vast black and gold lobby. The Gillerlain Company was on the seventh floor, in front, behind swinging double plate-glass doors bound in platinum. Their reception-room had Chinese rugs, dull silver walls, angular but elaborate furniture, sharp shiny bits of abstract sculpture on pedestals and a tall display in a triangular showcase in the corner [Chandler [1944] 2016, 1].

This description continues in equally extraordinary detail which may be quite surprising in a genre, the detective story, which is characterised by its interest in plot. However, it is clear that there are both ‘mimetic’ and ‘diegetic’ elements in the two sentences above and it will be useful to try and separate them out in a little more detail. The components that are shown include the Treloar Building’s sidewalk, or pavement; a man without a hat; the entrance lobby of the Treloar building and its reception-room. The ‘diegetic’ element is then the fact that our narrator walks from outside that building into the reception area. It is unclear whether the ‘diegetic’ element (the movement from outside to inside) is

‘told’ or ‘shown’, since we are *told* that ‘I went past’ but we are not ‘shown’ the figure going past. Obviously, this is because the ‘I’ is the one who is doing the describing and so it is difficult for us to ‘see’ him (and we presume it is a ‘him’, this is a Raymond Chandler novel after all). But we do know that the character, Philip Marlowe as it turns out, is there at the intersection of showing and telling.

The film, in contrast, begins with a medley of Christmas carols that starts playing as soon as we see the MGM lion and continues throughout the credits, which are presented on Christmas cards that are removed one by one to finally reveal a handgun. It is at this point that the sound of the carols merges into a whistle; there is a fade to black, and then we see Philip Marlowe (Robert Montgomery) in a medium shot, sitting at his desk. The film thus begins with an objective or impersonal shot of the protagonist, presumably to allow for subsequent audience ‘suture’. The whistling fades out and he starts to speak to the camera and to the film audience directly: ‘My name is Marlowe. Philip Marlowe. Occupation: private detective’. He then introduces the plot, names the Madison Building (the novel’s Treloar Building) and to some extent explains the film’s method of narration:

**Marlowe:** What you’ve read and what you’ve heard is one thing. The real thing is something else. There’s only one guy who knows that. I know it. [...] You’ll see it just as I saw it. You’ll meet the people, you’ll find the clues... and maybe you’ll solve it quick, and maybe you won’t. You think you will? Okay, you’re smart. But let me give you a tip. You’ve got to watch them. You’ve got to watch them all the time. Because things happen when you least expect them.

We then dissolve to what we must assume is the Madison building and the whistling returns. The whistling is crucial here since it is the marker that we are in Marlowe's mind rather than merely following Marlowe's point of view in Branigan's sense of restriction. The whistling marks an interiority that displaces inner speech in the film. Marlowe does not talk to himself in a way that we might imagine that we do when we walk along silently, but the film needs to tell us that he is thinking, or rather that we are in the position of his thought. The whistling is the soundtrack to the inner speech that we as spectators are providing for Marlowe.

When we realise that we *are* Philip Marlowe walking down the corridor, we could expect to hear his inner thoughts (and I will use the terms 'inner speech' and 'inner thought' interchangeably here). We could imagine some thoughts or words<sup>7</sup> like: 'Hmmm, I see three women with their backs to me and a man walking towards me. Let me check whether the door on my left is the one I am looking for. No, that's 919, a stocks and bonds office (I wonder what that is, is that an accountancy firm or something else?). Ah, that must be it in front of me, 350, Kingsby Publications...' and so on. However, the film does not provide this commentary since we are being shown all of this and so we do not need to be told it as well. However, we must also not forget that we are inside Marlowe's head

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<sup>7</sup> I am not at all sure how we think or speak to ourselves in everyday situations – do we comment on everything like an odd space traveller in our mind? Perhaps we do this sometimes, and perhaps at other times we do not; or perhaps the metaphor of 'internal dialogue' breaks down here and our thoughts are not really like words at all. I am not certain how we could empirically measure something like this.

and so we need the whistling to remind us that we are not so much seeing what is happening, but rather that we are seeing Philip Marlowe see what is happening. It is difficult here to judge whether this is a mimetic or diegetic mode of narration, or a strange combination of both.

In returning to Edward Branigan's *Point of View in the Cinema* (1984), we should recall the basic distinction that Branigan makes here, and in *Narrative Comprehension and Film*, between narrative (crudely, the story, the chronological series of events) and narration (the way in which those events are presented to the audience by the film). It is important to stress that 'narration', in Branigan's scheme, implies everything connected to the cinematic image and its sound. So, narration includes *mise-en-scène* (and acting, depending on whether you choose to include acting under *mise-en-scène* or not), editing, cinematography and sound. The crucial point is that narrative is fundamentally virtual: we are only ever reconstructing the virtual narrative from the actual narration of that film. Branigan (1984) defines this succinctly: 'narration refers not to the story itself, but to the knowing of the story' (2). It may also be useful here to use Daniel Yacavone's recent distinction between the 'world-in' the film and the 'world-of' that film. Responding to a review of his book *Film Worlds: A Philosophical Aesthetics of Cinema* (2015), Yacavone explains this distinction thus:

In brief, the *world-in* a film is its basic representational and/or fictional world, i.e. what is frequently referred to as the *diegetic world* of a film. [...]. [T]he *world-of* is defined throughout as the total communicative and expressive-affective structure and

experience of a film (or its 'modality,' if one likes) as a *presentational*, as well as representational, reality. As such it necessarily encompasses (but without contradiction also clearly exceeds) the *world-in*, and also includes various integrated and co-present extra- and non-diegetic, extra- narrative, formal, and stylistic features of the sort which are often associated with the artistic dimensions of films (Yacovone 2017, 157–158).

*Lady in the Lake* and other first-person films have a very distinct and distracting *world-of* that makes it difficult to engage with the *world-in* of that film, even though the subjective camera is obviously intended not as a technique of distancing but rather as one of immersion. In Branigan's terms, the narration in such films tends to overwhelm the narrative and thus fails in the intention of doing the opposite. The aim of providing a fully immersive experience is one that has always fascinated filmmakers although technical solutions seem less successful than straightforwardly narrative ones.

### The Subjective Camera in 1946

Writing in *American Cinematographer* in 1946, Herbert A. Lightman explores the 'subjective camera' in Hollywood cinema and says that the camera has a 'point of view' and that 'the audience will see the story only as the camera sees it' ([1946] 1973, 61). He writes further:

Usually the camera maintains the role of a detached observer of the story. [...] Occasionally, however, the camera steps out of its role as casual observer and becomes a participant in the story. In so doing, it assumes the point of view of one of the characters, and what appears on the screen is what

that particular character sees in a certain filmic situation. Thus, the camera becomes his "eye," and when this is the case we say that the camera is *subjective* (61–62).

Even in 1946, Lightman acknowledges that the 'technique, in itself, is not entirely new' and that, with new technology, it is now 'dynamic without being clumsy'. He claims that the 'psychological effect of this device on the audience is direct and potent' and that it allows the audience to 'participate subconsciously in the action that is taking place on screen' (62). Such pseudo, – or folk-psychology is quite familiar: 'The audience is allowed to see part of the action as it appears to one of the characters' and it will subconsciously experience the same reactions he does' (ibid.). Clearly this was not really the case with *Lady in the Lake*, although, it must be said, that contemporary reviews were far more generous than the film's subsequent reception. *Variety*, for instance, thought:

*Lady in the Lake* institutes a novel method of telling the story, in which the camera itself is the protagonist, playing the lead role from the subjective viewpoint of star Robert Montgomery. Idea comes off excellently, transferring what otherwise would have been a fair whodunit into socko screen fare (31 December, 1946).

In Britain, the *Monthly Film Bulletin* explains that the camera lens 'becomes the eyes both of Marlowe and the audiences and Marlowe is not seen unless reflected in a mirror' (1947, 5) and that, finally:

This is a good thriller, whose first person camera technique is effective, though a little tiring; but has the

drawback that we see so little of Montgomery, a deprivation to his admirers, even though they hear his voice and admire his directorial skill. [...] The film is richly garnished with Chandler wisecracks and should be much enjoyed by his and all thriller fans (6).

We do hear quite a lot of Montgomery as Philip Marlowe throughout the film, but his voice seems oddly strained and his laugh, in particular, is very odd indeed as if the actor were trying too hard to inject some personality into the role. Nevertheless, it is significant that the *Monthly Film Bulletin* pays so much attention to Montgomery's voice and to the dialogue in the film, since there is very little else on which to focus.

Here, we may venture to say that one of the reasons that *Lady in the Lake* does not succeed emotionally is to bring in another form of contemporary pop-science, that of the mirror-neuron. In this hypothesis, whenever we watch a human action, the same area in our brains that would 'light up' if we were doing that action ourselves, 'lights up' at the sight of that action. Thus, when we see someone wave their hand, the 'hand waving' portion of our brain is activated (and presumably runs 'off-line'), and that when we see a human face expressing obvious emotion, our brains react in the same way as if we were experiencing that emotion ourselves (see Shaw [2016] for a fuller discussion). I remain agnostic as to whether this mirror-neuron hypothesis is of any scientific explanatory value, but assuming that it is, we could argue that in cinema it is very important to see character's faces in order for us to experience the appropriate emotions as expressed by that actor's face. Since we hardly ever see Montgomery/Marlowe, we do not really know what we are

supposed to be feeling in response to the brute visual reality of the scene. Perhaps it does not help that Audrey Totter as Adrienne Fromsett, has such a peculiarly inexpressive face. It is extremely difficult to gauge what sort of emotion she may or may not be experiencing during any particular scene. The pop-cognitivist hypothesis would then be that in order to experience the proper emotional response, and even Lightfoot in 1946 acknowledges that the 'modern photoplay appeals principally to the emotions' (62), we have to see the actors' faces in order not only to understand what emotions they are experiencing but also in order to experience those emotions, as quasi-emotions, ourselves. There are of course numerous problems with this hypothesis, including questions of cultural and historical specificity which question whether all audiences at all times will have similar responses to particular films or facial expressions, but it may be relevant to explaining the lack of emotional success in entirely subjective films. Dialogue is just not enough in such cases.

Foreshadowing a point that Branigan makes in his discussion of *Lady in the Lake* (although in more technical semiotic vocabulary), Lightfoot argues that a 'subjective scene cannot simply be tossed into a sequence at any point. It must be motivated by, and definitely linked to, the objective scenes that precede and follow it' (63). Clearly this is a real problem for *Lady in the Lake*, since there are very few objective scenes apart from the framing narrative ones in which Marlowe addresses the audience directly. Lightfoot discusses Alfred Hitchcock's subjective camera in *Lifeboat* (1944) and *Spellbound* (1945), since Hitchcock is particularly fond of the subjective

camera even in his early silent films *Champagne* (1928) and *The Ring* (1927), for instance, or in more famous sequences, such as Cary Grant's drunken drive in *North by Northwest* (1959). But, however experimental Hitchcock was, he never tried an entirely subjective approach like *Lady in the Lake*, although we could consider his apparently single take *Rope* (1948) as an exercise in supreme objectivity.

Lightfoot ends by saying that he himself has written a 'screenplay for a two-reel short subject which is entirely subjective' (66), which was never made, but he does say: 'It is, of course, self-evident that such a film could only be placed on the screen as a novelty short. A feature-length film done entirely with this approach would become monotonous' (ibid.). Judging by the lack of any consistent use of the first-person camera technique in feature films, it would appear that Lightfoot was correct.

### The Face in the Mirror

One of the ways in which *Lady in the Lake* tries to break with the monotony of the first-person point of view is in the four times that Marlowe looks into mirrors during the film (Figures 1–4).



Figure 1: *Lady in the Lake*: Philip Marlowe

(Robert Montgomery) sees himself and Adrienne Fromsett (Audrey Trotter) in her office mirror.



Figure 2: *Lady in the Lake*.



Figure 3: *Lady in the Lake*.



Figure 4: *Lady in the Lake*

There may be quite a lot to be said about mirrors and mirror images in the cinema (even without getting into the various permutations of film theory's

engagement with Lacan's rather fanciful discussion of the supposed psychological mirror stage that children apparently experience), but I would like to mention Umberto Eco's discussion of the 'catoptric [mirror] experience' in the final chapter of his *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* in which he writes that:

But you should not forget that the mirror image is not the double of its object, but, rather, a double of the stimulating field one could have access to if one looked at the object instead of looking at its mirror image. [...] And it is precisely from this experience of the absolute that the dream of a sign having the same characteristics arises. This is why men [sic] draw [and produce the signs which are precisely defined as iconic]: they draw to achieve without mirrors what mirrors allow them to achieve (Eco 1984, 210).

Eco takes the term 'iconic' from C.S. Peirce's tripartite taxonomy of the sign: index (sign as imprint of reality, as in a footprint), icon (sign as resemblance, as in a painted portrait) and symbol (sign as arbitrary, as in the words of a language) (see Chandler 2007, 36–37) and the mirror image, for Eco, represents the dream of absolute resemblance. Thus, the image of Marlowe in the mirror acts as a reminder that the film audience is not in some third-person position, but that the image we see is a direct depiction of the diegetic world as experienced by Marlowe. In an ideal situation, the viewer would take the image as an index rather than an icon, since, if we were to lose our minds and imagine that we *were* Marlowe, then the image would be a direct impression of the fictive real, but, as subsequent spectators seem to have agreed, this

dream of indexicality always collapses into iconicity. We always know that what we see is not an imprint of a real world, but always a portrait of a fictional one. The image of the mirror is similarly important in Delmer Daves's *Dark Passage* (1947).

### **Speech and Silence in *Dark Passage***

In *Dark Passage* (Delmer Daves, 1947), which was released just after *Lady in the Lake*, Vincent Parry (Humphrey Bogart) begins in the first-person camera position for the first 36 minutes or so, until the escaped convict organises surprisingly effective, illegal facial reconstruction surgery. Bosley Crowther, writing in the *New York Times*, complains that the first-person device interferes with the audience's desire to see the main actor:

Mr. Daves has also confused things by using a subjective camera at the start, so that it sees things as through the eyes of a fugitive, and then has switched to the conventional use later on. This technique withholds Mr. Bogart from the audience's observation for some time – until a fast job of plastic surgery has supposedly been performed on his face. When he finally does come before the camera, he seems uncommonly chastened and reserved, a state in which Mr. Bogart does not appear at his theatrical best. However, the mood of his performance is compensated somewhat by that of Miss Bacall, who generates quite a lot of pressure as a sharp-eyed, knows-what-she-wants girl (Crowther 1947).

Vincent can speak to others and to himself in voice-over until the face surgery but is then silent while his face is bandaged. He begins to talk as soon as

Irene Jansen (Lauren Bacall) removes the bandages. Silence marks the space of transition between one identity and the next. He says: 'Well? Is it that bad?' and rushes over to the mirror before listing all the things that are still the same. Of course, we know that he is now Humphrey Bogart and the film settles down into a rather more straightforward style, although the issue of identity and the way in which it is linked to the face remains central. In an earlier sequence, the taxi driver (Tom D'Andrea) who then goes on to help him organise the facial surgery, says to Vincent: 'It's funny. From faces I can tell what people think, what they do... sometimes even who they are. You, for instance, you're a guy with plenty of trouble'. Meaning lives on the surface of appearance and speech is not to be trusted. In the final scene of the film, Vincent has escaped to the town of Pieta in Peru and waits in a cafe for Irene to arrive. She finally appears and Irene asks the band to play their song, which Vincent recognises before seeing her. They then dance together in silence. *Dark Passage* gives us a parable about appearance and truth, and that the two are not necessarily connected.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The problem of speech and silence appears very clearly in the first-person film's most recent exemplar, *Hardcore Henry* (Ilya Naishuller, 2015). This film adheres most closely to the logic of the first-person camera device and, while it is clearly modelled on the action of first-person shooter video games, the film explicitly deals with the problem of silence and of speech in a quite a novel way. Henry, whose face we never see even in reflection, wakes up in a disoriented state and he is told that he has been brought back from the dead and given a new body but that his voice protocol still needs to be activated. Before this can happen, armed villains disrupt the process and Henry has to flee. Henry does not speak at all for the rest of the film. *Hardcore Henry* is perhaps problematically gleefully in its celebration of fantasy violence and underpinned by a rather unpleasant misogyny, but it is

## Conclusion: The Problem of the Homunculus

If a first-person camera character speaks, and if we are immersed in their subjectivity, then these expressed thoughts invade and take over ours. Speech functions as an infection supplanting our own thoughts. Ideally, the first-person camera acts as a parasite, but one that, like the cuckoo, forces out the proper thoughts that are our own. This may be why these films tend towards silence rather than trying to present inner speech. They are afraid of scaring their audiences by speaking for them; speaking in their stead and in their minds.

This is a rather melodramatic way of putting what is sometimes called the 'homunculus' problem in the philosophy of mind. Here we imagine that in our brains, there exists a small version of our selves: the homunculus, which drives the body just as Ripley controls the exoskeleton in *Aliens* (James Cameron, 1986) or as Remy the Rat learns to control the hapless chef Alfredo Linguini in *Ratatouille* (Brad Bird, 2007) (Figure 5). The problem is that this homunculus must itself have another homunculus within its mind, driving it. So, Ripley drives the exoskeleton, but Ripley's mini-Ripley drives her, and her mini-Ripley must have a mini-mini-Ripley to drive her, and so on *ad infinitum*. In *Ratatouille*, Remy controls Alfred, Remy 2 controls Remy, Remy 3 controls Remy 2, and so we have to imagine an infinite number of Remys (see Cottingham, [1987] 2004).

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surprisingly gripping in a way that *Lady in the Lake* never is. Perhaps less speech is more in the subjective film.





Figure 5: *Ratatouille*.

First-person cinema tries to insert us as homunculi in the mind of another but this particular device either fails because the homunculus theory is logically flawed at the outset, or because it reveals the unwelcome truth that we do not really know what or who we are when we think or talk. The first-person conceit therefore highlights a problem that Derrida finds at the centre of Western philosophy as

such. In the final essay of *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida writes:

*The history of metaphysics therefore can be expressed as the unfolding of the structure or schema of an absolute will-to hear-oneself-speak. This history is closed when this infinite absolute appears to itself in its own death. A voice without difference, a voice without writing, is at once absolutely alive and absolutely dead* (Derrida [1967] 1973, 102, emphasis in original).

In first-person cinema, we are shown the fantasy of hearing-oneself-speak but are simultaneously taught that this is indeed a fantasy and that one can only hear oneself speak in the mirror of language.

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ISSN: ISSN 2049-2340

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