

Nick Wibert

Instructor Zack Shaw

ENG 4133: Masters of the Modern Moving Image

19 June 2020

Cinematic Subjectivity in *Good Time* and *Uncut Gems*

One of the main goals of cinema as an art form is to present characters and situations with which the audience can readily engage. To enjoy or even experience a film is to relate to it in some direct way, most often by identifying with a character and the situations they confront to some extent. In other words, the viewer connects with a character's subjective experiences, and the filmmakers control how this connection occurs. This connection between spectator and character is especially strong in *Good Time* (2017) and *Uncut Gems* (2019), modern crime thrillers directed by brothers Josh and Benny Safdie. The two films are praised for their immersive and stressful atmospheres, with many giving credit to the visual elements and how they are presented to engage the audience on a deep level. Through claustrophobic cinematography and the creative use of reality, the Safdie brothers build a subjective cinematic reality as a means of forcing the viewer into the headspace of the main character. This method minimizes the distance between the audience and protagonist and their respective experiences, using cinematic subjectivity to heighten the viewer's stress while staying within the traditional conventions of the crime thriller.

Before diving too much into technique, it is important to first cover the genre conventions of the crime thriller to understand how the two films can be defined as such. In Kate Watson's "The Crime Thriller in Context," she lays out the prominent narrative features and emotions associated with various fiction in the genre. Notably, the crime thriller aims to "incite

excitement, be suspenseful... invoke anxiety, ambiguity, and fear” (Watson 3) with a narrative “based on the psychology of characters or ‘an intolerable situation that must end in violence’” (Watson 4). Both *Good Time* and *Uncut Gems* invoke the emotions that Watson listed through the intentions and techniques to be explored in this analysis, and both focus on the psychology of the protagonist (manipulative sociopathy and gambling addiction, respectively) while building to a violent resolution. By first satisfying the essential requirements of the crime thriller, the Safdie brothers have enabled themselves to play with their depiction of subjectivity in interesting ways while remaining within the comfortable and familiar restraints of genre.

Subjective cinema is a complex topic where many issues can arise, particularly in the common use of the “first-person camera” to achieve subjectivity by imitating the literary first-person (such that the audience is looking through a character’s eyes). In “Subjective Cinema: And the Problem of Film in the First Person,” Julio L. Moreno asserts that the first-person camera reduces the protagonist to “no more than a viewpoint, merely a look,” effectively depriving the viewer “of this object with which he could identify himself” (Moreno 357). While the first-person in literature allows for a closer identification between reader and character, the same cannot be said for the use of the first-person camera in film. Moreno does not suggest that subjectivity and a “more complete identification between the spectator and the protagonist” is impossible in film, but rather that “film has its own means of achieving this, without the necessity of borrowing literary devices” (Moreno 358).

Many filmmakers employ the first-person camera with the intent of depicting a subjective experience, but in doing so have completely detached the spectator from the character having said experience, leaving the spectator with no way to engage with this character’s subjective experience. In this scenario, the only subjectivity that exists is in the individual’s own

experience as a spectator, which they have brought to their viewing of the film and is not a reflection of the film or what it achieves. As such, the accepted idea that the first-person camera lends to subjective cinema is invalid and should be substituted for techniques within the fundamental language of cinema. An examination of *Good Time* and *Uncut Gems* will show that the Safdie brothers' approach to cinematography (a feature unique to cinema) resolves this common problem of false subjectivity in film.

As aforementioned, some of the emotions commonly associated with the crime thriller include anxiety and excitement, both of which *Good Time* and *Uncut Gems* have been highly praised for invoking in audiences. While one could attribute the ability of these films to stress their spectators to elements of narrative, sound, editing, etc., I believe that the most important factor at play is the cinematography. Both films feature extreme, uncomfortable close-ups very frequently; by compressing visual space, the Safdie brothers create a claustrophobic image which contributes to an overall atmosphere of stress and suspense and puts the character's facial expressions and emotions under a microscope during the films' most intense moments (see Figure 1 on the next page). It is important to note that the two films have different cinematographers, so the strong similarities across the two films are more indicative of the directors' intentions rather than their respective cinematographer's. By bringing the camera so close to protagonist, the Safdies significantly reduce the distance between the spectator and the character, allowing for more complete identification without the use of a first-person camera.



Figure 1. The protagonists are frequently depicted in uncomfortably tight close-ups, increasing intensity and audience identification with the character by magnifying the actors' facial expressions (stills 1 and 2 from *Good Time*, 3 and 4 from *Uncut Gems*)

It is through these cinematographic choices that the Safdies demonstrate an effective method for creating true subjective cinema without relying on the first-person camera. In this sense, the films never depart from the “objective” third-person camera, instead generating subjectivity by the way that objectivity is presented. In regard to the practice of photography, Maya Deren states that “the photograph not only testifies to the existence of that reality... but is, to all intents and purposes, its equivalent... a photograph must be differentiated from [realism] as *a form of reality itself*” (Deren 64). In fact, the way the Safdies choose to capture objective elements of reality lends to the creation of a filmic reality—a “reflection of another world” (Deren 66)—which reflects the subjective experiences of the protagonist. The Safdies’ insistence on filming in public locations without closing them down and their casting of mostly non-actors in both films is a testament to their understanding of reality and the “controlled accident” (Deren 66) as an important tool of cinema. The Safdies extend Deren’s definition of the “controlled accident” from nature to the man-made world, depicting Manhattan streets, buildings, vehicles, and people as they behave “naturally” with minimal outside influence. By filtering objective reality through the previously described cinematography, the Safdies enable themselves to create a new energetic reality that reflects the emotional state and experiences of the protagonist.

Even though *Good Time* and *Uncut Gems* both take place in New York City, the worlds of the two films are presented in very different ways. The images of *Good Time* are very dark and grainy, providing a gritty depiction of the harsh underbelly of New York. The protagonist Connie Nikas is a mentally-damaged sociopath with a superiority complex who manipulates

everyone he crosses paths with to achieve his goals; so, this grimy presentation of New York is a strong reflection of his troubled mental state and how he views the world as a result (see Figure 2).

On the other hand, *Uncut Gems* features very bright and vibrant depictions of the wealthier side of New York, not only as a literal depiction of Howard Ratner's lifestyle, but also as a way of



Figure 2. Connie's world (top) vs. Howard's world (bottom)

surrounding him with the wealth and riches that he is perpetually obsessed with obtaining as a gambling addict. Furthermore, the strong, vibrant colors reflect Howard's state of denial, refusing to acknowledge the negative aspects of his reality and instead pretending like everything is going fine despite constantly digging himself deeper into a financial and emotional hole (Figure 2). In both cases, the Safdies present the world of the film in the way that its respective protagonist perceives it, cloaking the entirety of the film with a layer of subjectivity so that the spectator can more closely identify with the character and his experiences throughout.

A basic requirement of cinema, especially in visceral genres like the crime thriller, is to engage the spectator. The most common way to achieve engagement is through identification with a central character or characters, which the Safdie brothers take to a deeper level by approaching true cinematic subjectivity. *Good Time* and *Uncut Gems* act as a response to Moreno's conclusion that true subjectivity in film must be achieved by the means of cinema alone. The Safdies demonstrate a strong understanding of the language of cinema in their creative use of reality and cinematography to compress visual space and depict the world as it is seen through their protagonist's eyes, all the while staying within crime thriller conventions to

take advantage of the emotions associated with the genre. These visual techniques come together in both films to provide a unique, cinematic depiction of the protagonist's subjective experience and worldview, allowing the audience a deeper identification with the character and amplifying the emotions that the crime thriller invokes as a result.

Works Cited

Deren, Maya. "Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality." *Daedalus*, vol. 89, no. 1, 1960, pp. 150–167. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/20026556. Accessed 12 May 2020.

Good Time. Dir. Josh Safdie and Benny Safdie. A24, 2017. Netflix. 11 Feb. 2020. Web. Accessed 19 June 2020.

Moreno, Julio L. "Subjective Cinema: And the Problem of Film in the First Person." *The Quarterly of Film Radio and Television*, vol. 7, no. 4, 1953, pp. 341–358. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1210006. Accessed 10 June 2020.

Uncut Gems. Dir. Josh Safdie and Benny Safdie. A24, 2019. Netflix. 25 May 2020. Web. Accessed 19 June 2020.

Watson, Kate. "The Crime Thriller in Context." *Critical Insights: The American Thriller*, vol. 1, 2014, pp. 3–13. Salem Press. Accessed 10 June 2020.