

LIFE MIRROR

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Abstract

Crowdsourced filmmaking is still largely unexplored as a creative process and as a social phenomenon. In recent months it has started to spread rapidly throughout the arts community as a cheaper and more democratic mode of expression than traditional filmmaking, and often manages to ignite unexpected tangential narratives and new meanings. The Lifemirror project is a crowdsourcing tool and cinematic system designed to enable collective creativity and filmic argumentation based on geo-time tracked video through mobile phones.

Keywords: Crowdsourcing, cinema, mobile phone, video, mass-creativity, communication.

Introduction

By the time anyone has read this, NASA's Cassini spacecraft will have sent us a new natural colour and high resolution image of ourselves from behind Saturn's rings, almost a billion miles away. As a moment of recorded history it follows 1968s "Earthrise" image and 1990s "Pale Blue Dot", a photograph which at Carl Sagan's request to turn the Voyager 1 camera back on ourselves, created an image 'about a new recognition, still slowly overtaking us, of our coordinates, our place in the Universe' [1] Seeing ourselves in new ways is an essential part of our evolution and conscious development. The interesting aspect of this new photo shoot is that we know in advance that our picture is being taken, indeed NASA are inviting us to send photos of ourselves waving back to the camera. This raises some interesting considerations about how we might treat our recorded image in a technologically evolved society.

In terms of collective self-reflection, I moved to observe that back here on Earth, while we often know 'what' we are filming, it is sometimes the case that we do not know 'why' we are filming. Lifemirror is a practice-based research project which aims to reframe how and why we choose to film ourselves and our environment by placing the mobile recording process in the context of cinema.

The ongoing dance between system development and theory is constantly informing the project and reflecting the process back on itself, in many ways a characteristic of a product such as Lifemirror may create. In this paper I will give a brief overview of the theories informing the system, explain how the

current prototype is working, and finally suggest a few possible theories for its future.

Theory

My interactions with crowdsourced filmmaking and designing for a process that facilitates its production has brought me into contact with some diverse speculations. While many of the theoretical texts were written in the context of more traditional practices such as early theatre or traditional cinema, many of their philosophies seem to support the generation of crowdsourced video as an extended practice of cinema. The initial impetus informing development began with Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic model of systems in *A Thousand Plateaus* [2]. This led to Deleuze's own reconceptualization of film theory in the *Cinema books*, and then on to Ranciere's extension of an image theory in the form of the 'sentence image' and the 'Great Parataxis' [3]. While these theories discuss various aspects of cinema in detail, especially with regard to the spectator's cognitive processes in reaction to the moving image, they appear to generate new meaning when thinking in terms of mobile-sourced video. The physical aspect of fragmentation seems to mirror the cognitive functions found in the Deleuzian schizoanalysis of cinema [4] that infuses much of the thought and design of Lifemirror. These ideas also point towards a reconceptualization of films that can be ongoing, fragmented yet side-by-side, and if ignoring the traditional hierarchical film production models, may evolve and fluctuate as naturally as an organism.

Temporal thinking behind the design came from readings around Heidegger's *Das Sein* [5] and the study of Zen and in particular the nature of the flow and the ongoing Koan [6]. This inspired thinking about the possibility of making 'films with no end' and brought to mind two questions. Could the opening and closing door of reality be transposed more realistically onto the cinema screen, not to replace it, but to fortify it with the cameras of the people? Can narrative be based on a natural progression of seemingly opposing forces related by ideas?

While much is written and relevant in the realms of participatory video, the theoretical focus of the project was more a reaction to the conceptual evolution of film and the provocations of filmmakers like Harmony Korine who claimed that cinema is stuck in the birth canal [7]. Indeed he is also reported to have said

that his first film was an excursion into 'a new film grammar, a kaleidoscopic mix of realistic and surrealistic scenes not necessarily connected to one another'. Such resistance and sparks were also drawn from Trevor Stark's essay on the potential of militant cinema. This provided an historical context for framing cinema as a tool for change and reflection. While the Medvedkin Group brought cameras and processing equipment to remote communities on a train, YouTube enabled Kevin MacDonald to make *Life In A Day* on July 24th 2010 [8], the first commercially available crowdsourced film. The essay discusses a time in film history when 'class consciousness (and the cinematic tastes) of the masses inevitably lagged behind the vanguard works...' [9], though in these cinematically educated times it could be suggested that a co-existing of filmic ideation on the big screen might present a balancing force, a collective self-reflection as suggested, or at least make for some interesting flicks.

In looking at how this social cinema might manifest I also looked at the origins of theatre and in particular the idea of parabasis which is the 'stepping forward' of the chorus in Greek comedies. This device allows the author to represent parties not directly entwined with the narrative; this was often his own voice or indeed, that of the gods. While Aristotle's second volume of the *Poetics* is lost, the origins of comedy and irony and their political inclusion in a connected world are informing the concepts of audience participation and elliptical authorship on which the project is based.

System

Lifemirror is currently at a prototype stage and working in three parts. Firstly, the mobile phone app allows users to suggest film titles and vote on them. They can also choose how long the clips in the film should be (1-5 seconds) and provide a short description where they can give a textual direction. At the moment this process refreshes daily with the winning film going into the next day's production. The second part allows participants to take clips and store them in a library. They can then decide which clip to send to the day's film idea. Users can send one clip per film/day. Finally, the films are screened back to an audience through a system that allows the clips to be sequenced according to the collected metadata. This anticipates location and audience-specific screenings that can be filtered further by textual data. We have

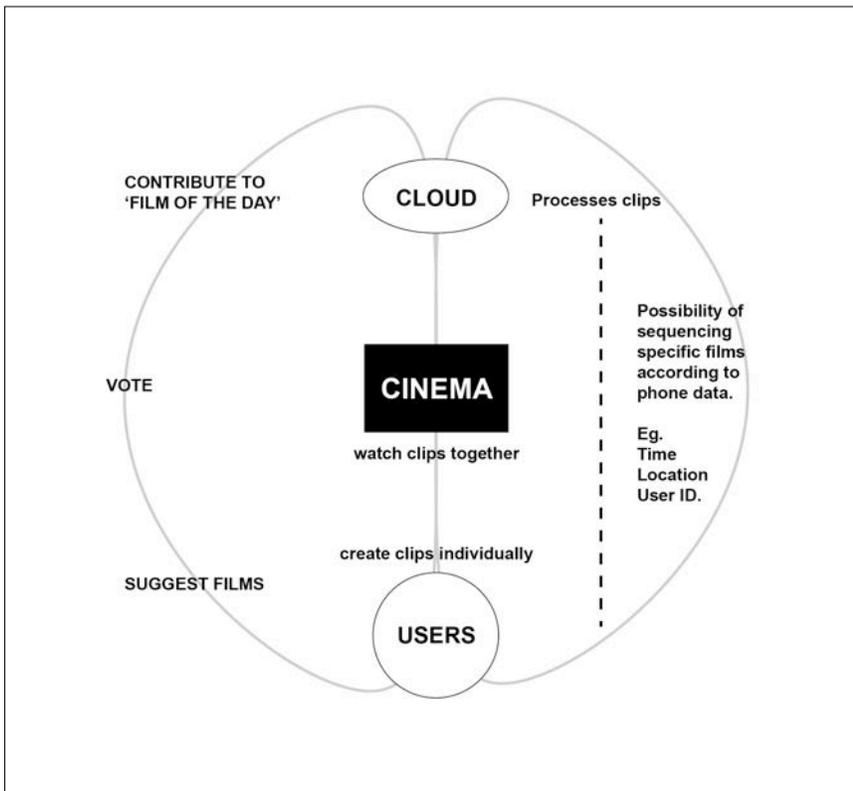


Fig. 1. The system is based on a cycle filtering clips according to relevant data from the phone ie. User ID, location, time, gyroscopic.

tested this in two real cinema scenarios and are in the process of building virtual cinemas where a community can also watch them together.

Cinema

While initial use of the system involves a relatively small number of participants, we received enough clips to make two community screenings. The primary feedback came from those who could not attend and so wanted some way of watching the films online thus demonstrating that engagement relies heavily on participants having open access to the media they create. Drawing from this feedback we are now designing virtual cinemas with the view that content can be screened back using audience-specific filters (The films can be generated according to those in the room). This is an important development as the intention of Lifemirror has always been to further understand and develop the idea of 'cinema as community' and to see what potential it might have as a tool for societal change. It also proposes that a collective observer effect could be a means of forming new communities in both real and virtual spaces.

Some participants contributed video without going to screenings. The main

feedback from these users was that they enjoyed the daily film challenge and found that using the camera in this context inspired them to think of new ways to film and interpret ideas. There was also a distinction between recognition of moments that would contribute to the cinema and 'scene creation' where users would set up a scene for filming. This may lead to possible discussions surrounding the nature and nurture of the moving image and how this might affect a collectively realised narrative. While much feedback reported a sense of anti-narrative and more a catalogue of perspectives, some however did comment that they felt a 'sense' of narrative in that the clips were held together by a community, an idea, and a cinema screen.

Due to technical limitations, some were not able to use the app though still came to the screenings. These participants were curious about what they might see and general feedback was that an audiovisual catalogue is being created rather than a body of films. This came about through discussions on the nature of narrative and how our expectations of cinematic flow might change should a film be treated as a concept by a collective cinematographer. An interesting note is that the people who were able to

suggest films and see them made were curious in a very different way, as if they had a level of expectancy and excitement that the non-participating audience couldn't share. Contributors in the same way were curious to see their own clips in a new context and this provided the audience with a feeling that perhaps 'new meanings are being created'. These comments seem to strengthen the idea that 'connected' cinema can provide a community space which is still largely unexplored and fertile in the digital realm.

The films, as intention-based deconstructions of the moving image are ordered time-sequentially. They present a stream of consciousness which is at once familiar in cinematic form and also surprising and mysterious in that we cannot expect the next scene, as in a traditional cause and effect model of narrative, but rather gain data-driven time-space awareness. In the post-screening discussions, audience members related that they could see the value in creating an open forum for idea sharing in this form for the simple enjoyment of watching the film format while not feeling like they can be judged for their creative intention in any way. Deleuze's suggestion that cinema is the natural medium for philosophical discourse and indeed his view that film is a very powerful speech act in itself, in the sense that it has actual power to do something (or to 'operate in reality') [10], can frame these clips in a more relevant context. The idea also precursors Ranciere's concept of the Sentence Image, '...the unit that divides the chaotic force of the great parataxis into phrasal power of continuity and imaging power of rupture. As sentence, it accommodates paratactic power by repelling the schizophrenic explosion.' [11].

Analysis

At the two screenings held so far, the audience reported that they believed this film system gives a new way of looking at ourselves and provides a thought-provoking and entertaining way of seeing our everyday words and thoughts. While there is not enough space or time to cover all the theories and diverse outputs of the project so far, I would like to present these findings by looking at three of the resulting films.

The film *Green* became a focal point in discussions as it was at once so familiar yet such a curious thing to watch. As a parabolic voice we find a certain community articulation of the colour green. Trees from a window revealed through



Fig. 2. *Green* (16th May, 2013)

an auto exposure adjustment.. a track forward into the grid on a cutting board.. a handwritten note saying 'I am colour blind' on a red background.. a tea leaf falling in water.. a plant.. a camera beep and exposure adjustment to reveal trees in another location.. a green bottle.. a sentence highlighted.. a rubber frog, a tobacco pack accompanied by loud music.. the drawing of a green bird. As the first film made in the project, it reveals many accidentals, found material and 'shots-to-hand'. In the middle of this

collage of green sits a question, a set up shot proclaiming colour blindness. While this got some laughs at the screening it also serves to reinforce the idea that crowdsourced cinematics could provide a way of recognising ourselves in extremes as well as similarities, a suggestion that visual koans can be created quite naturally.

Philosophy begins with a pan revealing the message 'I'LL BE BACK', then a mandala like diagram with a voice saying 'The philosophy of Carl Jung'.. a

Fig. 3. *Philosophy* (24th May, 2013)



flame on a red background, though it isn't a flame, it is light from a garden seeping through fingers.. a light piano in the background, a book opens to reveal the question 'Who are we?'.. pan from a chicken to an egg and back again.. a page turned of handwritten notes.. a ringing sound over trees and a pan down into a spiral patterned singing bowl.. a young man scratching his chin, filming himself in the mirror, eyes obscured by an Apple logo.. a slow zoom on a microchip asking in a hand-drawn speech bubble 'Can a micro-chip think?'

The clips are sequenced in upload order and the final clip was added manually for an eager participant with a non-compatible phone. It is interesting to note the use of camera movement to express certain ideas, the panning between two objects, the track out to reveal, the wobble to imitate flame. The movements suggest that the use of the body and awareness of the camera-in-hand can be used as an expression of more than a single captured image or word. Recalling the nature/nurture of moving image production, it is interesting to note that all the clips in *Philosophy*, our means of questioning thinking and being, were physically set up and executed with consideration and thought so creating a montage of questions within a question.

The film *Look Left* shed light on a potential interaction perspective of the process while revealing something reminiscent of artist Tony Hill's multi-location, hyper-perspective video installations [12]. Kitchen, airport, park, beach, street, park. Flickering visions of a camera ballet come to mind when imagining these interactions. Filmed in one-second clips it becomes fluid (if a little dizzying), and as it is shot in one day, somewhat more compelling. It seems to give a sense of Earth as our shared environment and in time sequence, a new perspective from our technologies.

Cinematic Futures

With the proliferation of video-enabled mobile phones and the soon to be released Google Glass, it seems more important than ever for us to try to understand the reasons why we record images and what contexts we can create for them so they can be of use and/or interest to others.

A key element gleaned from the research so far is that the receptive side of the collective filmmaking process, the real and virtual cinema spaces where co-



Fig. 4. *Look Left* (31st May, 2013)

creations are projected, should be considered carefully in terms of our emerging mixed reality communities. The real space of the cinema, which is only completely real until the film begins, is a transformative space by nature, and by allowing user-led feedback through the screen could give us an increasing awareness of the potential to affect and be affected by it. The entertainment space simultaneously becomes a discussion space where mutual and new understandings of narrative and form can occur.

If considered as an evolving boundary object, *Lifemirror* could be seen as a channel of information and context which is capable of translating, transferring and transforming knowledge between communities of practice [13]. For example it could function in disused high street shops as collective installations. Communities could project ideas for the spaces onto elements of the environment thus giving new potential avenues for what could ‘live’ there in the future. The fragmented, yet still organic, multi-perspective stream of audiovisual con-

sciousness could therefore replace more antiquated systems of appeal, competition and judgment that often imbue the process of environmental or societal change. Like-wise, this schizoanalytic approach to giving voice to communities could be seen as a mediation tool for group discussion and therapy for individuals. Being inclusive of environment and each other, on both the creative and receptive levels, gives crowdsourced cinema a potential to help reflect and be of use to communities who cannot always be together in time and space.

The cinema could be a useful guide to help us evolve together in a globalised society, and connected by mobile cameras, may give us a new means with which to communicate, perhaps like a visual koan that reflects back our harmonies and discords and asks us to consider them together. As a new perspective of ourselves, crowdsourced cinematics might be a way forward, but designing for such media requires a metaphysical lens drawn from nature and projecting nature with the mobile phone as channel, a window into nature, not something that

‘captures’ or ‘shoots’ it. In this way we may operate individually, but sing and be sung to side-by-side, a chorus come together in the cinema.

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