Lifemirror – Collective Cinematic Thoughts

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ABSTRACT

Online crowdsourced art has received little attention from researchers or art historians [1] and online crowdsourced film perhaps even less. When Giles Deleuze began the first ontology of film image in his 'cinema books', he proposed the medium to be 'a producer of ideas' [2]. Through this lens, crowdsourced filmmaking promises to ask new questions on the evolution of the image. Due to the advancement of digital technology, instant and networked film-based media is destined to bypass traditional production and distribution systems. As recording acts become increasingly intimate through mobile phones and wearable technology, it is possible that camera use will emerge as something close to an expression of thought. This suggests a need to reevaluate the flow of user-generated media and investigate the behaviors of a camera-connected community. The *Lifemirror* project has been initiated to enable the creation and deconstruction of an unedited crowdsourced film image, the analysis of which might open questions of design and meaning in mobile video practices. Borrowing Gregory Ulmer's words in his preface to *Teletheory* (2004), 'My goal within this process is not to explain video, but to think with it' [3].

Author Keywords

Crowdsourcing; cinema; mobile; video; mass-creativity; communication.

ACM Classification Keywords

Theory.

INTRODUCTION

The *Lifemirror* project began as a reaction to Kevin MacDonald's pioneering documentary *Life In A Day* (2011) [4] which on its live stream release from the Sundance Film Festival, became the first commercial, crowdsourced film. Made from over 80,000 YouTube submissions, the film depicts one day on earth as seen by various people in 192 different countries. Human stories and observations were gathered by posing uncomplicated questions to the online community such as 'What do you love?' or 'What's in your bag?' The simplicity of these remote directions moved me to ask if it might be possible to make *Life in a Day*, every day; or at least capture something of its unique feeling of 'togetherness'.

In 'The Art of Seeing' [5], Aldous Huxley endorses a technique for healing vision that focuses on a relaxation of mind that in turn relaxes the eye and allows it to see. In our increasingly frantic and media-saturated environment, this ability 'not to strain' may be at the heart of designing future media systems and a key to making sense of our multi-perspective, fragmented selves; medicus curat, natura sanat, or, medicine cures, nature heals. As the title of this project suggests, a primary objective is to create and understand a more organic process of collective visual reflection, and in it see an evolved image of ourselves.

Traditional social media platforms are often designed with heavy emphasis on self-documentation and self-promotion. *Lifemirror* consciously shifts the motivation for participation away from an ownership of image and towards a concept of co-created film. Indeed, on seeing regaining his vision, Huxley goes on to say

> 'The great truth discovered on the spiritual level by the masters of prayer, that 'the more there is of the "I", the less there is of God,' has been discovered again and again on the physiological level by the masters of the various arts and skills. The more there is of the 'I', the less there is of Nature—of the right and normal functioning of the organism.'

While this analogy is meant as a provocation, it makes us consider that our media system design could perhaps be more sensitive to our collective reality. However, as initial trials of *Lifemirror* have shown, this transition of awareness is not something all of us want or are perhaps ready for.

METHODS

The practice-based inquiry takes a mixed methods approach. It comprises three research cycles in which each design iteration is followed by two stages of analysis and reflection.

• The first research cycle used a mobile application that allowed participants to suggest, vote on, and contribute to daily films. After two weeks, the films were viewed in a physical cinema space. Analysis of the first 14 films was conducted through post-screening audience discussions. Reflection resulted in the first academic output [6].

- Based on the findings, a second iteration has been completed which allows users to create unlimited films and watch them on an accompanying website. Moving from a physical to a virtual space, research was carried out through semi-structured interviews within the Lifemirror user-base. In response to this it also introduces a film-studies analysis in order to ground it again.
- Stage three will incorporate group functionality into the system and carry out a study of inter-community and inter-individual relationships in the film image. The inquiry will look specifically at how crowdsourced film might evolve as a communication space, and in turn, how a mobile-created cinema might evolve as a social tool.

This paper is part of the reflection stage of the second cycle and anticipates the third iteration of the system. To understand the virtual fragmentation of image as a theoretical physicality afforded by technology, a Deleuzian perspective on the 'brain screen' has been adopted.

CINEMATIC THINKING
The relationship of the brain function to the media screen has been widely discussed in both the philosophical and neuroscientific arenas. Raymond Bellour argues that 'it is essential for a neurobiologist to be able to recognise the brain (brain-body) as cinema. Quoting Damasio: 'Movies are the closest external representation of the prevailing storytelling that goes on in our minds' [7], and looking closer, we see that the physical aspect of fragmentation (of the cinematic image) seems to mirror the cognitive functions found in a Deleuzian schizoanalysis of cinema. The concept of an unpredictable sensory motor connection informs much thought in *Lifemirror* design. The model points towards a reconceptualisation of film narrative that can be experiential rather than linear, fragmented rather than sequential, and if it can ignore the traditional hierarchies of film production, may evolve and fluctuate as naturally as an organism.

Collective cinematics, as Deleuze would put it, forces a plane of immanence made from intentional perspectives. We are in the realms of collective unconscious; of creativity and primal over intelligence. In the Time-Image, Deleuze writes,

'The discovery of the synapses was enough in itself to shatter the idea of a continuous cerebral system [i.e., the brain as a whole, or as a unified system], since it laid down irreducible points or cuts…[but] in the case of chemical synapses, the point is 'irrational; to cut is important in itself and belongs to neither of the two sets it separates….' Hence the greater importance of a factor of uncertainty, or half uncertainty, in the neuronal transmission.' [8].

As a literal interpretation, *Lifemirror* is being designed in such a way that, at a critical mass, films will be made entirely by the people in the real or virtual room (cinema); a cinematic user-audience. This, it is hoped, will create a pseudo collective observer effect; with no beginning or end, and each film's content dependent on its audience.

In *The Future of The Image* (2007), Jacques Ranciere proposes the concept of 'The Great Parataxis' where images are in motion, and 'Linking any with anything whatsoever, which yesterday passed for subversive, is today increasingly homogenous with the reign of journalistic anything contains everything and the subject-hopping of advertising' [9]. The paratactic feed of media which surrounds us is taken literally within this system, placing images side-by-side and foregoing conventions of grammar in order to favour a more honest and balanced collective vision. This may animate questions on future narratives in relationship-based filmmaking. Early findings suggest that the multi-perspective stream created by *Lifemirror* might act as a form of collective visual koan (a Zen story which instills great doubt in order to test a student's progress towards enlightenment). Deleuze conceives of cinema as a powerful speech act – in the sense that it has actual power to do something (or to 'operate in reality'). Indeed he describes cinema as 'like a langue', and 'the shot an utterance' [10]. If there is any truth to this, a video-based social network might not be far off the horizon.

PAINTING WITH LIGHT
Even on a small scale, designing for networked film creation must often use a hypothetical lens. While we can create and share the moving image through apps like Twitter Vine and YouTube, the footage is generally channeled into traditionally defined categories based on broadcast programming. Creative connections tend to depend on tagging, titling, and image recognition rather than harnessing serendipitous or organised co-intention at the outset. In short, they are still made with the metaphorical selfie in mind. YouTube's tagline, 'Broadcast Yourself' is still very much the core message in internet-based media platforms. *Lifemirror*, along with a few recent crowdsourcing applications such as *Vyclone* or *Crowdfilk* offers a new channel system for user-generated video, a 'selfie-less' function closer to an open dialogue than a world stage.

On the democratisation of the camera, Walter Benjamin foreshadowed the rebirth in our mobile landscape. He notes 'the illiteracy of the future (someone has said)…will be ignorance not of reading or writing, but of photography' [11]. This was in response to the Brownie, the everyman-cam. What now then of hyper-connected, HD video at our fingertips? This project would, ironically, like to pause the surging trend of digital innovation, in order to reconsider our reflection in a co-created film image. The camera has traditionally been an extra function to the mobile phone, an add-on; the primary focus of a phone was to phone. Now of course it is far more than that and we are creating our world with fingers, voice and gesture, using devices that are becoming progressively more like brain extensions.

Figure 1: *Airports* (2014) The above image uses one still from each 3 second clip.

Perhaps the camera lens will become our 'third eye'. Focusing on the fact that cameras see images in a shared language (reality), this project suggests research be undertaken into how we might communicate with unedited recordings, and what we might learn by our shared 'painting with light'.

SYSTEM

In order to keep the integrity of a film as 'an event recorded by a camera as a set of moving images', the system is designed to continually play clips in time-sequence without stop, pause, or scrub functions. This challenges our expectation to 'control' a film and keeps the design closer to cinema and the dream state of the brain. As we do not control the system, the brain is 'constantly working over and preparing matter by destroying previous relations (the residual traces of the day's experiences) and creating a complex assemblage of new linkages' [12]. In this sense, *Lifemirror* aims to stay faithful to this premise and in doing so, prepare the way for a primal (or perhaps artistic) collective expression. The looped video, as often found in art galleries, disrupts preconceived notions of formal narrative structure and thus keeps the essential 'movement' of a cinematic image as brought to light in Lyotard's acinema [13]. Through it, we can simplify and free 'the image' into a seemingly ephemeral flow and loosen the grip of the ubiquitous media players found across the Internet.

An important design decision was to allow video uploads exclusively via the in-app camera. This has been an attempt to encourage a pure channel between camera (mind-body) and screen (brain) without possibility of digital manipulation or archival uploads. It is interesting to note that some participants filmed different screens in order to achieve an effect. While some used television content as a 'found object', others reported making clips on another camera in order to prepare a moving image to film. This 'meta-filming' has since opened up discussions on fidelity and time-space manipulation within the system. In addition to the television becoming a production resource or 'actor-at-hand', it also reinforces that, in true rhizomatic fashion, the creative impulse will always spark new directions from technological limitations and rule-based constraints. This year's Turner Prize shortlist consisting primarily of 'video collagists' echoes this observation and perhaps reflects an increasing trend towards media recycling.

Rather than pressing a button, or tapping the screen, the user must tilt the phone in order to begin recording. This decision was made in order to reinforce the camera-body extension and make the recording act covertly gestural. The relinquishing of traditional control was not well received by all participants partly due to the delay when tilting. This is a key consideration for the next iteration though it has sparked discussions on camera control, accidental narrative, and the possibility of bespoke behaviors for connected cameras.

EXAMPLES

By setting in motion a self-channeling, mobile-connected media environment we open up a space to find new interpretations of the cinematic experience. While the prototype, as discussed in the initial screenings, focused on the audience situated in cinemas, this iteration focuses its attention on the remote audience. The following two analyses were conducted through conversations with individual users:

While the system was designed to encourage a certain 'truth through camera' by not supplying any manipulation functions for the footage, the film *Airports* (see Figure 1) revealed that cinematic illusion is entirely possible without direction. The first shot reveals a cockpit of an aeroplane, then an aeroplane in the sky, followed by two airport walkways from the same perspective and a silhouette of people in the airport lounge. A typical intellectual montage, as defined by Eisenstein [14], would use the techniques accidentally displayed here. An interior close-up followed by an exterior pan of the vehicle gives the audience a sense of space within the narrative. The establishing shots of walkways and lounges would serve to contrast the movement of flying. The cockpit itself is actually a book being held up and a voice making aeroplane sounds. It is a common trait of *Lifemirror* clips to use 'found material' because the themes are, in reality, sometimes remote next to the recording act. The fact that there is no real cockpit and the plane itself is actually a video of a plane reminds us of the traditional studio tricks from Hollywood and television that give us the illusion of narrative space. Comments like 'It works' and 'I feel like I'm there' had no immediate noticing of the fact that the cockpit was in fact an image from a book. The serendipitous nature of this event perhaps reveals the reality of cinema as a function of the mind and might also demonstrate that we are, at least collectively, cine-literate. The screen-filmed moment of flying is then accompanied by real spaces in airports. This recalls *Paisa* [15], Rossellini's neorealist classic, which combined both staged and documentary footage and became a focal point of Deleuze's argument for post WW2 cinematic displacement of time and space [16].
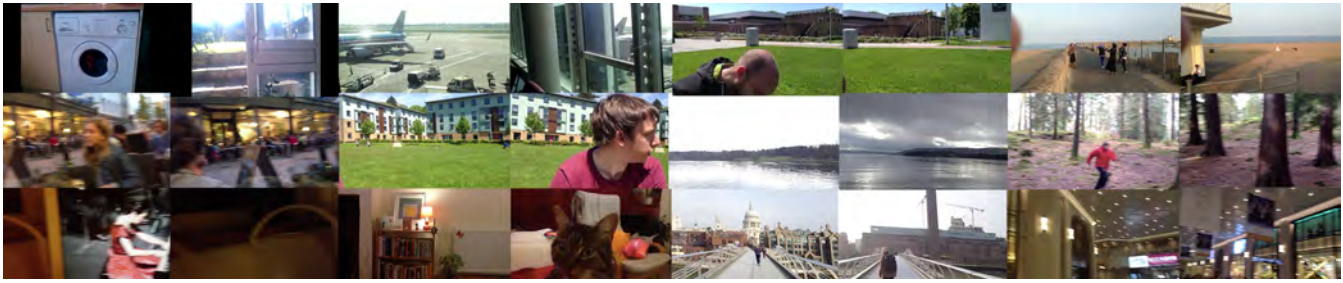
Figure 2: *Look Left* **(2014) The above image uses two stills from the beginning and end of each 1 second clip.**

The first six clips uploaded to *Look Left* (see Figure 2) were filmed with the prototype in one day [17]. The following seven clips were filmed using the second iteration and filmed over six months by one user. While the clips do not retain the inherent narrative structure of 'the day' they seem to morph into something else. A comment made by a user highlighted a larger narrative of time that might be revealed, 'If this film continued, would we see the world change around us by season?' This compression of time in film normally arrives through conscious editing techniques (The market scene in *Notting Hill* comes to mind) [18]. However this process demonstrates that alternative channeling through mobile 'streams' may also have the potential to create similar cinematic expressions.

CONCLUSION

In the broader sense of seeing ourselves in new ways, the system may provide an audiovisual boundary object for communities and organisations. An educational tool might enable remotely connected groups and individuals to discuss their own perspectives in shared space and time. A project on trees might be set up between schools in Japan and England. How would this broadening perspective assist our future connected generations? Would they be able to learn from, and teach, each other in new ways? In the wider context of collective learning, could crowdsourced film be able to act as a memory tool for organisations? And what effect might a collective reflection have on individual memory and sense of identity?

As a new awareness, or becoming of a post-lingual community, this inquiry argues that crowdsourced (or networked) cinematics could have a profound impact on our understanding of self, cinema, and emergent visual discourse enabled by mobile technology. Relating *Lifemirror* images to Ranciere's 'pensive image', 'an image is not supposed to think. It contains unthought thought, a thought that cannot be attributed to the person who views it without linking it to a determinate object…it is to speak of a zone of indeterminacy between thought and non-thought, activity and passivity, but also between art and non-art' [19]. Even if a director-less, unedited, and perhaps 'unthought' cinema is not possible, we still might consider a new image-type to extend Deleuze's ontology: a sequence of clips which dislocate unity of crew, space and camera, where camera is now extension of self; a universal jump cut, organically intertwining our individual narratives and gestural images of thought with the whole. For this, I suggest the 'Network Image' as a term for crowdsourced filmic consciousness; a conceptual tool for considering the mechanics of collective reflection in user-generated video.

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