

## LIFEMIRROR

Oliver Case, HighWire DTC, School of Computing and Communications, Lancaster University, UK

E-mail: <o.case@lancaster.ac.uk>

### 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 the 1968 'Earthrise' image and the 1990 '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 issues about how we might treat our recorded image in a technologically evolved society.

In terms of collective self-reflection, it is my view, that back here on Earth, although 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 the form of never-ending and ever-changing film sequences. In this paper I will give a brief overview of the theories informing the system, explain how the current pro-

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

### Theory

My own 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 the development of the project began with Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic model of systems in *A Thousand Plateaus* [2]. This led to Deleuze's own reconceptualisation of film theory in his *Cinéma* 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 reconceptualisation 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 'Dasein' [5] and the study of Zen, in particular the nature of the flow and the ongoing Koan [6]. This inspired me to think 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? and 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 *Lifemirror* project was more a reaction to the conceptual evolution of film, and the provocations of filmmakers such as Harmony Korine, who claimed that cin-

ema 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, which 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. Stark's 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 the process of examining 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 allowed the author to represent parties not directly entwined with the narrative; often his own voice, or 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 in which 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, 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, which anticipates location and

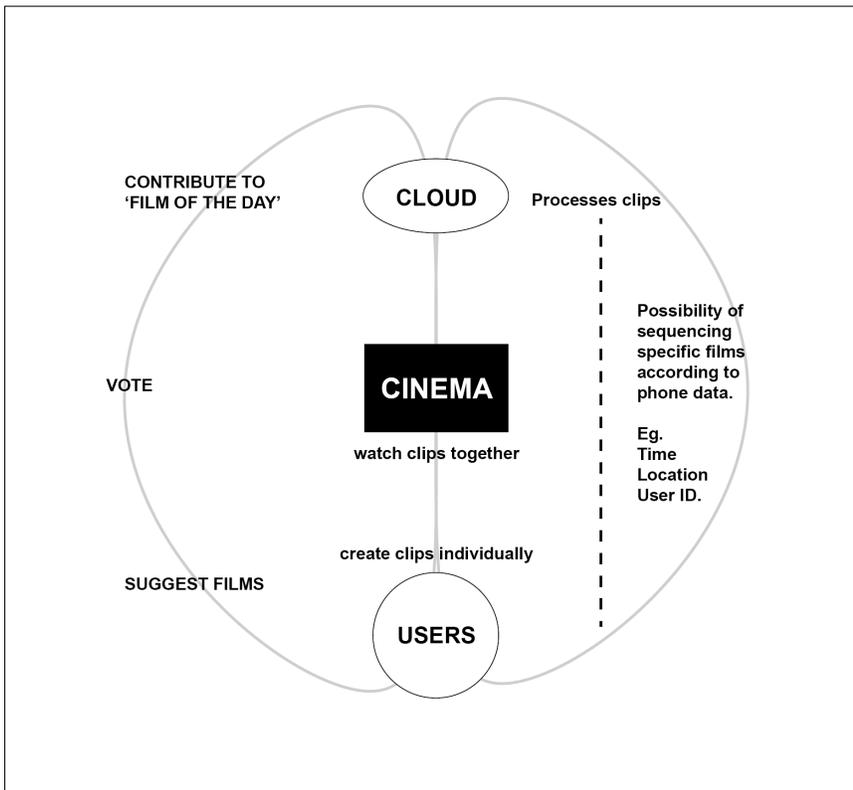


Fig. 1. The system is based on a cycle filtering clips according to relevant data from the phone, ie. user ID, location, time, **gyroscopic** (© Lifemirror)

audience-specific screenings that can be filtered further by textual data. We have tested this in two real cinema scenarios, and are in the process of building virtual cinemas in which 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 to interpret ideas. There was also a distinction between recognition of moments that would contribute to the cinema, and 'scene creation', in which users would set up a scene for filming. This may lead to discussions around the nature and nurture of the moving image, and how this distinction might affect a collectively realised narrative. 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 would-be participants were not able to use the app, but still came to the screenings as they were curious about what they might see. 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, yet 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. Both Deleuze's suggestion that cinema is the natural medium for philosophical discourse, and 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], offer useful frameworks for interpreting these clips. The manner in which they come together also brings to mind 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 offers 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



Fig. 2. *Green* (16<sup>th</sup> May, 2013) (© Lifemirror)

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 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 tealeaf 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 ... a 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.

The next film, *Philosophy*, begins with a pan revealing the message 'I'LL BE

Fig. 3. *Philosophy* (24<sup>th</sup> May, 2013) (© Lifemirror)



BACK', then a mandala-like diagram with a voice saying 'The philosophy of Carl Jung' ... a flame on a red background, though it isn't a flame, but 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?'

In this film the clips are sequenced in upload order, with the final clip 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 body, and awareness of the camera-in-hand, can be used to express 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 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



Fig. 4. *Look Left* (31<sup>st</sup> May, 2013) © Lifemirror

the collective filmmaking process, the real and virtual cinema spaces where co-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 would become a discussion space in which mutual and new understandings of narrative and form occur simultaneously.

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 consciousness could therefore replace more antiquated systems of appeal, competition and judgment that often imbue the process of environmental or societal change. Likewise, this schizoanalytic means of giving voice to communities could be seen as a mediation tool for group discussion, and as therapy for individuals. Being inclusive of environment and each other, on both the creative and receptive levels, makes crowdsourced cinema potentially useful to communities which cannot always be together in time and space.

The cinema, then, could act as a guide to co-evolution in a globalised society, and, through connection via mobile cameras, offer new ways to communicate – perhaps like a visual koan, reflecting back our harmonies and discords and asking us to consider them together. As a new perspective on ourselves, crowdsourced cinematics might offer a way forward; however, designing for such media requires a metaphysical lens both drawn from, and projecting, nature,

with the mobile phone acting as a channel or window into nature, rather than 'capturing' or 'shooting' it. In this way we could operate individually, yet sing and be sung to side-by-side, a chorus brought together in the cinema.

## References and Notes

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