
Article

Exploring the application of practice-based research on affective cinema to the teaching of creative cinematographic techniques within UK higher education

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Abstract

This article outlines an exploratory approach to the delivery of film practice education, as developed and tested with a second-year undergraduate module in cinematography. Students were provided with two existing creative sound pieces composed by a professional sound designer within the context of an AHRC-funded practice research project entitled Affective Cinema. These aspects of sound design inspired and informed the students' work, while allowing them to focus upon the module's key learning outcomes as related to camera and lighting skills. Above all, the approach allowed for aspects of the film theory synthesised through the preceding research – and pertinent to the nature and unique expressive potential of film – to be partially absorbed and learned by the students through practical experimentation, thus becoming an embodied, tacit practitioner knowledge. In this respect, I argue that such approaches help transcend the fraught divisions between film practice and film theory.

Keywords film practice; cinematography; co-creation; affect; defamiliarisation; expressive connotation; Metz; Deleuze; sound design; theory and practice

Introduction

In my experience studying and teaching on a variety of higher education film production courses in the UK, group projects are usually the norm when it comes to practical assignments. Students form production teams, covering all the key roles required for a professional film shoot, and, in this way, short films are made that are more or less independently produced by each group. In my experience, music and/or sound design are one of the key elements required for almost all such film projects. These sonic elements arguably belong, however, to a fundamentally different creative discipline, and their production requires a skill set that cannot always be expected to be covered by film students. As a result, these aspects of music or sound design are regularly outsourced, whether by engaging professional composers or student composers from other courses within a university, or by using pre-existing royalty-free music and sound. Proficiency with sound design and music are not usually requisite skills for most students, and they do not form a significant part of many higher education film courses within the UK. It would thus seem sensible not to directly assess the quality of these sound elements either, especially not as part of mid-course assignments without an expected production budget. Ultimately, the focus of such exercises tends to be that students apply, practise and demonstrate skills and creative faculties pertinent to film-making. However, music and sound design are also some of the most central modes of film – modes arguably linked to aesthetic or emotional impact just as much as (or perhaps even more than) cinematography. In fact, in my experience, cinematography and creative sound are often almost inseparable: they support and enhance each other's expressive power, or give rise to such expressive power in the first place, through their complex, often unforeseeable mutual resonance. Therefore, it can be argued that *without* music and/or sound design of a certain artistic quality and suitability for the project, it is difficult to bring out the most from the form and content of a film's visuals. In my experience, both as a student and a lecturer, however, it is frequently the case that students undervalue or neglect the sonic aspects of their films, or simply do not have the resources or skills to identify the most suitable and applicable music for their film – whether ready-made or yet to be composed.

My approach to the second-year undergraduate module in cinematography on which I taught was therefore driven by the considerations outlined above: how to allow students to focus on building and exercising their skills in cinematography, while also being able to explore and experiment with the inherent potential of film to forge fundamentally new connections between sound and image. Arising from this aspiration, a specific approach to practical film education emerged within the context of my insights as a professional film-maker and cinematographer, from the knowledge and understanding of film generated by my practice-based research, and from my ambition to set an inspiring creative limitation for students, which frequently serves within practice-based arts education as a tried-and-tested stimulant for creative practice. Rather than just a conceptual limitation, I sought a specific creative aspect that would contribute to, and ultimately form the basis of, the group projects, thus helping the students to produce strong, original work while exercising and applying skills pertinent to the learning outcomes of the module. My practice-based research in the project *Affective Cinema* provided a productive background to this approach, with specific relevance to teaching cinematography. The insights into cinematography and moving-image aesthetics generated by the research underpinned the theoretical side of the module, which, as I explain later, subsequently defined the approach to the main practical assignment. Prior outcomes of my research – specifically aspects of sound design composed in the context of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) research project exploring philosophical concerns and considerations related to affective cinema – were given to the students to serve as a creative limitation while contributing to their films as the soundtrack, lending aspects of co-creation to the process. Before detailing the pedagogic approach I adopted in more detail, I will first outline aspects of my underlying research with the *Affective Cinema* project, in order to establish the context for this teaching practice.

Affective Cinema research and its relevance to teaching cinematography

As part of my research on the Affective Cinema project, I produced a series of experimental film structures that function not as vehicles for narrative content, but rather aim to explore the unique expressive potential of film as a medium. As illuminated within my research, this expressive potential lies in the notion that film represents a threshold between the incessant and unpredictable movement of the real and the (human) stillness of language, memory and perception. Film mechanically and automatically captures an imprint of complex arrangements of light at a given time and place, and this arrangement then becomes stilled as film, assuming a semiotic permanence, and therefore articulating as an effective and innovative means of intersubjective communication. And yet, film's origin in the non-human real, and its ability to defamiliarise the ordinary perception of things, while modifying or enhancing the impression of both light and movement, makes the (photographic, reality-based) moving image possess a certain surplus of meaning; each piece of film, each shot, is thus a singularity that cannot fully submit to its semantic use within communication. Therefore, each sequence of shots – and the meaning it has the potential to generate, especially through connotation – is unique. Further, the way meaning is articulated is often surprising, and can only be arrived at heuristically in the edit, rather than being fully staged and pre-planned. The meaning generated by any given film is thus in its totality unique and singular: it can be compared and related to other similar visual or textual expressions, but it can never be reduced to them. This understanding of film can be related to Deleuze's (1986) understanding of *the singular* in relation to *affect*. Affect can perhaps best be understood and defined in opposition to emotion, which, according to Shaviro (2010) and Massumi (2002), is a conceptualised, habitual form of affect; emotion is the specific and qualified experience of a subject, confining or reducing affect to an intelligible (human) form, which nevertheless always has a certain affective surplus beyond meaning outside the boundaries of subjectivity (Shaviro, 2010: 4). Deleuze (1986: 98) states that:

... the affect is impersonal and is distinct from every individuated state of things: it is nonetheless *singular*, and can enter into singular combinations or conjunctions with other affects. The affect is indivisible and without parts; but the singular combinations that it forms with other affects form in turn an indivisible quality. (Emphasis in the original)

The singularity of shots and edited sequences also resonates with more prevalent considerations of film, however, such as those of Christian Metz. For Metz (1991: 79), the meaning of a shot is naturally expressive rather than signifying: there is a unity of the signifier and the signified, resulting in a meaning that is 'naturally derived from the signifier as a whole, without resorting to a code'. Expression, as compared to signification, is 'natural' rather than conventional, 'global and continuous' rather than divided into discrete units, and 'derived from beings and things' rather than from ideas. The edited sequence of such shots is a form of language for Metz; however, he clarifies that 'to "speak" a language is to use it, but to "speak" cinematographic language is to a certain extent to invent it' (Metz, 1991: 101). It is the film audience who are the group of *users* of the cinematographic language, which is partially invented, in each film anew, by the film-maker.

This understanding of film is valuable and relevant to teaching cinematography, whether in artistic/experimental or commercial/mainstream contexts. This is for the reason that the ability to play with the potential of film images, in order to generate expressive or affective cinematography, can be applied to the service of narrative, and contextualised as dramatic emotion. How an intended narrative or dramatic meaning is to be translated into cinematographic decisions is always a guessing game to an extent, as photographic images are not permanent habitual symbols from which exact meaning can be constructed. Furthermore, I would argue that it should be the cinematographer's ambition to express meaning in a new form, rather than merely to reiterate tried-and-tested clichés of cinema. For example, the familiar camera technique of a 'dolly-in' movement into a close-up shot could be used to signify a certain emotion

or internal life in the character, or a narrative revelation in a particular moment of the film, but, as a cinematographic technique, it has no fixed meaning. Therefore, it can result in surprising instances of 'expressive connotation' (Metz, 1991: 79), when entered into contact with other shots in a narrative sequence, dispelling any unambiguous or habitual meaning conventionally associated with this popular signifier of cinema, and instead forging a new connotative meaning. For Metz (1991: 79), in the language specific to the cinema, 'expressive connotation' emerges from 'expressive denotation', as opposed to the process of literature, where 'expressive connotation' stems from 'nonexpressive denotation'.

Such an approach to teaching film practice, focusing on the novel and unpredictable expression unique to film, can be contrasted with Barrett's (2018: 1) 'Template Model', which seeks to foster an understanding of moving images in the context of a film education that is 'in a way not dissimilar to how we understand natural language'. Barrett applies social semiotics in order to develop a simple and schematic model of symbolic, denotative meaning ascribed to different shot sizes and camera movements and angles, basing this visual vocabulary on the understanding that 'the camera's perspective mimics human perception, [and therefore] carries with it psychosocial implications for an audience' (Barrett, 2018: 4). Because of the association of human perception with the camera, for Barrett (2018: 11), 'the camera's perspective is always present and always meaningful'. While I would argue that Barrett is correct in positing that meaning is not expressed merely by the content of a shot but also by the camera's perspective itself (through aspects such as frame size, angle and movement), it would also seem the case that the content of any given photographic image cannot be reduced to mere denotation or symbolic representation. Instead, the singularity and specificity of every photographic (moving) image captured in reality complicate or disrupt any symbolic denotation of the camera's perspective. For this reason, the perspective of the camera and the photographic content of the frame cannot be thought of in separation. As a unified whole (of the camera perspective and photographic content), a shot can play a denotative function within the context of the visual sequence or the wider story. However, this function is ultimately relative: shots can be combined into many different sequences, each time 'inventing' new meaning unique to each particular sequence. Regardless, in my experience of various film production courses at UK universities for the past 15 years, the meaning model that Barrett (2018) proposes in the context of Australian film education (for example, considering a close-up shot as more intimate, or a high angle denoting increased power associated with the character sharing the camera's perspective) would already seem the habitual, default understanding of 'film language'. In this sense, a film education rooted in Deleuze's (1986) affect and Metz's (1991) expressive connotation is precisely an attempt to move away from, or to transcend, such prescriptive, codified understandings of film, and instead to explore (and expose) the creative potential of expressive connotation unique to the medium.

In this regard, sound design and music can contribute further to destabilising any sense of coherent denotation and thus – I argue – enhancing the creative potential of film. Creative sound, when combined with creative visuals, has the potential to open up new levels of affects and/or expressive connotation within the images with which it is placed in counterpoint, which would otherwise not be perceptible. Furthermore, such new audiovisual structures frequently form new wholes, new singularities – expanding the unpredictable potential of film for narrative expression and emotional impact. The precise manner in which moving image and sound ultimately connect and correspond is hard to predict, however, beyond a simplistic and basic range of emotions (happiness, sadness, fear and so on). Even in instances where a film requires a specific narrative or emotional impact, I argue that it can be a more sophisticated approach to film form to seek to step beyond relatively simplistic or basic expression of emotions. This is because the true potential of film – I argue – is expressive connotation, as Metz (1991) describes it, rather than simple denotation. One potential of expressive connotation achieved by combining sound and moving image in this manner corresponds with Shklovsky's (1997: 4) concept of defamiliarisation, which allows images and works of art to remove 'objects from the automatism of perception'. Similarly, Kracauer (1960: 71) speaks of the 'suggestive indeterminacy' of the expression of film, which – as my film-making experience suggests – can be uniquely achieved by forging unpredictable audiovisual connections. Such

newly formed audiovisual structures cannot be fully predicted or planned, however, and have instead to be tested, and sometimes even discovered, through the post-production process, precisely because they are emergent singularities, rather than merely channelling a habitual, predetermined code.

My research with the Affective Cinema project sought to theoretically define and establish issues surrounding the unique expressive potential of film, before making a thorough exploration of these through my own film-making practice. Combining visuals and creative sound was especially important to the practical outcomes of my research. To this end, I collaborated with four different music/sound composers, and many of the films resulting from the research ended up having two different sound versions composed for them. This was a valuable aspect of the research, as it allowed me to demonstrate how different sonic affects can give rise to different expressive wholes when combined with the same film, opening up new affects in the images and forging a different audiovisual work as a result. For a concrete example of this, see two versions of one of the films produced as part of the research, illustrating the difference that can be achieved by different soundtracks: <https://vimeo.com/330770176> and <https://vimeo.com/330732018>.

My collaboration with sound designer Rob Szeliga proved to be particularly productive. Szeliga had composed multiple versions of minimal soundtracks for many of the research films, creating a rich and fascinating repository of choices and possibilities for the project. While I could not use all of these versions in my final films, when designing the Cinematography module, I decided to implement some of the unused sound compositions. This, in turn, formed the basis of group practice assignments. In this respect, students were given the opportunity to experiment with the expressive potential of film, as originating from my practice research, while being provided with a useful creative limitation that simultaneously served as a strong grounding for their projects.

Teaching using creative limitations as a form of co-creation

The main assignment of the Cinematography module in question was a group project, focusing on visual, cinematographic aspects, but using one of two soundtrack options provided to the students in order to guide the practice. This allowed students to focus solely on the visual side of their films, disregarding audio production and post-production. At the same time, however, these ready-made sonic aspects provided a source of inspiration and mediation for their creative choices, and informed the structure and pace of the editing process. Therefore, rather than a co-creative approach focused either upon the shape of the curriculum or whereby staff directly assist students with their projects, our approach to module delivery was based upon independent work of student groups. This work was supported by the previous outcomes of my practice research, in this case specifically by the use of aspects of sound design generated as part of it. In my experience, the benefit of this sort of approach is the manner in which it channels student film productions towards experimentation with the inherent potential of cinematography, in order to complicate schematic understandings of narrative, drama and emotion, to instead forge affective and/or expressive-connotative audiovisual structures. Student projects were constituted by each group's independent creative teamwork, which was nevertheless grounded in the boundaries of the assignment informed by my research, as well as in the artistic sensibility of the composer. The understanding of co-creation is different in this context from the one presented by Bovill et al. (2015: 1), who primarily think of co-creation as a collaboration between staff and students with the intention to 'create components of curricula and/or pedagogical approaches'. When considering co-creation specifically in relation to film practice education, Chambers (2019) talks about the need to acknowledge the contribution of instructors and lecturers to student work. He states that:

... student film productions represent a complex, multimodal tapestry of decisions, some of which have indeed been made by 'the students themselves', alongside decisions made collaboratively or dialectically, and still further decisions made either explicitly or implicitly by supervising or senior adults in the process. (Chambers, 2019: 29)

This too differs from my use and application of co-creation within the Cinematography module: apart from feedback given during rough-cut viewings both by myself and by the class as a whole in order to encourage reflective practice, my approach did not rely on the direct participation or contribution of teaching staff. Rather, by providing students with professionally made sound pieces emerging from the Affective Cinema project, a creative forum was inaugurated around underlying theoretical concerns linked to affect and expressive connotation, which served to channel and stimulate student work in a particular direction, while leaving them with sufficient agency and autonomy to be fully in control of their projects. Such an approach can be considered constructivist, in the sense that ‘meaning is not imposed or transmitted by direct instruction, but is created by the student’s *learning activities*’ (Biggs, 1999: 60, emphasis in the original), with scope simultaneously for students to make and learn from mistakes through the process of reflection. As Race (2015: 9) points out, ‘learning through one’s mistakes is one of the most natural and productive ways to learn almost anything’. While I would initiate reflection and provide feedback at key points, the students themselves had to deal with the consequences of their independent decisions.

The provision of the ready-made sound pieces from the Affective Cinema project also established a sense of *creative limitation*. *The Five Obstructions* (Lars von Trier and Jørgen Leth, 2003) is a feature-length documentary/experimental film exploring the notion of a creative limitation, and it provides a useful parallel here, particularly since the film itself is a product of a form of co-creation (rather than collaboration) between two film-makers. In the film, Lars von Trier asks Jørgen Leth to remake the latter’s short film *The Perfect Human* (1968) five times based on a set of creative limitations that Von Trier imposes each step of the way. The overarching film is then structured chronologically on the basis of these remakes, intertwined with a series of reflective discussions between the two film-makers upon viewing each of Leth’s completed tasks, which subsequently lead to the imposition of a new creative limitation, initiating a further remake of Leth’s original short. *The Five Obstructions* builds upon Von Trier’s interest in the creative potential of limitations, which is similarly evident in the Dogme 95 manifesto (which asked participating film-makers to agree to a set of narrative and aesthetic rules and limitations) and the film *Dogville* (Lars von Trier, 2003), an entirely studio-based film devoid of any realistic sets, where the (indoor and outdoor) environments of the narrative are represented as a kind of blueprint of white lines on the floor.

In film education, there is a notable parallel to such creative limitations in the form of the Cinéma Cent Ans De Jeunesse (CCAJ) film education project, which, although focused on working with young children often ‘engaging with cine-literacy and filmmaking activities for the first time’ (Chambers, 2020: 156), is comparable in many respects to the approach I adopted with undergraduate students. As Chambers (2020: 139) explains, CCAJ represents an example of ‘experimental pedagogy’; as part of CCAJ, the pedagogic team ‘formulate the project’s annual theme, alongside a corresponding set of exercises (entitled “Rules of the Game”) to be followed by all participants, and a body of clips assembled from world cinema to serve as illustration and embodiment of the theme’. The aim of CCAJ is to use creative limitations in order to facilitate an engagement ‘with some of the most fundamental questions of cinematic aesthetics’ (Chambers, 2020: 139). Chambers (2020: 156) ultimately describes the experimental pedagogy of CCAJ as having an ‘open-ended approach’, with ‘resistance to repetition and systematization’, with a ‘growing sense of the impractical and the impossible ... becoming a process of relentless innovation forced to explore increasingly obscure, secondary parameters of cinema’. Although the approach I adopted in delivering the Cinematography module has the potential to evolve into a more experimental pedagogy, especially within the context of postgraduate university education, the example of it presently explored is far from what Chambers (2020) describes. On the one hand, the approach initiates or inspires an experimental exploration of more advanced, contingent and heuristic approaches to film-making, seeking to move beyond schematic or simplistic understandings of ‘film language’. On the other hand, when combined with learning outcomes rooted in practical/technical skills of the Cinematography module, the approach represents a rather modest modification of the original module aims. This modification nevertheless proved to be quite effective in providing a useful creative

context for exercising and applying these practical skills – setting a productive creative limitation through the specification of the sound design pieces, while allowing for all production efforts to be channelled towards the visual aspect of the film.

The outcomes of the Cinematography module within an underlying research context

As informed by my research on the Affective Cinema project, I sought to test my pedagogical approach through the delivery of an established undergraduate module on cinematography, the intended learning outcomes of which included the critical and creative application of a holistic sense of visual style, alongside professional collaborative skills and technical skills related to camera and lighting equipment. Technical skills included the understanding and application of the principles of composition, colour and camera movement, and the various creative considerations pertaining to camera optics, such as exposure, focal length and depth of field. The module assumed the same teaching structure as implemented across the programme, following a series of weekly one-hour lectures and three two-hour workshops with smaller groups of students. I gave the lectures and ran one of the weekly workshops, while the other two workshops were delivered by a teaching assistant. Lectures explored technical knowledge and understanding, and a portion of the workshops was dedicated to reflecting on the application of the related skills based on the footage and rough-cuts of the student projects. While the module sought to shape and exercise skills applicable to mainstream/commercial film-making, there was no conflict between covering more traditional approaches to practice and implementing an approach informed by my work on the Affective Cinema project. Rather, I found these two sides of the module to be complementary and wholly compatible: while practical skills in cinematography are essential for the ability to control an abstract visual style, prioritising visual experimentation over coherent communication ultimately provides a good opportunity to exercise those skills. While defamiliarisation and the basic semiotic principles at the heart of film's audiovisual expression as a medium had been explained in the lectures, these concepts were then explored by the students through creative process, rather than being engaged with on an intellectual level.

In a cohort of more than sixty students, 12 films were made in production teams of five or six students, each including the roles of director, producer, cinematographer and editor. The workshops assisted with the development of each group's projects, and I therefore had only a limited influence upon the conception of the films developed in the two workshops run by the teaching assistant (although I personally delivered rough-cut reflective workshops with all the teams in the second part of the term, which were critical to shaping the projects in relation to the sound pieces). While the teaching assistant clearly understood the aim and function of providing students with the sound pieces as a creative limitation, it was arguably the introduction of this creative limitation that channelled the work of the students in a particular direction. This was especially the case because being provided with the sound pieces as source of inspiration at the outset of the creative process – at the moment when the production teams assembled to face together the daunting prospect of developing a film project from scratch – seemed helpful and natural within the context of the module, and therefore an easy instruction to follow. This sense of creative limitation gave the teams a unifying direction at the starting point of their projects, while the abstract sound design provided made this starting point sufficiently diffused and open. Initially, most of the groups' film ideas had a clear narrative meaning and purpose. However, as all the production teams embraced the option of telling their story *visually* (with no dialogue) – using their chosen soundtrack as the dominant or only sonic element in their films – this made it harder for their stories to be told unambiguously, thus allowing for increasing ambiguity and loosening coherent communication in post-production. The two films on which I focus here provide illuminating examples of this trajectory, although they were by no means the only projects that followed this path. The two films are *An Invincible Summer* (Lindsay Mead and Joe Scott, 2019; <https://vimeo.com/582461898/98643aff4c>) and *Seen in Passing* (Grace Bingham, 2019; <https://vimeo.com/582469933/43d45ff2f0>).

While demonstrating both creative and technical competence, these two films represent well the aesthetic range achieved throughout the module in response to the two distinct sound design pieces. *An Invincible Summer* is based upon the idea of a psychedelic trip experienced by its protagonist, as suggested in the film's opening by a top-angle shot of a glass mug filled with a 'magic mushroom brew'. This shot then fades to a shot of the protagonist lighting up what seems to be a marijuana joint. The rest of the film includes various shots of the protagonist smoking, and drinking his 'magic mushroom brew', albeit appearing in a purely abstract visual context forged by creative formal play, especially by lighting techniques (colour gels, back lighting and using light from a projector). These shots are intercut with various atmospheric visuals, including footage of night-time funfair rides and of nature, such as wide shots of forest trees and a macro close-up tracking shot moving through grass on the ground. There is also a top-angle wide view of a forest from a drone, which, shot with a wide-angle lens, transforms the trees into a creative visual composition, arguably emancipated from mere representation of the subject (Figure 1). In any case, it would not seem possible to fully describe many of the shots in the film, as the form and content are fused together, creating new abstract wholes. As a result, I would argue that these are not merely shots of this or that, or shots denoting intimacy or power based on their angle or framing, as Barrett (2018) discusses in relation to the template model. The affective, connotative expressiveness of the shots arguably cannot be reduced to such meaning; instead, through the creative, experimental combining of shot sizes/angles and playful camera movements, the visuals transcend denotation.

Seen in Passing is about the contingent circumstances of a romantic date. The film cuts between four different people, who act in separation, but whose trajectories coincide, often for no apparent reason. We see a noticeably nervous man sitting at the bar in a pub, who, as it transpires, is waiting for his date to arrive. A waitress has just finished her shift and leaves. A busker plays guitar and sings outside on the street; we do not hear him play or sing, nevertheless, as the synchronous sound is entirely replaced by

Figure 1. Various shots from *An Invincible Summer* (Lindsay Mead and Joe Scott, 2019): 'magic mushroom brew'; protagonist lighting a cigarette; night-time funfair rides; drone shot of a forest

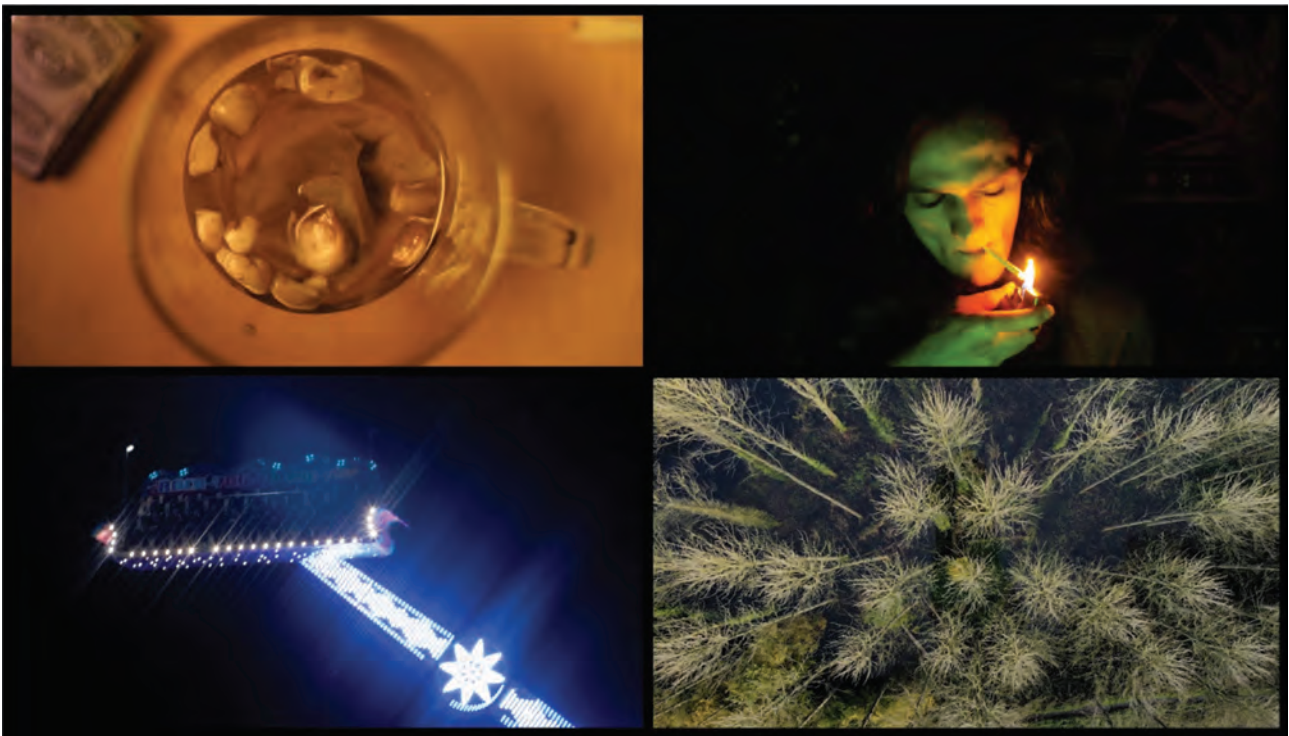


Figure 2. Various shots from *Seen in Passing* (Grace Bingham, 2019): man waits at the bar; waitress leaves; busker plays guitar; woman applying lipstick



Szeliga's abstract soundtrack, these images are imbued with a strong sense of defamiliarisation. Finally, another woman, initially seen applying lipstick in a close-up shot, eventually arrives at the pub to join the man at the bar, thus revealing that she is the man's date (Figure 2). The couple are the only people who are relevant to the causality of the narrative meaning. However, the film cuts between their actions (which lead to them coming together) and the actions of the busker and the waitress – suggesting a sense of abstract, mysterious and defamiliarised connection between the four, arguably lending the film a strong sense of expressive connotation, supported both by the soundtrack and by the engaging visual aesthetic of the film. The visuals consist of tracking camera movement achieved using a stabiliser, and an effective use of atmospheric, location-specific lighting, compositional depth of space and low depth of field (image softness allowing for creative alterations of focus within a shot).

Although having the soundtrack ahead of time had shaped the students' thinking about the concept for both these films, they had largely been committed to narrative meaning at the pre-production stage. However, when editing their films, the influence of the minimal and emotionally ambiguous soundtracks became much more prevalent. I therefore felt it was important to view the raw footage and rough edits half-way through the production process, so that the students had the opportunity to reflect on their actual material (rather than their initial idea and/or concept) in relation to the soundtrack. This allowed students to loosen their bias for meaning and narrative, to open up a more direct heuristic oriented towards the audiovisual expressiveness of the piece. The groups subsequently had the opportunity to return to the production stage in order to obtain more material in relation to the actual nature of the developing audiovisual skeleton of the projects, rather than the previous conceptual skeleton defined within their ideas (ideas which are often wittingly or unwittingly influenced by other works absorbed through media and culture). As my Affective Cinema research had illustrated to me, by gently recalibrating the traditional sequence of pre-production, production and post-production in this way in order to involve aspects of

reshooting and response, it is possible to root film works in *visual actuality* rather than in the *imagination*, which can, in turn, lead to more original or unexpected results. The methodology that allows for this – through a gradual alternation between practice and reflection – is referred to by Trimingam (2002: 56) as the ‘hermeneutic-interpretative spiral’, a practice research approach ‘where progress is not linear but circular: a spiral which constantly returns us to our original point of entry but with renewed understanding’. Here, a certain hermeneutic oscillation is created between action and reflection, allowing for consideration of each stage of practice before commencing the next one. When applied to film production, this approach makes each new stage of practice more emancipated from the initial state in which no material existed, becoming instead rooted in the footage generated as part of the hermeneutic-spiral process.

Seen in Passing and *An Invincible Summer* were not the only projects that responded well to the creative opportunities afforded by this hermeneutic-spiral approach, wherein reshoots allowed for a more responsive approach. Nevertheless, many of the films remained firmly committed to the execution of their initial concepts throughout production. However, as these concepts themselves were visually driven and inspired by the soundtracks, in some instances the students’ commitment to a coherent communication of meaning was not reflected in their final films: the denotative meaning they had intended did not transpire through the visual sequence. In my view, this fact (unintentionally) enhanced rather than diminished the appeal of these films, as the visual ambiguity, amplified by the soundtracks, resulted in expressive connotation, releasing the films from the limitations of the intended meaning, which on occasions was a bit simplistic or stereotypical. In this respect, many of the films ended up in a comparable space to the two projects discussed here, which had nevertheless engaged in the experimental process with more awareness and a deliberate sense of creative discovery (and hence reached more decisive results).

The teams that, following the hermeneutic-spiral approach alternating practice and reflection, sought to root their projects more in visual actuality than in the imagination were also then able to reach a certain level of tacit practitioner understanding related to the semiotic concerns at the heart of my Affective Cinema research. While arguably present, this practitioner understanding was, however, perhaps a little too tacit in some cases. Since the conceptual concerns of my research were not the primary focus of the module, and were not extensively covered, even the students who fully engaged in the creative opportunities of the module – and whose practitioner approach was altered or enhanced by this process – developed only a limited awareness of the connections between their practice and (what were, for me at least) these key semiotic questions. A more experimental module could certainly be designed in which film semiotics could be more integrated, and linked to learning outcomes within film theory or theoretical concerns pertaining to practice-as-research. However, this was not the case with this decisively practical, core module. While certain aspects of embodied practitioner knowledge can be gleaned from the film outcomes, it is also true that many of the students ultimately framed their practice in rather conventional (or habitual) terms, ascribing symbolic value to colour, camera movement and montage, and remaining focused upon narrative when discussing their films.

Nevertheless, many of the students were aware of the defamiliarising effect of Szeliga’s soundtracks on their work, despite not framing it in those terms. For example, Lauren O’Connor, who was the editor of *Seen in Passing*, states that ‘the sound design was intrinsic to the evolution of the piece’. She goes on to explain:

As the editor, I found that the sound design was fundamental to the editing process. I began by listening to the audio a few times to get a feel for the mood/vibe of the piece and tried to imagine how to arrange the footage in a way which would complement the sound design and vice versa. The sound was especially useful when working out the pacing of the piece and immediately enhanced the footage, making the initial rough-cuts seem more cohesive from the very beginning. I found that, during the edit, the sound design constantly spurred new ideas about different ways to edit and arrange the footage, which kept the process interesting. In addition I found that I would hear different sounds come to the surface of the

same piece of audio when paired with different images, which showed me the power and adaptability of sound designs such as that which we were given.

It is worth noting that based on one of the reflective rough-cut feedback sessions – and thanks to the implementation of the hermeneutic-spiral model of alternating practice and reflection – the *Seen in Passing* team decided to change their soundtracks to the second option. This was because, at the rough-cut stage, their film seemed to lack sufficient expressive connotation or affective resonance with the sound design they had originally chosen. The group did not realise this on their own, and I suspect would not rationalise what I saw as a deficiency in these terms. Instead, the reflection upon their rough-cut was essential to this realisation, and the reflective process itself was embodied in practice, rather than rationalised. When the group showed their rough-cut, I suggested that they play it for a second time, but this time using the other, *darker* soundtrack. (As O'Connor aptly puts it, 'where one [soundtrack] was open, airy and seemingly romantic and optimistic, the other hinted at something more negative and even sinister'.) Without articulating it at the time, the students recognised the expressive value achieved by the 'sinister' soundtrack, as they now experienced their film enriched with a newly intriguing and highly engaging, ambiguous significance, as the defamiliarising force of the soundtrack unlocked new affects in the visuals. In response to this creative discovery, they re-edited the film in accordance with the mysterious atmosphere instilled by the new soundtrack – fragmenting its originally intended linear narrative. As O'Connor explains, changing the soundtrack 'immediately transformed the feel and nature of the piece'. She elaborates that:

... when we changed from one piece of audio to the other in the re-edit, it completely changed the implicit meanings of the film and the conclusions drawn by the audience. While we initially thought that the first sound design would be better for our film, as we felt that it had more progression and was more pleasing to the ear than the alternative, in the end the second proved to be far more interesting and enhancing to the footage which we had gathered.

Grace Bingham, the director of photography of the group, explains that 'the interpretive responses to the score allowed for the group and I to begin a focus on the emotional ambiguities evolving through our narrative ... this allowed for various shots to merge coherently together in an unpredictable manner'. As a result of this, the final film is 'entirely open to interpretation'.

For the *An Invincible Summer* team, the soundtrack also played an important role. As Lindsay Mead (director), Matthew Hill (director of photography), Brandon Caws (editor) and Joe Scott (camera operator) jointly affirm, 'the track had moments of tension and tranquillity which created the foundation for the protagonist to experience a range of emotions, complementing and illuminating every shot. It also was the blueprint for the pace of the edit.' The group felt that this provided an opportunity in 'creating visual continuity rather than chronological ... the fact that the track was the only structured tool we had, it was the cement that meant we could work automatically with the imagery and experiment'. Although the initial idea of a psychedelic trip was generated in response to Szeliga's soundtrack, the intention to make a film to accompany this soundtrack also inspired the formal play. This formal play became gradually more dominant in the group's process, especially as the team started to edit the film to the soundtrack, and then had the opportunity to obtain additional footage in response to the edit. In this way, the film as a structure became gradually less about a sequence of meaning, and more about the affective expression discovered through the montage of the various shots, creating a particular visual rhythm in unison with the soundtrack. This is especially apparent through the opening shaky, chaotic hand-held shot in the film, which is very abstract, does not represent coherently anything in particular, and does not contribute to the narrative meaning of a psychedelic trip in a denotative way. However, the abstract sense of contingency (in both form and content) gives the shot a clear aesthetic value, which is amplified through its correspondence with the soundtrack.

As the comments of the students illustrate, the sound design pieces composed by industry professional Rob Szeliga played an important function in both teams' creative pursuits – a process that was usefully enabled by alternating practice and reflection. This afforded the students an opportunity to expand upon their initial ideas for their projects in exploring the expressive potential unique to film as a medium. Despite not explicitly verbalising the theory underpinning the approach to the module, the students' comments can be seen to resonate with these theoretical concerns. Although this theoretical understanding was secondary within this practical module, the ambiguous and affective nature of Szeliga's soundtracks – as well as their strong potential for giving rise to defamiliarisation when combined with expressive visuals – helped to orient students towards the learning outcomes, which had been informed by the theory, and yet materialised as practitioner understanding (especially when supported or teased out by the process of reflection). Not all students were able to demonstrate such practitioner understanding. This was perhaps a problem stemming from group work adhering to production hierarchies, which was the standard expectation within the programme as a whole. Although the students worked in relatively small production teams, many of which essentially worked as creative equals, some students were inevitably closer to, and more in control of, the creative process than others – benefiting from the direct experience of seeing the initial vision for the meaning of their film being challenged by Szeliga's soundtracks in the edit. In some teams, this problem was accentuated by power struggles for creative control, where one member was determined to force through their vision, not only at the expense of others' input, but also at that of the experimental play enabled by the exercise. However, even in such cases, the pivotal role that Szeliga's soundtracks played within both the conception and the post-production stages led to a consistent level of emotional ambiguity and/or expressive connotation in these films, making it likely that the future practice of many of these students will be affected in some way by this experience.

Conclusion

After the module was concluded for the term, some of the student films continued to have a life of their own. I was informed by students on at least two occasions about their intention to submit these projects to festivals – something that Rob Szeliga had happily agreed to. On the whole, the visual outcomes of the module were a good match for the considered artistic value of Szeliga's sound pieces. While the films can potentially be useful to the students' future careers, they are also at a standard with which Szeliga was happy to be associated as an industry professional. In this sense, the inclusion of the soundtrack arguably presents a mutual benefit for both the students and the composer, while setting a high standard for the students to aspire to, and ultimately fulfil.

The approach to undergraduate module delivery informed by the Affective Cinema research, as discussed here, is particularly applicable – I would argue – to practice-based film education. It relied on a collaboration with an industry professional who provided a portion of the practice through the choice of two minimal sound design pieces of a distinct affective value. The focus on sound as the pre-existing project base was especially useful for this module, as it gave students the chance to focus on building skills and insights related to the visual aspect of their film practice, without compromising in any way the quality of the sonic element. On the contrary, the mature aesthetic quality of the audio seemed to provide a useful stylistic benchmark for the students, motivating them to aspire towards high-quality results. Furthermore, the affective, ambiguous nature of both pieces channelled the student practice in a particular direction, stimulating for some participants tacit practitioner understandings of the theoretical concerns underpinning the module, especially the principles of Shklovsky's (1997) defamiliarisation of ordinary objects of perception, Metz's (1991) expressive connotation as the non-codified language of film, and Deleuze's (1986) singular and indeterminate affects. Not all students would have reached such a productive level of practitioner engagement through the module. Comparably to Chambers's (2020: 155) experience with CCAJ, it was the attentive and passionate engagement of a minority of students on the module that most clearly demonstrated the intended learning process. However, the vast majority

of students were involved in making projects that seemed to clearly benefit from the sound pieces as both their initial inspiration and their eventual defamiliarising force. Therefore, most of the students were ultimately exposed to a creative process that resulted in film structures with a strong affinity to Affective Cinema.

Winston (2011: 195) states somewhat provocatively that ‘when Anglo-Saxon practitioners within the film industry come up with something recognisably theoretical, it is likely to be nonsense’. While I agree with Winston (2011) that theory originating in the field of film studies is in many cases more valuable to film practice than production theory emerging from practitioner experience alone, I would go much further in assessing the ultimate utility of theory for practice. Far from seeing a separation between theory and practice (as Winston (2011) suggests is often the case in film education), I argue for a direct integration (or even assimilation) of theory *into* practice, so that theory informs the very foundations of practical tasks, and, further, so that learning outcomes represent an application of the theoretical concerns as a creative and technical skill in film-making, whether or not any theoretical learning has been rationalised or accounted for. For this, the implementation of the hermeneutic-spiral approach discussed above of alternating practice and reflection would seem to be integral, as it allows students to gradually remove themselves from their biases and preoccupations, which are frequently rooted in a simplistic understanding of meaning, and how this can or should be communicated through the medium of film. Instead, such an approach allows students to build a new or enhanced understanding, as they gradually explore the moving image heuristically as practitioners. Despite not readily adopting the language of the underlying theory, in my experience this leads to situations in which student practice nonetheless demonstrates its absorption and tacit understanding, at least by some. This, it would seem, is the kind of understanding closely related to the possession of a *skill*, which readily crosses the border between technical inventiveness and creative agility, and which is applicable to artistic/experimental and mainstream industry-based practice alike.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Consent for publication statement

The author declares that participants’ informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflict of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently blind the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

Filmography

Dogville (DK 2003, Lars von Trier)

The Five Obstructions (DK 2003, Lars von Trier and Jørgen Leth)

An Invincible Summer (GB 2019, Lindsay Mead and Joe Scott)

The Perfect Human (DK 1968, Jørgen Leth)

Seen in Passing (GB 2019, Grace Bingham)

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