

Central St Martins Conference: 21st century photography: art, philosophy, techniques

Look Up- A Screening and Analysis of my Practice Research into the Photographic Approach to Filmmaking

As an artist, I do not consider myself a philosopher or a purveyor of truth, but I often use film and photography to make sense of the world and to find my own truth.

When my mother died a few years ago, I was in the final year of my practice research MA in art, media and design. The following film is an attempt at making sense of the world and how I felt within it, during that period of bereavement. I would like to show you the film and then discuss the methodologies and philosophies within the work.

PLAY LOOK UP (duration 5 mins)

In 2010, during an interview about the making of his film *Il Quattro Volte*, Michaelangelo Frammartino talked about his belief that the movie camera is more than simply a tool for representing reality. He believes it has the ability to perceive and capture the invisible bond between the human world and the natural world.

Look up started as an investigation into representing how it feels to be in nature, both in a spiritual and physical sense, through using moving image. This was practice research or as Thomas E. Wartenburg would suggest, a type of avant-garde filmmaking that is a real film experiment in thought and aesthetics. I had no script, no narrative and no knowledge of an end product – a completely new way of working for me, having come from a background of television documentary and narrative filmmaking. On reflection, I was simply swapping Deleuze’s **‘movement-image’** for the **‘time-image’**, creating what Erik Knudsen would define as a transcendental or anti narrative- a narrative more concerned with states of being as opposed to action and plot.

My methodologies were influenced by my decision to shoot on a full frame DSLR, one of the current technological trends amongst filmmakers. I was used to shooting on a video camera, but I chose a stills camera to give me greater control of the depth of field, high quality images and a combination of interchangeable lenses and a mirror system that produced a more cinematic, film aesthetic. For a lone filmmaker without a crew, working independently as photographers generally do, this lightweight equipment suited my needs.

My approach evolved into being less that of a narrative, linear filmmaker and more of a conceptual artist, preoccupied with the art of 'looking' and perfecting the image, through re-shooting, refining and reflecting. Letting go of the embedded rules and cinematic grammar I had learnt over the years was difficult and there was always the fear that I would produce one of those art films that no one understood, idly playing on a plinth in the corner!

However, experimental film became a large part of my research and filmmakers Margaret Tait and John Smith proved to be very influential through their beliefs that if you look hard enough, at the detail, beauty and meaning can be found on your doorstep, everyday. I was also influenced by various writers on the overlooked beauty of Edgelands, and so chose to record all my sound and imagery from my cycle routes in and around the city.

I knew I was keen to create an alternative to the classical and picturesque representation of landscape, a tradition that asks the viewer to look *at*, stand back from and remain separate from. I wanted to create an immersive piece, that challenged the viewer and drew them into the landscape world, through the illusion that moving image creates of 'being there'. I wanted the audience to experience what I was feeling, whilst being in nature, making these images with my camera, to re-create what Merleau Ponty refers to as **'being in the world'**.

Perhaps I had already taken to being in the world in a different way, because my mother had been very ill for six months, and I was inhabiting that twilight world - a space between past and future, where grief waits like a shadow. Then, not long after I'd started filming, she passed away and from this moment my engagement with my environment changed and became increasingly influenced by my grief process.

I found spiritual comfort in nature around me, and the filming process became a cathartic documentation of this strange, new engagement with the world. My relationship with time slowed down, my gaze lingered longer, paying attention to the detail of life around me. My personal narrative and notion of time had been ruptured – and like a freeze-frame or a still occurring in a film, my attention was drawn to this rupture, to a heightened sense of the present, where all previous narratives had the appearance of mere illusion.

I was experiencing a different type of reality and embodiment within the everyday. I was caught between several temporalities; memories of the past, the nonsensical, questioning of the present and a feeling of uncertainty about the future – none of which represented my usual relationship with time or reality. The only evidence that anything was at all real to my state of mind, lay in the movement that was still happening around me in nature, such as the sunlight patterning the water or the wind shaking the leaves. Despite death, to quote Barthes, **'Indifferent Nature'** still continued.

To show time passing literally before the lens and to give a sense of being there, I used a long lens and filmed in close up, extricating all other signifiers or distractions to the movement within the image. I kept the camera static, on a tripod, so again not to distract or make the viewer aware of the camera's eye, apparatus or viewpoint. With these techniques I wanted to create a feeling of being within nature, amongst the elements and in turn attempt to create a mesmeric, transcendental experience for the viewer.

I became intrigued by the notion of chance in terms of what I recorded, by allowing the camera to record long takes in close up, capturing whatever passed across the lens. I discovered filmmaker Chris Welsby employed a similar technique with his experimental film *Windvane* in 1972, by attaching cameras to windvanes and recording what the lens saw as the wind blew it around, so the weather dictated what images were produced.

Similarly the passive camera technique I used with *Look Up* produced some fortuitous imagery for my film, happening to capture the beauty of a falling leaf as it twirls to the ground, or the passing of clouds across the sun. Perhaps my willingness to let nature help make the film, was symbolic of me accepting fate, or death, and the fact that we have no control over the part it has to play in our lives? Furthermore, this notion of a bond between the human and physical, runs through the film, hinting at animism, in particular between the robin and the bereaved.

When moving between past memories and the present we are disconnected and yet deeply connected with the world, inhabiting a strange tension between the near and far – a feeling I represented through the camera, shooting close ups using a long lens, which created an abstract *space* taking the audience into a state of reverie appropriate for listening to poetry.

So why poetry? I had never used poetry as a narrative device in film, but here it was most appropriate, given that grief itself is somewhat indefinable, non-linear and liminal. With grief being such an individual experience, I wanted to create a film that reflected this non-prescriptive state of being and so by using associative imagery and poetry which is in itself associative, I could hint at or suggest feelings and ideas to the viewer that were not set. The idea to use poetry however, came at the editing stage when I looked back at my diary and noticed that I had tried to make sense of my mother's slow death and loss through writing poetry. In their raw and original form these poems were too sentimental and personal to literally re-present, but after several days of drafting and critical honing down, all sentences that were purely sentimental and lacked meaning, were discarded, to leave only the essence of the experience of grief. I was also keen avoid any specific personal language or references, for I wanted to create a prosthetic collective memory, making the film relatable to as many people as possible.

The personal to the public was a process I went through in the act of making - this was a performance of my grief, acted out several times through the layers of the film making process; filming, editing, writing, voicing and screening – no wonder it was cathartic! I had not been prepared for the emotional impact it would have on my family, when it was first screened, because I had become habituated to it as well as distanced through my objective and critical stance as a maker.

When I look at the film within a photographic context, as a filmmaker I see a series of moving or durational photographs that share an aesthetic and theme but bear little relation to each other in a conventional linear film narrative sense. The final edit contains none of the traditional building blocks of editing, such as different shot sizes from different angles, around clear, specific locations. Instead, this is a series of images with gaps, like moments or snapshots, which could either be interpreted as memories or moments of reflection, perhaps much like photographs?

However, what does bring them together as a narrative is the synthesis of words, in the form of poetry, and image. The narrative voice holds and guides us across the various temporalities in the film, oscillating between memory, present grief and future hope, whilst the moving images lull us into a sense of reverie. This reverie is broken and temporality is suddenly disclosed when the black screen interrupts the flow of images, and the narrative voice brings us into the present– the harsh reality that death has passed and isolation and loneliness is all that remains. We are asked to imagine the flowers blooming in the garden, a projected memory or future hope and the illusion of cinema is made evident. I would like to suggest that *Look Up* uses the symbiotic relationship of two language systems, poetry and image, to produce an emotional as well as intellectual meaning that would not exist if one did not have the other.

Perhaps the relationship between philosophy and film could be looked at in this same vein? As Havi Cavell has suggested, film can shed new light and different readings on philosophy through its ability to synthesise both the sensual and the intellectual, through its use of sound, image and word, all of which can work together to produce insight into the human condition. This synthesis can provide a multiplicity of meanings that can aid our understanding of concepts, ways of looking and relating to the world and each other.

ENDS

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