Affective Space: A Conceptual and Practical Approach to Cinematography

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Abstract:

This article seeks to provide a theoretical justification and context to the understanding of cinematography as affective space, both in the aesthetic effects in the film image and in how this understanding can inform a specific approach to cinematography in experimental camera practice, with a potential application to larger film productions. Affective space, as this article argues, depends on a film's aesthetic impulse against the seamless impression of reality; the notion of affective space rests on the assertion that the aspects of the filmed reality and the aspects of the camera (such as framing or depth of field) merge into a single two-dimensional surface in the moment of capture, and that these two sides are inseparable on the level of the image, forming a new aesthetic reality, which has the potential to transform and partially abstract a sense of representation of ordinary space. The notion of affective space synthesises various sources in film theory and ontology, but then applies these concepts through film practice, leading to the development of new cinematographic techniques. Affective space represents an

understanding of film developed through a wider AHRC-funded[1] practice research entitled Affective Cinema, and relates to Deleuzian affect theory and Marks's haptic visuality. This article explains the conceptual field surrounding affective space, and then presents a set of experimental methods and insights resulting from the practical application of the theory. In this way, the underlying research transcends the division and distinction between theory and practice.[2]

Keywords:

Affect, cinematography, Deleuze, practice-as-research, experimental, film style.

Introduction

The tradition in both the theory and practice of cinematography, as recently discussed by Cowan (2019), for example, is to think of form and content in separation. At the intersection of practice and theory, form represents the cinematographic techniques and technology, which can result in particular formal effects. For example, a set combination of iris opening in the camera lens and the size of the camera sensor generates specific depth of field (the level of softness or sharpness of the image in front of or behind the point of focus), which can lead to the formal effect of style and aesthetic impression in the image. Content could then refer to the story and meaning of the film, but in the image itself, it is primarily linked to the photographic representation of recognisable reality and space, which is a precondition for the secondary representation of story and meaning to take place. To put it simply, the film contains a representation of something or someone, and usually of somewhere too. This represented reality, which carries the meaning and context of the diegesis, has been traditionally the focus of cinematography. For example, Van Kets (2018), in recognising "the cinematic space as a narrative construct for

1. The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) is a research-funding body in the United Kingdom.
2. Link to film examples from the original practice-as-research cited in the article: https://vimeo.com/showcase/9147827 (password: space)

the film experience" (p. 76), states that "the visual narrative construct of a shot – cinematic space and its viewpoint – that is no longer related to the physical camera but to the spectator's perception of the images projected, is the core of cinematography" (p. 78). The notion of affective space, as elaborated on throughout this article, moves away from this primacy of diegetic representation, seeing instead a conceptual and creative value in thinking of the cinematographic image (shot) as singular and homogenous, fundamentally linked to the moment of photographic conception, and thus eluding the semiotic separation between form and content.

The approach to the moving image as affective space informed experimental film practice – including cinematographic methods and techniques, as well as technological choices – that aimed to utilise the visual homogeneity and unity, in order to move away from the coherent visual and narrative representation of the image, guided, instead, by its philosophical conception. Furthermore, as a practitioner, academic, and researcher, I was curious about what I perceive as the unique expressive potential of film, which can be observed in expressive cinematography of works, especially from the tradition or art cinema, where realism and seamless photographic verisimilitude are replaced by various degrees of visual abstraction. The aim of this article is therefore to establish and explore this sense of cinematographic abstraction through a conceptual synthesis rooted in film theory and philosophy, but also to offer specific cinematographic techniques developed and tested through practical experimentation, which has been, in turn, informed by the preceding theoretical understanding. As part of the underlying practice-as-research, I explored these cinematographic techniques within individual creative practice that eschewed a wider crew in the pursuit of a nimble and highly responsive experimental process, which was not informed by industrial procedures; although this process can be incorporated into existing, large production procedures,

considering this in any detail would be beyond the scope of this article.[3] As such, the key collaborators in the filmmaking process were performers, with camera assistants/2nd camera operators occasionally involved where more complex set-ups required it; in post-production, I collaborated only with music composers and sound designers[4], and occasionally also with a colourist – performing all other editing tasks myself. Therefore, the filmmaking process focused on exploring the expressive potential of film by experimentally applying the theoretical understanding of affective space, admittedly at the expense of a finer technical accomplishment that emerges from collaborative practices and procedures underpinning the examples from the art cinema tradition.

Affective space can be understood as an aesthetic impulse against the film's seamless impression of reality – its representation of coherent space – in order to bring attention to the expressive potential of the film form. As

3. My experimental practice-as-research approach can be contrasted with Greenhalgh's (2010) consideration of effective crew collaborations as involving three interwoven aspects of production: practice, process, and procedure. According to Greenhalgh (2010), "practice is most commonly understood to involve repeating or rehearsing something over and over again to improve performance" (p. 310); she continues to explain that "if a process is a way of happening, procedure would describe its operations … the procedure attempts to identify stages which help the practitioner to understand the know-how of the process" (p. 310). Based on Greenhalgh's film production framework, my experimental practice (as well as its outcomes presented in this article) focused on the aspect of process, which is after all key to experimentation – a heuristic process of discovery, instead of habitual repetition, or description/implementation of set procedural steps.
4. The implementation of sound and music during post-production was one of the key methods within the wider practice-as-research, as the resulting film examples illustrate. This is because the element of non-synchronous sound in film has the potential to remove the image from a coherent dramatic or emotional context, giving rise instead to unexpected affective connections between the image and music/sound – creating a new, singular whole, rather than forging a representation of emotions or of a relatable human experience. Likewise, the editing process was not concerned with creating a meaningful or narrative whole; rather, it was a form of distillation: a gradual reduction of the raw footage into shorter segments – shots – which I then heuristically combined into a sequence based on aesthetic rather than narrative considerations. The concept of affective space discussed in this article is nevertheless concerned purely with the visual side of film – considering individual shots as self-contained, singular "units of affective space". Elaborating on the aspect of sound and editing in the wider research and practice is therefore beyond the scope of this article. For a more detailed discussion of the aspects of sound and editing (as explored through a pedagogic application of the wider research), see Prokopic, 2021.

Andrew (1984) points out, "the structure of cinematic perception is readily translated into that of natural perception, so much so that we can rely on information we construct in viewing films to supplement our common perceptual knowledge" (p. 41);[5] nevertheless, as I argue in this article, affective space in film disrupts this representational mechanism, instead helping to create a sense of a new reality, a new dimension completely emancipated from the reality from which it arose. The original reality has gained its coherence *through* the human observer (or the viewer, when the reality is coherently represented on film), but the mechanical apparatus of the camera is *not* human; instead it is an automatic capture of light falling within the boundaries of the frame/camera sensor. Therefore, the camera captures (and has the potential to reveal) something more about *the real* as the basis of coherent reality (outside of the conscious and pre-conscious "making sense" of the human mind). Or as Shaviro (1993) puts it, "the automatism and nonselectivity of mechanical reproduction make it possible for cinema to break with traditional hierarchies of representation and enter directly into a realm of matter, life, and movement" (p. 31).

Through the medium of light, film captures traces of the movement of the real, but *it does not represent them*; for they are only revealed in the film, they can only exist in the film, and in that sense they only came into being through being captured on film (we can only deduce the past becoming of the real *from* the image, for it is *only* the image that makes it visible, as an echo or a trace). The particular organisation of light within a specific slice of visible reality that is captured on film, and in which the real continues to exist as a trace, is emancipated from the original reality, while depending on it indexically. It carries forward the real by transforming it

5. Andrew (1984) later on elucidates this concept of representation of reality in film further: "The cinema fascinates us because we alternately take it as real and unreal, that is, as participating in the familiar world of our ordinary experience yet then slipping into its own quite different screen world. Only an unusually strong act of attention enables us to focus on the light, shadow, and color without perceiving these as the objects they image. And, on the other side, only an equally strong hallucinating mode of attention can maintain from beginning to end the interchangeability of what we perceive and the ordinary world, negating all difference of image and referent" (p. 42).

into something new, rather than by representing it; it becomes the *new real* of the image.[6]

However, it is a critical part of my argument that the camera that captures the traces of the movement of the real is very much part of the becoming of the real in the moment in which the image originates. Therefore, the aspects of the image produced by the camera *simultaneously* in the moment of capture (that have the potential to forge the alienation of coherent space), such as depth of field, focal length, exposure, shot size, camera angle, and movement, become inseparable from the original real (light) that was captured. The filmed real and the aspects of the camera melt into a two-dimensional luminous field, and in their mutual interplay within this field co-constitute the *affective space* of the image (an aesthetic expression/impression of the new real), especially if the ordinary representation of space is reduced or denied by the aesthetic choices. The aesthetic impression generated by the reduction of ordinary representation of space, as the following section elaborates on, can be related to Deleuze's *affects*: undifferentiated *nonhuman* emotions existing in the image independently of both the viewer and the creator as "sensible experiences in their singularity, liberated from organising systems of representation" (Colebrook, 2001, p. 22).

In the following sections, I explain and define the concept of affective space and then present and demonstrate its application in practice, using the outcomes of the research (a series of short films entitled Affective Signs) as an illustration. The article also presents examples of applicable

6. The concept of the new real in film corresponds with Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of simulation. Rather than considering, along with Bazin (2005), the moving, photographic image to be an indexical imprint of reality – a direct representation of a segment of reality – or, because of extensive aesthetic manipulation, thinking of film as a simulacrum ("a copy whose relation to the model has become so attenuated that it can no longer properly be said to be a copy" [Massumi, 1987, p. 91]), "resemblance is a beginning masking the advent of whole new vital dimension" (Massumi, 1987, p. 91). As Massumi clarifies, "simulation is a process that produces the real, or, more precisely, more real (a more-than-real) on the basis of the real" (p. 92). "It carries the real beyond its principle to the point where it is effectively produced … the point where the copy ceases to be a copy in order to become the Real *and its artifice*", as Deleuze and Guattari state (1983, p. 87, emphasis in the original). Or as Shaviro (1993) puts it: "Reality is not preserved and sustained so much as it is *altered* by the very fact of passive, literal reproduction – or what could better be called hypermimetic simulation" (p. 17, emphasis in the original).

methods of and approaches to cinematography, which resulted from the implementation of the affective space concept in experimental practice.

Affective Space: Theoretical Context

The notion of affective space accords, to an extent, with Deleuze's "any-space-whatever". One of the cases in which Deleuze's concept considers the disruption of coherent representation in film is the framing of the face in a close-up shot. In this way, the face "gathers and expresses the affect as a complex entity, and secures the virtual conjunctions between singular points of this entity" (1986, p. 103). Nevertheless, an undetermined space, a space that "has left behind its own co-ordinates and its metric relations" (p. 109) is even "more suitable for extracting the birth, the advance and the spread of the affect" (p. 110), regardless of the frame size. For Deleuze, the any-space-whatever "is not an abstract universal, in all times, in all spaces. It is a perfectly singular space, which has merely lost its homogeneity, that is, the principle of its metric relations or the connections of its own parts, so that the linkages can be made in an infinite number of ways" (p. 109). Deleuze is contemplating the relation between the filmed space and the shot that frames out a portion of it – creating an abstract whole of the image. My concept of *affective space*, instead, is based on the claim that aspects of the original space, and all other aspects of the image (which are linked to the immediate presence of the camera within that original space in the moment of capture) are *inseparable on the level of the image*: they form one singular affective space. Another way of thinking of it would be to consider it an affective, homogenised version of *mise-en-scène* (a popular concept in film theory and criticism, defining the narrative/aesthetic value and relations of all visual elements within the frame).

Affective space also corresponds with Merleau-Ponty's *flesh*, if creatively applied to the moving image (and to the relationship between the non-human vision of the camera and the filmed reality), rather than reading it in its original context of a relationship between a human being and the world. The flesh is a kind of homogenous, sensible material, from which both the world and the body are made – in which they exist *as one*. Or as Merleau-Ponty (1968) suggests: "where are we to put the limit between

the body and the world, since the world is flesh?" (p. 138) He goes on to describe the flesh further:

> The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. To designate it, we should need the old term 'element,' in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a *general thing*, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being. The flesh is in this sense an 'element' of Being (p. 139, emphasis in the original).

And this sensible material is imbued with *vision*:

> It is not I who sees, not he who sees, because an anonymous visibility inhabits both of us, a vision in general, in virtue of that primordial property that belongs to the flesh, being here and now, of radiating everywhere and forever, being an individual, of being also a dimension and a universal (p. 142).

Merleau-Ponty's inseparability of vision and visibility, of seeing and being seen, is important in relation to affective space, for it is precisely the vision of the camera where the image and the filmed reality meet and become one. The image is simultaneously vision and visibility, image and reality. Furthermore, Deleuze and Guattari ultimately draw the link between affect and flesh in *What is Philosophy?* (1994), making a connection between the unity of vision and visibility, and the nonhuman, undifferentiated world outside of representation:

> The being of sensation, the bloc of percept and affect, will appear as the unity or reversibility of feeling and felt, their intimate intermingling like hands clasped together: it is the flesh that, at the same time, is freed from the lived body, the perceived world, and the intentionality of one toward the other that is still too tied to experience; whereas flesh gives us the being of sensation and bears the original opinion distinct from the judgement of experience – flesh of the world and flesh of the body that are exchanged as correlates, ideal coincidence (p. 178, emphasis in the original).

The sense of the unified affective space of the image – especially in the way it defamiliarises the coherence of filmed reality – can also be related to Marks's (2000) notion of "haptic visuality". Haptic visuality, as Marks explains, invites "a look that moves on the surface plane of the screen for some time before the viewer realizes what she or he is beholding" (p. 163). This corresponds with Arnheim's (1957) point that "the effect of film is neither absolutely two-dimensional nor absolutely three-dimensional, but something between. Film pictures are at once plane and solid" (p. 12). Marks nevertheless makes a useful distinction between haptic and optical visuality to further illuminate this duality of film:

> Haptic visuality is distinguished from optical visuality, which sees things from enough distance to perceive them as distinct forms in deep space: in other words, how we usually conceive of vision. Optical visuality depends on a separation between the viewing subject and the object. Haptic looking tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture. It is more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze. (2000, p. 162)

While affective space is rooted in ontological, rather than phenomenological, considerations of film, the effect on the viewing experience of the kind of images Marks describes is certainly consistent with the concept.

Affective Space: Context in the History of Cinema and Practical Exploration

Affective space can be constituted by a variety of stylistic means, as there are no clear lines separating the constitutive aspects of the image, since affective space is in essence homogenous and singular. However, it is useful to consider a few distinct aspects of affective space, particularly in relation to creative/technical choices and decisions related to film production, but also in respect of the resonances the concept of affective space has with existing examples in cinema – each being notable for different dominant aspects of the image. This section therefore provides a brief context for affective space in film, which served as an initial inspiration for my practical

experimentation. Subsequently, a few examples are provided of the practical exploration of affective space through particular technical choices, and in direct response to the theoretical understanding.

Throughout the history of cinema, various films can be identified, which, either in their overall visual style or through their particular sections/shots, constitute a sense of affective space – especially when considered through the prism of one of distinct aspects, such as camera movement, depth of field, focal length, or lighting. For example, *Nostalghia* (1983) is notable for the atmospheric attributes of derelict interiors, turning the shapes and textures of the object surfaces into abstract elements that enhance the aesthetic quality of the image, rather than representing an ordinary, three-dimensional space. However, *Nostalgia* is also a good example in relation to affective space because of very slow, dolly-in camera movements, which transform the ordinary representation of space into an aesthetic world of the moving image. Similarly, in *Elephant* (2003), a long, continuous tracking movement of the camera following performers through high school corridors elevates the space and the situation to an abstract level of the image. What would be an ordinary corridor is gradually transformed through the long, persistent tracking movement into a hypnotic, visual structure, and what would be naturally occurring light becomes a durational structure of alternating luminous intensities that emanates effects instead of narrative meaning. In *Barry Lyndon* (1975), extreme low depth of field creates hazy, undefined backgrounds to close-up shots and leads to a soft image, diffusing the specificity and clarity of "ordinary vision", giving rise instead to the *flesh* of the image. *A Man and a Woman* (1966) then employs extreme focal length in certain shots to crush perspective and narrow depth of field, leading to a self-contained world of the image frame: affective space. When it comes to using lighting in order to constitute a sense of affective space on the level of the filmed reality, *The Double Life of Veronique* (1991) is a good example. The film uses coloured light, without any realistic motivation, to create an abstract, aesthetic space – focusing on the affective value of the image, rather than communicating meaning or narrative. (I elaborate on the specific function of lighting within the understanding of affective space later on.)

As some of the examples above establish, aspects of the camera, such as movement, framing, depth of field, and focal length, can play a key role in establishing affective space of the image. In *Affective Sign 7*, I combined

a dolly-in camera movement with atmospheric lighting and slow motion in order to create affective space (Figure 1). However, in comparison to dolly-in movements employed in *Nostalghia*, here the camera has its focus fixed on a close distance, which coincides with the low depth of field of the image (the iris of the camera was wide open) to make this dolly-in movement also a *movement into focus*, starting from hazy softness to gradually reveal the face of the performer as the camera moves closer to her. Given the fact that the image from the camera was immediately projected in the background of the shot, creating a feedback loop of light, the combination of the dolly-in movement and the soft, fixed focus had a significant effect on the appearance of the background.

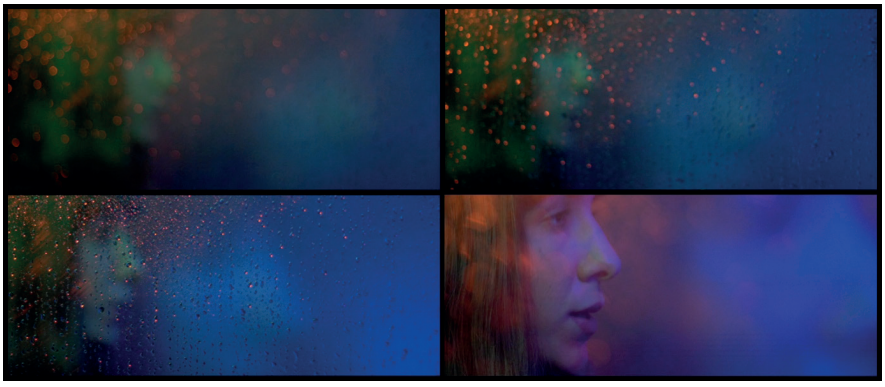

Figure 1: 'Movement into focus': dolly-in camera movement combined with low depth of field, fixed focus, and atmospheric lighting. *Affective Sign 7* (2min9sec – 2min26sec).

In *Affective Sign 4*, a tracking camera movement coincides with low depth of field, which leads to an abstract space of the shot (Figure 2). I achieved the extreme low depth of field of these shots by combining a wide-open iris of the lens with a "full frame" digital camera (the sensor of the digital camera is twice the size of the sensitive field of a standard 35mm cinema camera); this gave rise to images even softer than the aesthetic employed in *Barry Lyndon*. The focus remains fixed at close distance, which makes the film oscillate – flow smoothly – in and out of focus, making sharp portions of the face momentarily emerge from the unified *flesh* of the image, without forging a coherent context of the specific filmed space.

Figure 2: Low depth of field tracking shot with fixed focus. *Affective Sign 4* (4min31sec – 4min55sec).

In *Affective Sign 4* (Figure 3), I employed a custom two-camera rig, filming simultaneously on two cameras with a different focal length, and at a slightly different angle. This produced two contrasting frames of the identical moment in reality, giving rise to two distinct instances of affective space. My concept of affective space depends on the assertion that each instant of filming (each series of rapidly captured equidistant frames) forges a singularity that transcends indexical representation *as the new real* (the attributes of the image merge inseparably with the filmed space), and this has the potential to dislocate coherent representation of space. The visual results of the two-camera rig can be read as evidence of this assertion, as they reveal two moving images obtained simultaneously, looking in one direction from roughly the same position (the lenses are side-by-side rather than occupying exactly the same point in space, which they cannot do). It is the aspects of the camera (depth of field, framing, focal length, and camera movement altered by the increased focal length) that distinguish the two shots as singular instances of affective space. The aspects of the camera cannot simply be abstracted from either of the images; while depth of field and focal length can be applied as techniques, they ultimately combine inseparably in each instance with the photographed reality, in order to forge a homogenous, singular field of the image.

Figure 3: The custom two-camera rig: two images of an identical moment in reality obtained using different focal lengths. *Affective Sign 4* (3min31sec – 3min43sec).

Lighting cannot be neatly separated from the filmed space, yet in the intertwined vision and visibility of the image, it occupies a virtual dimension between the image and the filmed space – being both and neither at the same time. Although light can be (and often is) manipulated and constructed as part of the filmmaking process, it transcends the geometrical conception of space. At the same time, within the image, it is a key aesthetic aspect: the translation, in the process of filming, of light in reality into colour and contrast of the image is critical to the constitution of affective space. Lighting designs can contribute to the constitution of affective space by abstracting the image from an ordinary impression of reality and coherent representation of space, and in the process bringing attention to the aesthetic nature of film as a two-dimensional surface. In my practice, I experimented with lighting designs to constitute affective space, inspired by the play of coloured light in *The Double Life of Veronique*. For example, in *Affective Sign 1*, I used coloured and changing lights to forge an abstract space of the image, defined primarily or solely by light. I fitted a soft-box light with colour-changing LED light bulbs, and framed the close-up shot so that the surface of the soft-box forms the entire background. I used colour gel filters to control other sources of light (Figure 4). In *Affective Sign 7*, I combined the available lighting of the night street with artificial, complex sources of illumination, such as flashing red and blue light, and the spinning flame of the Poi Performance, in order to create an abstract, expressive affective space of the shot. The overall darkness played an important part in this shot, providing an abstract base against which the alternating light is contrasted (from which it emerges) (Figure 5).

Figure 4: Affective space constructed by a complex lighting design. *Affective Sign 1*.

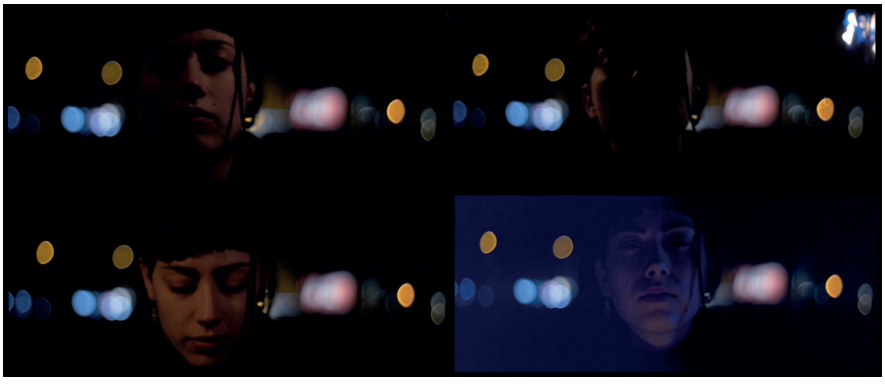

Figure 5: Street lighting combined with flashing coloured light and the spinning flame of Poi performance. *Affective Sign 7* (4min32sec – 5min4sec).

Conclusion

As I explain in this article, affective space – fundamentally related to Merleau-Ponty's *flesh*, Deleuze's *any-space-whatever*, and Marks's *haptic visuality* – is based in the idea, solidified through practical exploration, that on the two-dimensional level of the (photographic moving) image, the attributes of the original filmed space and attributes of the image merge into an emancipated, *single surface world: the new real.* Affective space makes the new real visible and apparent *as a new aesthetic reality* by dislocating coherent representation of three-dimensional (and diegetic) space, while

reducing iconic and symbolic representation and exposing instead the film's fundamental, indexical bond with the contingent real.

The concept of affective space is equally relevant to film practice and theory. Or rather, the distinction of theory and practice in itself becomes meaningless, for the theory directly informs practitioner decisions and can be linked to specific filmmaking results, as this article demonstrates. Furthermore, my experience of teaching cinematography at undergraduate and graduate levels at various UK universities suggests that the practical methods developed as part of this project – and underpinned by specific philosophical concerns related to film ontology – can be utilised and applied in education and can inform film practice in artistic, mainstream, and commercial contexts alike. The technical and aesthetic qualities, as well as the diversity of my students' films on modules informed by my research, illustrate the benefit that can be achieved by a deep theoretical and practitioner understanding, as presented in this article. Such insight informs practical choices and decisions, but also shapes specific technical skills and aesthetic sensibilities, while helping students to challenge conventional understanding of meaning, narrative, and emotion that can be communicated through film. (For a detailed discussion of the application of the wider practice-as-research to teaching cinematography, see Prokopic, 2021.) Ultimately, the understanding of the moving image frame as affective space inspires creativity and experimentation toward the unique expressive potential of film, which lies in its direct, indexical relationship with the real – a relationship that forms an inextricable bond between the momentary arrangement of light in reality and the various attributes of the camera capturing that light.

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