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Nonhuman Flow: Audio-visual Affects and the Expressive Potential of Film

Sightlines: Filmmaking in the Academy Issue 3 2021



Nonhuman Flow (sound by Rob Szeliga)

from **Sightlines Journal**

05:44





Nonhuman Flow (sound by Jack Foran)

from **Sightlines Journal**

05:44 |



Pavel Prokopic: Director, Researcher

Film: *Nonhuman Flow: Audio-Visual Affects and the Expressive Potential of Film*

Length: 5.44 minutes

Year: 2020

RESEARCH STATEMENT

Nonhuman Flow emerged from a wider AHRC-funded research in Affective Cinema, which seeks to experiment with and explore the unique expressive potential of film linked to its direct capturing of the real (light); as Shaviro puts it, “the automatism and non-selectivity 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” (1993, 31). Narrative and representation can be loosened by the process of defamiliarisation: capturing things “as they are perceived and not as they are known” (Shklovsky 1997, 4). This can give rise to affects: impersonal, undifferentiated-yet-singular, *nonhuman* sensations and feelings contained in the work, as opposed to the *human* world of meaning and language (Deleuze and Guattari 1994). The research synthesises various sources in film theory and philosophy, making them the guiding principle

of the practice; this results in original works of film art, expands the understanding of the theory and leads to the development of innovatory film production techniques, such as the complex lighting experiments demonstrated in the visuals of *Nonhuman Flow*.

One of the new concepts developed through the research – and explored/expressed through the film – is *nonhuman intimacy*, which arises between the mechanical vision of the camera and the performer's body, in an *inter-objective* (rather than inter-subjective) encounter (Sobchack 2004). Nonhuman intimacy can be achieved by the physical proximity of the close-up, and the temporal proximity of slow motion, leading to what Benjamin (2008) refers to as “optical unconscious.” The affects arising from nonhuman intimacy also correspond with the notion of ‘photogénie’ (Epstein and Liebman 1977), which, as Doane explains, can lead to ‘the invocation of an otherwise unknown dimension, a radically defamiliarized alterity’ (2003, 91).

Nonhuman intimacy can be amplified further by the performer's look into the camera. This is because the camera lens already *is* the film, it is the sensitive surface on which everything that the frame is able to contain is reflected, absorbed, transformed. Therefore, the look into the camera is the look onto itself, it is a look that covers the whole of the frame, but from a position within it: it not only acknowledges the embodied, nonhuman vision of the camera, it simultaneously *is* the centre of vision in the film. The look into the camera is the reflection of the camera's look in the surface of the all-permeating feedback-loop of vision of the image.

Another defamiliarising force amplifying nonhuman intimacy is creative sound, which has the potential to open up new affects in the film – forming a singular whole with the visuals. The research experimented with this potential, and the two sound versions demonstrate the radical affective difference that can emerge within the same film. The sense of nonhuman intimacy achieved through close-up shots, slow motion, look into the camera and defamiliarising sound has resonances with various moments in cinema, for example in *Mirror* (1975, directed by Andrei Tarkovsky), *Gummo* (1997, directed by Harmony Korine) and *Visitors* (2013, directed by Godfrey Reggio).

References

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Shklovsky, Viktor. 1997. "Art as Technique" in *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory: A Reader*, edited by K. M. Newton, 3-5. Macmillan Education.

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PEER REVIEW 1

Prokopic presents a short film comprising a series of enigmatic and beautifully filmed close-up shots, predominantly of one central young female, but also a tracking shot looking into the face of a male subject walking through a corridor, and shots through a raindrop covered pane of glass of the profile of another female character. There is no overt narrative and dramatic, colourful 'complex lighting experiments' are explored in the execution of the shots. The same short film is presented with two different soundtracks composed by two different composers, one of which I would describe as more melodic and ambient the second more electroacoustic and dissonant.

The filmmaker's research statement locates the work as emerging from a wider AHRC funded research project in Affective Cinema which "synthesises various sources of film theory and philosophy" and act as the guiding principle to this particular practice.

For Prokopic the film explores what he describes as a new concept developed through his research – 'nonhuman intimacy'

On viewing the work, the research questions and underpinning theory were not explicitly evident to this reviewer. It was only in looking further into Prokopic's work following the Vimeo links to his website that I could understand this particular work better and how it is one exploration of a body of ideas explored in the context of his wider Affective Cinema research project. Perhaps by being restricted to a limited word count statement for this submission the statement alone is not sufficient to explore the themes at the heart of the work. Situating this work in those wider and longer discourses may help in better understanding the contexts of the work.

Prokopic's statement makes evident the film theory and philosophy that has underpinned and initiated this practice and that the work itself is an exploration of the research statement's content, what could be called research-led practice.

There is evidence of innovation in the montage of cinematic content in order to explore theoretical and philosophical themes and innovation in form through the complex lighting experiments.

PEER REVIEW 2

The films are intimate, sensual, and affective as the filmmaker has intended. Both sound versions offer evocative backdrops to the intimacy portrayed, one more dramatic than the other; one more subdued and almost industrial.

I understand the film explores nonhuman intimacy but without reading the statement I would have thought this film was exploring human affect, not

nonhuman intimacy. The closeups are at times confronting in that they are very intimate. I might change the title to reflect the intimacy inherent in the nonhuman relationships.

The submission has value in its exploration through the research process. Both version are evocative with sound and gentle with vision. However, the research statement should probably include some more theoretical, if not historical, explanation of the gaze and the camera since this film builds on this by framing the lens/camera as the nonhuman. As such, the film does present a new interpretation of the gaze via intimacy with the nonhuman. I think it would be interesting to include some questions in the statement that address how nonhuman intimacies subvert or reproduce power relations, or are such questions relevant with the nonhuman.

RESEARCHER RESPONSE

In order to illuminate further the concept of nonhuman intimacy (which is a matter raised by both reviewers), I would like to bring the reader's attention to the Deleuzian distinction between *human* and *nonhuman*, which is key to the understanding of nonhuman intimacy, and which I briefly outline in the first paragraph of the statement when defining 'affect'. The 'human' represents the world of language, coherent meaning and rational understanding, whereas the 'nonhuman' essentially stands for impersonal and undifferentiated intensities, which can be experienced outside of language, as singularities not yet assimilated into a habitual system of representation – a system that is based on predefined or recognisable similarities, patterns or a wider historical/cultural context. The corresponding pairs of oppositions, *being/becoming*, *representational/non-representational* and *emotion/affect*, can all be used to illuminate the distinction between human and nonhuman further. In all of these dualisms, the former represents a conceptualised and contextualised form of the latter, through human language and understanding. In this sense, the nonhuman affects are fundamentally related to – and emerge from – the real outside of language and subjectivity. It is also worth pointing out in this context that the true nature of the

‘human body’ is in fact *nonhuman*, to the extent that it fundamentally predates – and transcends – language and subjectivity. We might say, therefore, that the self-aware being of the subjective person acting in the socio-cultural context of the world is fundamentally rooted in the becoming of the nonhuman body, where the subjective person emerges from the body, and not the other way around. We become aware of the body through our subjective and rational intelligence, and we can be conscious of many of its spontaneous or involuntary actions, but we also accept – both rationally and intuitively – that the body as an object predates the conscious rational state and exists independently of it, while in fact being the very precondition for our subjective existence.

The concept of nonhuman intimacy is based on *this* understanding of the nonhuman: an intimacy that arises between the indiscriminating, mechanical, *nonhuman vision* of the camera, and the *nonhuman body* of the performer. Due to the specific filmmaking process activated by the applied philosophical framework, these ‘nonhuman states’ of the camera and the body are not rooted in or contributing to a rational or narrative context/coherence but are instead open and giving rise to undifferentiated and contingent intensities and becomings: affects. When thinking of the lens as the mediating surface between the two ‘nonhuman entities’ of the camera and the body, which both participate in the intimate becoming of the shot (as alluded to in the penultimate paragraph of the original statement), I am referring to the experience of the filmmaking process itself – the moment of capture in which this shot originates – rather than the resulting moving image, which would be more aptly aligned with the digital sensor or the film stock, as validly observed by the first reviewer. In the moment of capture, it is the lens that is experienced, by the performer *and* the filmmaker, as the locus of the nonhuman vision of the camera: a sense of autonomous, embodied vision emerges in the becoming of the moment from our shared awareness of the camera recording, as the permanence of the resulting film rushes into being.

Exploring the possible connections with the gaze, as suggested by the second reviewer, would be interesting and productive in its own right. However, as a psychoanalytical concept rooted in a specific approach to reading and interpreting cinema, the gaze is not relevant within the philosophical framework of this work, and does not particularly illuminate the filmmaking process itself, which is

ultimately at the heart of this practice research. Therefore, considering the gaze in more detail is beyond the scope of this statement. Instead, I would invite the reader to engage with further publications that emerged from the Affective Cinema research, especially if additional insight and context would be deemed beneficial. *Affective Cinema: Experimenting with Feelings of Meaning* (2019) can be found in *The International Journal of Creative Media Research* (<https://doi.org/10.33008/IJCMR.2019.17>); *Mirrors and Tears* (2020) in *Screenworks* (<https://doi.org/10.37186/swrks/11.1/3>) and 'I'm Not There Anymore': *Film Performance Affects and the Loosening of Narrative* (2021) in *Open Screens* (<https://doi.org/10.16995/os.38>).

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