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Mirrors and Tears



Mirrors and Tears

from **Pavel Prokopic**

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Research Statement

Criteria

Mirrors and Tears is an audio-visual structure that does not aim to communicate specific meaning or a story but instead brings together disjointed lines of dialogue, delivered by a group of performers who were under the influence of experimental production conditions and directorial methods. It is the eighth of a series of films resulting from the AHRC-funded practice-as-research PhD in Affective Cinema, informed by art cinema and experimental film traditions, and by conceptual fields derived from film theory and philosophy (specifically film semiotics, and the writings related to Deleuze's affect). The outcomes of the research are short films structured on the basis of affective significance – an original concept identified in various film moments from the history of cinema (such as the examples listed in the 'context' section below), and subsequently developed through the project. Affective significance is a sense of meaning that is felt before it can be thought: it eludes language, and transgresses the boundaries of traditional knowledge and (inter-subjective) communication. As well as the Affect theory, the concept of affective significance resonates with and is informed by Barthes' (1977) *third meaning*, which describes a certain surplus of meaning, an *insistence of the image* after all intelligible meaning has been extracted from it – bearing a *significance, without signifying* anything. Similarly to the third meaning, affective significance is produced by chance being captured and revealed on film, in combination with stylistic aspects and decisions that do not coherently assimilate these flashes of contingency into the film's ordinary signification, but instead amplify their nonhuman origin in the real outside of the world of reason, concepts and understanding. Through experimenting with film performance, and its ability to expose the nonhuman nature of the moving body as the real (below the human surface of intention, self-control, subjectivity, and meaningful gestures), the sense of affective significance can be amplified, when combined with the aforementioned aspects of style and chance.

Research Questions

The research behind *Mirrors and Tears* is guided by these underlying questions:

- 1) In what ways can audio-visual style coincide with film performance in order to generate a sense of affective significance?

2) How can the concept of affective significance become the structuring principle of a film work in the tradition of art/experimental cinema?

3) What kind of filmmaking methods to implement in order to apply and express the theory underpinning affective significance through practice?

Context

Mirrors and Tears responds to and synthesises various theoretical and aesthetic concerns in relation to cinema, giving rise to what I refer to as affective significance – using it as the structuring principle of the work. The sense of affects in the audio-visual style and performance preserves the singularity and becoming in the images rather than submitting them to habitual order – and yet it also constructs an elusive and abstract (subjectively-perceived) narrative meaning, which emerges as a byproduct of the affective structure, rather than as an outcome of intentional communication. Deleuzian affect, which forms the basis of affective significance, is fundamentally related to both the aspect of style and performance in the film. For Deleuze and Guattari (1994), affects in works of art are independent of both the viewer and the creator, as the ‘*nonhuman becomings of man*’ (169, emphasis in the original): they exist independently of the human being as a subject – they exist as ‘sensible experiences in their singularity, liberated from organising systems of representation’ (Colebrook 2001: 22). However, film lends itself particularly well to this understanding, as ‘it is precisely because cinema composes images through time that it can present affects and intensities. It can disjoin the usual sequence of images – our usually ordered world with its expected flow of events – and allow us to perceive affects without their standard order and meaning’ (39). Furthermore, the power of cinema, for Deleuze, lies precisely in its ability to create new realities, new affects, rather than representing specific things as perceived in reality. It is his model of cinema as time-image (as opposed to a more traditional mode of cinema based in narrative logic, audio-visual coherence and the representation of concrete things, characters and places) that is intrinsically linked to affect: ‘in the time-image the image is no longer perceived as an image of this or that. It is the image in its singularity, so we see imaging as such, not yet incorporated into a viewpoint, not yet ordered into a line of time’ (53).

In terms of visual style, the sense of affect can be amplified by disrupting coherent representation of space in the image, resulting in what I refer to as affective space. Affective space corresponds, to an extent, with Deleuze’s *any-space-whatever*. For him the affective distancing from a coherent representation of space can be achieved, for example, through a close-up shot of the face, where the face ‘gathers and expresses the affect as a complex entity, and secures the virtual conjunctions between singular points of this entity’ (1986: 103). However, an undetermined space, a space that ‘has left behind its own co-ordinates and its metric relations’ (109) is for Deleuze even ‘more suitable for extracting the birth, the advance and the spread of the affect’ (110), regardless of the size of the shot. Deleuze is primarily considering the relation between original filmed space and the frame of the film that cuts out a section of it in order to create an abstract whole *as shot*. My concept of *affective space*, on the other hand, is based on the fundamental assertion that

attributes of the original space, and all other attributes of the image (which are linked directly to the participation of the camera within that original space), are *inseparable on the level of the image*: they forge one unified affective space.

The close-up shot nevertheless becomes the defining aspect of the affective space achieved in *Mirrors and Tears*. For Benjamin (2008), the enlargement of close-up 'brings to light entirely new structures of matter' (37). The close-up also forms the basis of 'photogénie', which, as Epstein and Liebman (1977) state, releases 'the cinematic feeling' (16) in the film. Or as Doane (2003) puts it, in relation to the close-up and photogénie, 'any viewer is invited to examine its gigantic detail, its contingencies, its idiosyncrasies. The close-up is always, at some level, an autonomous entity, a fragment, a "for-itself"' (90). The close up, she continues, can lead to 'the invocation of an otherwise unknown dimension, a radically defamiliarized alterity' (91).

In combination with the close-up, the aspect of non-representational film performance (a style of performance that does not aim to represent narrative/dramatic meaning) contributes to the constitution and amplification of affects in *Mirrors and Tears*. Del Río (2008) identifies the cinema as a 'privileged medium for the exhibition of bodies' (10); in film, 'whatever happens to a body becomes instantly available to perception. Thus, the performing body presents itself as a shock wave of affect, the expression-event that makes affect a visible and palpable materiality' (10). The influential French filmmaker Robert Bresson (1977) provides many useful reflections on the non-representational aspect of film performance that resonate with my research. For Bresson, the 'cinematography film' is 'emotional, not representational' (49); it is 'the art, with images, of *representing nothing*' (59, emphasis in the original). This he compares to the mainstream mode of cinema rooted in the dramatic tradition: 'Actor. The to-and-fro of the character in front of his nature forces the public to look for talent on his face, instead of the enigma peculiar to each living creature' (18).

The visual style and approach to performance in *Mirrors and Tears* are also influenced by various pieces of experimental and art cinema. The use of colour and lighting is inspired by Kieslowski's films, particularly *The Double Life of Veronique* (1991), and the affective approach to cinematography and narrative has resonances with Tarkovsky's *Mirror* (1975) and Tsai's *Face* (2009). The dislocation of coherent representation of space through the use of close-ups is then rooted in Bresson's *Pickpocket* (1959), Varda's *Diary of a Pregnant Woman* (1958) and Reggio's *Visitors* (2013). The experimental approach to the fragmentation of performance corresponds strongly with Frampton's *Hapax Legomena III: Critical Mass* (1971), but also with Figgis' *Co/Ma* (2004) and Greaves' *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (1968). The latter is particularly relevant for its multi-camera capturing of performance without aiming for specific narrative/dramatic results in the moment of production, and its experimental use of the split-screen.

Methods

The research uses the theoretical/philosophical basis in film semiotics and Deleuzian affect to formulate a set of experimental film production methods through which traditional directorial,

aesthetic/formal and storytelling choices are offset by non-representational immediacy (inviting in chance and uncontrollable elements of performance and the wider reality) and by improvisational 'reflection-in-action', which is informed by my experience and education in filmmaking.

Mirrors and Tears resulted from a workshop with performers, which led to a certain directorial and cinematographic complexity, helping to deliver unpredictable results in visual terms, but also performance and narrative-wise. I filmed the workshop over five days with eight performers, focusing on dialogue scenes between two performers. I did not give the performers the scripts in advance, and instead a pair of actors off-screen was feeding them the lines. Each session with two performers lasted for around two hours and was filmed in its entirety on three cameras; I periodically encouraged the performers to remain present in the moment, in a focused, meditative state of mind. This approach represents a new method of working, which I refer to as *affective atmosphere*. The method is about maximising atmospheric conditions both within the mind of the participants and in the space surrounding them; these two 'atmospheric layers' subsequently influence, amplify and resonate with one another. The affects emanating from the performance are sustained and amplified by the continuous, intense participation in the moment, and allowing oneself to be affected by the sensual impression of the other participants and of the immediate environment.

The lighting set-up created complex foregrounds and backgrounds unique to each of the camera angles – constructing a sense of affective space purely on the basis of light – but it also contributed to the atmosphere within the room, which helped to sustain the meditative approach to the scene. I wrote ten simple dialogue scripts for the individual sessions with performers, which did not represent any specific situation, emotion or a dramatic context. Gender or character names were not specified either: the conversation was merely a one-line exchange between character A and character B. The performers started each session by delivering the dialogue (repeating, mimetically, the lines after the pair of performers off-screen), and in the second part, they improvised a dialogue loosely based on what they retained in memory from the first part of the session, without actively trying to remember anything. The editing process focused on specific lines of dialogue where the performing body resonated non-representationally with the words, rather than using performance to meaningfully illustrate, emphasise or complement the spoken language. This allowed for further dislocation of any remaining context of the original dialogue, and instead made the speech enter into alogical correspondence with other singular lines, forging a sense of significance rather than signification, a sense of fleeting affects instead of contextualised emotions.

Outcomes

The research expands the potential of cinema by producing experimental film structures in which affective significance can be identified, and by analysing and describing the methodological and aesthetic conditions needed for it to arise. In the process, both established and new methods of film production are tested, and formulated into an applicable set of approaches to filmmaking, cinematography and directing performers. Furthermore, the research contributes to the understanding of film by defining the conceptual field surrounding affective significance, which is

rooted in established film scholarship on affect and semiotics, but also uniquely acquired through and embedded in practice. It is beyond the scope of this statement to discuss in detail all the relevant aspects of the conceptual field underpinning the concept of affective significance; this publication therefore prioritises the tacit, artistic expression of the practice-as-research conveyed through the self-contained audio-visual structure of *Mirrors and Tears*.

Impact

A version of the film was presented as part of a multiscreen installation of Affective Cinema at FACT, during the Liverpool Biennial in 2018. The exhibition was open to the public for a duration of four days; I was there for most of the time, gathering their views and feedback. This data later aided reflection – feeding into adjustments and reconsiderations of the research and the meaning that can be read into the work by the viewer (especially where such meaning is not overtly communicated by it). Later on, *Mirrors and Tears* was screened on a loop for over a month at the Stephen Lawrence Gallery in London as part of the SOUND/IMAGE 2018 exhibition, freely accessible to the public. A version of the film won an award for the best installation at the ‘Provoking Discourse’ 2018 conference at the Manchester Metropolitan University, and, in 2019, the overall Affective Cinema research was given the Inaugural Award in Creative Media Research from the International Journal of Creative Media Research. Most recently, I used the film, as well as the theoretical and aesthetics findings the research generated, in my lecturing work at Queen’s University Belfast and the University of Westminster (and guest/public lectures delivered at the University of Greenwich and Bath Spa University), both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The work has influenced and inspired particular style of cinematography and performance in the films of my students, leading to a demonstrable impact on a new generation of filmmakers.

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Filmography

- Co/Ma* (Mike Figgis, Slovenia, 2004)
- Diary of a Pregnant Woman (L’opéra-mouffe)* (Agnès Varda, France, 1958)
- Double Life of Veronique, The (La double vie de Véronique)* (Krzysztof Kieslowski, France, Poland, 1991)

Face (Visage) (Ming-liang Tsai, International coproduction, 2009)

Hapax Legomena III: Critical Mass (Hollis Frampton, USA, 1971)

Mirror (Zerkalo) (Andrei Tarkovsky, Soviet Union, 1975)

Pickpocket (Robert Bresson, France, 1959)

Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One (William Greaves, USA, 1968)

Visitors (Godfrey Reggio, USA, 2013,)

Peer Reviews

All reviews refer to original research statements which have been edited in response to what follows:

Review 1: Accept for publication with no amendments.

Mirrors and Tears forms part of a fascinating and original project that seeks to engage with whether/how much moving images can affect us, especially in a decontextualized fashion. The aim is to expose and to explore what the author refers to as ‘affective significance’ – or ‘meaning that is felt before it can be thought.’

As an experiment, whether the film succeeds or not is irrelevant, although I shall comment on this below. What is for certain worthwhile and fascinating is the experiment itself, and by this token I wholeheartedly support this work and endorse its publication.

That said, there are some issues that emerge across the written statement and the film itself (which I consulted in that order), and which might point the way toward future research in this area.

Firstly, many components dealt with in the written statement might do well to be explored in more detail in another context, including the theoretical work that the author provides, as well as further investigations and explanations of the methods, outcome and impact. In the context of Screenworks, alas, brevity is encouraged and important; all the same, pointing to further elaborations of this work might be useful.

When the explanation discusses how the visual style is ‘an affective version of *mise-en-scène*,’ this reviewer in fact found themselves thinking that the work is in fact an exploration more of the frame than of its contents, and that the frame is always providing ‘co-ordinates’ and ‘metric relations’ in its very angularity and limits.

When the statement then discusses the close-up in relation to *photogénie*, in particular in relation to ‘the cinematic feeling,’ it struck this reviewer that watching faces on a small screen (or a small window within a small screen) is perhaps antithetical to the ‘cinematic feeling,’ and that while this project has indeed had some ‘big screen’ exhibition, its effectiveness (its affectiveness?) are potentially minimised by the current medium of exhibition – an issue that is not addressed or explored.

The engagement with *photogénie* leads me to some brief thoughts on the film. The filmmaker seeks to move beyond representation, and yet I query that the faces that we see on the screen, in that they have different apparent genders and sexes, are nigh-impossible to see without a 'representational' component at work. More pertinently, and with various critical race theorists in mind (let us stick to Frank B. Wilderson III as an example), the theoretical claim that affect can happen 'before' the representational comes into operation might be challenged wholesale; affect in fact follows representation, not vice versa, especially when we consider how our entire modernity is constructed upon principles of representation (whereby certain skin colours are made to carry different meanings). This might be worth considering in more detail.

Furthermore, one wonders how much *charisma* might be at work in the film or otherwise. That is, the performers, when given the opportunity to work without direction, all strive towards 'sincerity' and none towards, say, humour. This is a very performed attempt to connote a 'lack of performance,' when more intense results might be yielded by leaning into performance and how the human is perhaps always only ever performative, especially with three cameras aimed at them. These 'sincere' performances are not particularly charismatic, even as the film showcases 'good' acting talent (but the talent on display is very much acting). I wrestle with charisma; I don't believe that it is the preserve of only some chosen few who are preordained by god as cinematically gifted. Conversely, I believe that charisma is related to energy and a giving of energy that is indeed affectively felt, within a cinematic context, by the viewer. Anyone, including any actor, can do this; whether they are willing to do so, or can only do so in very specific circumstances, is a different matter, and it raises questions about how directors work with actors and so on – all questions that are both beyond the remit of this experiment, as well as in some ways being directly related to it (affective significance comes from a conscious embrace of representation and performance, rather than an attempt to hide it; not that actors need to wink at the camera, but actors will know that their characters are also performing as much as they are).

All the same, this is fascinating work, and I'd love to see more like it – and for the work to evolve into a more complex and more complete film-philosophy and/or philosophy (and methodology) of making films.

Review 2: Invite resubmission with major revisions to the written statement.

Mirrors and Tears is a well-crafted, technically accomplished instillation film. The film is beautifully shot, and it goes some way in mobilising Gilles Deleuze's affection image, whilst modulating actor performance in order to privilege affect. The work and accompanying statement constitute a genuine contribution to new knowledge, particularly through the author's method of production. The formulation of a production space, which allows for the creation of an *affective atmosphere*, combined with a method of working with actors based on improvisation and what the author terms 'reflection in action' is innovative and original. The method of production is the most interesting element of the statement, and this method alone constitutes the creation of new knowledge. The whole statement could well focus on the method alone. This would be a worthwhile and much welcomed contribution to the field.

The practice work submitted is one component of a larger PhD project, and this is reflected in the written statement. There is a lack of clarity, particularly in introduction and context sections. This is perhaps due to the author attempting to condense too many concepts into a relatively short article. The opening paragraph is extremely dense. The concepts presented in this paragraph need to be clearly identified, clarified and cited. "Affective significance" is referred to early on as an integral concept, which has been "identified in various film moments from the history of cinema". However, this concept is not clearly defined. The author must clearly define the concept of affective significance, and cite sources in order to map out how this concept developed over the "history of cinema" if this concept is to be mobilised efficiently and effectively. Equally, "film ontology" is referred to, but no reference is given to frame the author's notion of film ontology. The idea that film has an ontology is contested, and should not be taken for granted.

Top of page 2: "Furthermore, the power of cinema, for Deleuze, lies precisely in its ability to create new realities, new affects, rather than representing specific things as perceived in reality." Citation needed.

A synopsis of the film, the intentions and the goals of the research could be included earlier, to give the reader a better sense of what the film is trying to do, and exactly how the author has achieved the intended aims and objectives. The Outcomes paragraph is actually quite clear, and this paragraph states the aims and objectives of the research well. I would suggest moving this section to the beginning, and using this to structure the rest of the paper.

The author states that the use of dialogue is non-representational, and it avoids signification, yet I struggle to see how language can operate outside of signification. If one is familiar with the language spoken (in this case, English), it is impossible for the language structure to exist in a purely affectual state as the author proposes. Perhaps a nonsense language could go further in achieving this, but even nonsense language draws on pre-existing linguistic structures (Carroll's Jabberwocky, for example). Privileging affect does not have to come at the complete expense of 200 years of semiotics.

The stated outcomes of the research are fascinating, but these outcomes are not clearly articulated in the text. Certain questions arise in response to the statement:

How do you define affective significance?

What film structures privilege affective significance?

How do you define filmic ontology?

The quality of the submitted film is high, and the conceptual engagement of the author is fascinating and of real value, but it should be rewritten for clarity in order to do the work justice.

All reviews refer to original research statements which have been edited in response.

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