



Cinema and the Prefigurative

By
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Abstract

Prefiguration is a term borrowed from political science, describing the experimentation with alternative ways of living, doing and being together in the present as a form of activism. In this article I will argue that cinema can be a powerful tool that can be used to support prefigurative objectives. Arguably, the point of origin of this methodology is *Man with a Movie Camera* (Человек с Киноаппаратом 1929) by Dziga Vertov. Structurally this film can be described as 'database driven' and as prescient toward the digital age in which databases and hypertexts are common organising principles affecting daily life experiences. But more importantly, the film presages a different, more harmonious society in a style that simultaneously uses documentary, experimental and poetic elements. The purpose of this enquiry is to establish whether subsequent crowd-sourced and community driven documentaries can be seen as equally successful examples of prefiguration.

Keywords: Vertov, Documentary, Database, Prefigurative Politics, Co-creation, Participation.

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Introduction

This essay takes Vertov's masterpiece *Man with a Movie Camera* as a departure point and subsequently explores how co-creation can be used as an expressive element in cinema. The question that is posed here is how this groundbreaking film can be used as a source of inspiration, both in terms of structure and methodology. To be able to answer this question it is important to scrutinize the original first. *Man with a Movie Camera* was made in an extraordinary, volatile time, a moment in history that still elicits a vision of hope and profound social change. A succinct and compelling statement concerning Vertov's visionary legacy can be found in the article *Vertov after Manovich* by Seth Feldman, Professor emeritus of Cinema and Media Studies at York University in Canada:

Vertov is, after all, a citizen not just of the revolution but of the film of the revolution. From the beginning, his manifestoes, including the filmed manifesto of *Man with a Movie Camera*, posit cinema as a means of participation and that participation as a means of contributing to the revolution's new understanding of the world (Feldman 2007: 46).

The participation Feldman points at is not only realised by the appearance of the cameraman and the editor in the film, or the great variety of people who appear in the film as themselves. It is also perceived by the spectators of the film, who are invited to participate in the production of meaning while watching the film. Signification of the film can be rephrased in almost endless variations, as the spectators are offered a semantic text in need of completion. This glorious 'incompleteness' renders the film contemporary, compatible with a mediated (postmodern) reality in which everything constantly changes form and meaning. But the film was certainly not intended for a bourgeois audience and their intellectual satisfaction, its purpose was to serve as a tool that would help to achieve the revolutionaries' dream of shared prosperity. From Vertov's manifestos it becomes apparent that he envisioned an army of filmmakers who would adopt his method and numerous films would be made, advocating the communal message around the globe (Vertov & Michelson 2001). Despite Vertov's productivity, manifested in both numerous films and text, he was not able to fulfill this goal:

His supporters, most of whom resided in the Soviet avant-garde outside of cinema, could be vocal, but the cineaste practitioners, the kinok armies, implied in his manifestos were largely imaginary. His manifestos and other proclamations picked hopeless fights with the rapidly ascending filmmakers and decision makers of the Soviet cinema

establishment. Nor did his writing provide much in the way of concrete instructions for would-be followers (Feldman 2007: 40).

Indeed, in the Soviet Union this army of documentarists did not materialise, nor did it elsewhere. But the film has been highly influential in other ways. Besides being seen as progenitor of the 'city symphony' genre, *Man with a Movie Camera* is described as an important forebear of digital and interactive forms of storytelling by Lev Manovich in his book *The Language of New Media* that is entirely structured around Vertov's film (Manovich 2001). Manovich phrases what Feldman calls 'participation' as a process of discovery and seduction: "Vertov's goal is to seduce us into his way of seeing and thinking, to make us share his excitement, as he discovers a new language for film. This gradual process of discovery is the film's main narrative, and it is told through a catalog of discoveries" (ibid. 243). The insight that *Man with a Movie Camera* can be seen as driven by a catalogue or database, is key to the further enfolding of Manovich's thinking. According to him the database leads to nothing less than a new way to understand the world:

Indeed, if after the death of God (Nietzsche), the end of grand Narratives of Enlightenment (Lyotard), and the arrival of the web (Tim Berners-Lee), the world appears to us as an endless and unstructured collection of images, texts, and other data records, it is only appropriate that we will be moved to model it as a database. But it is also appropriate that we would want to develop a poetics, aesthetics, and ethics of this database. (ibid. 219)

But the main attraction of *Man with a Movie Camera* might not be its participative process or its database structure. What enfolds before our eyes is a vision of society, a society in which everybody has a role. A world full of joy, beauty, poetry and dance. Not only the people who appear in the film seem to participate in a grand choreography but also the animals, vehicles, machines and even buildings and objects are part of a cinematic ballet. As such, the film draws us into a poetic understanding of the real. The film prefigures a utopian society as imagined by Vertov and his team. Herein lies its most powerful political statement, a statement that already provides a starting point for Manovich' desired new poetics, aesthetics, and ethics.

The concept of the prefigurative as a deliberate political strategy is derived from a groundbreaking article by sociologist Carl Boggs (Boggs 1977). Boggs analyses "the troublesome dilemmas encountered by Marxist movements and regimes" (ibid. p359) between the procurement of power and the implementation of a decentralized, fair and inclusive form of democratic governance. Trying to

reach utopia by brute force will result in the destruction of the desired future before it is even fully contemplated, as exemplified by Soviet Russia. Instead, the future needs to be rehearsed before it can be successfully applied full scale. In *Prefigurative Politics: Building Tomorrow Today* (Raekstad & Gradin 2020) the authors provide a further discussion of prefigurative politics. One of the objectives of this book is to clarify the term in order to make its use less random. By analysing a number of sources including anarchists such as Mikhail Bakunin and Emma Goldman and organisations ranging from the Black Panthers to the Occupy Movement a concise definition of prefigurative politics emerges: "the deliberate experimental implementation of desired future social relations and practices in the here-and-now." (ibid. 36).

The following exploration of the prefigurative in the context of cinema production follows such a "deliberate experimental" approach. As it is not clear if and how the term can be transposed to cinema, a diversity of films will be scrutinized that have emerged from widely varying contexts. The choice of films is based on structural similarities and the incorporation of a meaningful level of co-creation in the production process. Both the structural elements (Manovich' database model) and the strategy of co-creation provide a more open format as opposed to strictly hierarchically organised film productions based on linear narrative. Arguably, this strategy could be useful as a tool to help with the "implementation of desired future social relations and practices in the here-and-now". This will be further discussed by looking at each example in more detail. The first two films, *Life in a Day* (2011) and *The Uprising* (2013), are examples of so called 'crowd-sourced' documentaries. However, the two films are manifestly different as they are sourced with very different selection criteria in mind. The third film *I Love You* (*Я Тебя Люблю* 2011) is of interest as it returns to a post-communist Russia, while exploring the possibilities of a virtually unmediated, honest and raw type of collective documentary making. The final two examples, *The Sound we See* (2010) and the films coming out of *Film Farm* (1994-2019), both retract from the film industry. In these cases the initiators have chosen a grassroots approach, while focusing on educating and sharing and putting less emphasis on the end product.

By looking at a diversity of film productions that answer to a variety of cultural, technical and financial pre-conditions, this survey aims to understand the possibilities and limitations of a prefigurative methodology across the board. It is important to make clear that the choice of case-studies is influenced by practical circumstances. I have a long track record as organiser of collaborative art and film projects and I have been an artist in residence at the Echo Park Film Center (the producers of *The Sound we See*) and the Film Farm. In other words, this

inquiry is based on practical experience which has been supplemented by a more theoretical analysis. The objective is to gain an increased understanding of the prefigurative as a tool for collaborative film production, to share this knowledge and apply these insight in future projects.

Made by You

The crowd-sourced documentary *Life in a Day* was produced by Ridley Scott in association with Youtube. The project started with a call to amateur filmmakers to shoot footage on July 24, 2010 from early morning until midnight. All images were to be uploaded to a dedicated online channel, yielding a result of 5,000 hours of raw footage. The footage was organised in a database and metadata was added by film-students to make the material accessible to the editors (Youtube 2010). The final product takes the viewers around the world in parallel sequences, with the participants often talking directly to the camera. As such the film follows *Man with a Movie Camera* through its interweaving of simultaneous events, documented by cinematographers who also play a role in the film itself and an overarching structure that follows a diurnal cycle.

In the paper *Life in a Day / One Day on Earth: Visibility and Visuality in the Digital Arena* (Gotto 2011) Professor Lisa Gotto argues that digital platforms like Youtube have opened up new territories for cinematic experiment in documentary filmmaking:

The globalization of film culture has seen its most transformative aspects in the evolution of digital technology, and, correlatively, the new modes of transnational film distribution that these technologies have enabled. Accordingly, new technological developments allow films, as cultural objects, to generate new types of identification and signification (Gotto 2011: 181).

The global reach of *Life in a Day* is certainly unprecedented (more than 16,000,000 online views) and, potentially, Vertov's dreamed army of documentarists could reach a vast audience by using digital tools. Not dissimilar to *Man with a Movie Camera*, its American counterpart radiates optimism; food is abundant, nature is beautiful, children are full of hope, the world appears to be in harmony embracing all its diversity. Contentious subjects are presented in a lighthearted manner: a child working as a shoe polisher is also shown as a good student, an Afghan photographer shares his 'happy and peaceful' view of Kabul, an older couple is mocking each other teasingly and a gay man is shown 'coming out' followed by seemingly naive utterances of homophobia. When the film finally confronts the

spectator with more explicit images of violence and suffering, the editing speeds up and the images are intercut with footage from a rollercoaster and a fireworks display while ecstatic music plays on the soundtrack.

Even though death, violence and war are acknowledged in the film, all elements of the amassed database are used to create a global spectacle in which we are all equal for the camera. Apparently it is our visibility that matters most as exemplified by the final sequence of the film staging a woman who confides that 'nothing special happened' and that she is afraid not to be part of the film. A spectacular thunderstorm saves her apparent invisibility, giving her 'normal' life meaning. This focus on the recorded and shared moving image as a creator of global excitement and entertainment is sustained in the end credits, showing a slug eating the text 'mind your own business' while perched on a globe. As such *Life in a Day* demonstrates that the Hollywood version of Vertov's army is driven by a different revolution, more surreptitiously ideological. Sharing sites Youtube and Facebook and more recent developments like Airbnb and Uber do pretend to provide opportunity to all, the opportunity to become a movie-star, to be received as valued guests around the world or to take an easy ride across town while talking to locals. In reality the companies behind these platforms are creating the biggest accumulation of wealth and power that the world has seen, based on corporate values, not human values.

In order to expand this ethical analysis it is useful to look at the difference between representation and prefiguration. As argued by Mathijs van de Sande in his article *They don't represent us? Synecdochal representation and the politics of occupy movements:* "the most significant difference between representation as acting for and representation as standing for is that the former often implies an explicit mandate and a certain degree of responsiveness between the representative and the thing represented." (van de Sande 2020: 401). This can be understood within the context of contemporary democracy which often lacks responsiveness, subsequently undermining not only the relationships between politicians and voters but also having a further impact on the social fabric of society as a whole. Prefigurative politics attempts to restore this fabric by weaving new patterns. On the other hand, the social relations that are represented in *Life in a Day* are fleeting, interchangeable and based on a brief thrill. The source footage, which is voluntarily contributed by the participants, is turned into a commodity to be exploited by the producers of the film. *Life in a Day* stands for a perpetual state of excitement and the promise of universal global connectivity (aka consumerism). In the globally connected world of this film nothing has value, except when it can be sold. Moreover, the spectators are cast in their traditional role as 'voyeurs' who consume the images for their own entertainment and distraction. As such the film

creates an escapist illusion instead of prefiguring a tangible alternative.

Revolution

The Uprising, a film compiled by director and writer Peter Snowden, does something radically different while also using raw footage sourced from Youtube. Snowden's film is deeply invested in the civil unrest that spread across the Arab World in the early 2010's. Footage shot by participants during demonstrations and insurgencies place the spectator within the dramatic unfolding of events. The film does not sensationalize these happenings but also does not eschew disturbing and even traumatic moments that are caught on cameraphone. The objective here is to make the audience complicit in the events on screen, urging them to take a standpoint. Much of the footage is pixelated and shaky but this lack of aesthetic quality and professionalism adds to the intense experience induced by the film.

In an accompanying article Snowden argues that the sourced videos are the result of a performative "creative misuse" of mobile phones and social media platforms:

By unsettling the opposition between public and private, objective and subjective, collective and individual, they [the videos] bring about an irrevocable change in the potential of the online database, because that database is not just an infrastructure or an algorithm, but is inextricably enmeshed with practices, experiences and desires without which it cannot make sense, and which exist only offline – not only in our heads and hearts, but in the simplest, least explicable of our bodily gestures, too (Snowdon 2014: 412).

This argument against the neutrality of the database underpins Manovich's proposal for a new form of poetics, aesthetics, and ethics. Both stylistically and conceptually the images that Snowden has selected push against established boundaries. Hardly recognizable images, usually discarded in the editing room, become highly significant for their indexical value. Normally taboo subjects such as severe injury and death are recorded unexpectedly. This produces serious ethical implications that could easily result in a gruesome form of voyeurism. Cinema and media theorist Vivian Sobchack addresses the problematic representation of actual death on screen as follows:

In the presence of real death (and its representation) the codification of visual behavior, as that behavior acts to circumscribe the sight of death and bear (bare) its traces, allows both filmmaker and spectator

to overcome, or at least circumvent, the transgression of what in our present culture is a visual taboo. Such codification allows both filmmaker and spectator to view death's "ferocious reality," if not from a comfortable position then from a normatively ethical one (Sobchack 2004: 244).

The Uprising literally takes us on to multiple battlefields, forcing us to delineate our moral and ethical position, not only with regard to the images we are watching, but also with regard to our response to the events that are represented on screen. Here, the online footage can be regarded as 'fall-out' resulting from real lived and hence unpredictable events. Contrary to the images in *Life in a Day*, these images do not signify the (simulated) fulfillment of desire but rather the opposite: the actualization of (real) struggle.

The original footage, especially while embedded in its social media context, springs from a form of activism that closely relates to prefigurative politics. Radical forms of solidarity coupled with spontaneous protest are enacted in front of the camera while the participants in these actions simultaneously experience brutal oppression. The Uprising successfully brings the Arab revolutions onto the (Western) cinema screen and into the living room, but this does not happen entirely without compromise. The footage is intricately edited and a musical soundtrack has been added. The film is credited as "a film by Peter Snowdon" and the original Youtube clips are referenced subsequently in the form of a bibliography. Hence, the original communal function of the footage takes on another form, re-arranged in a more traditionally structured narrative shaped by the director. The film allows the spectators a safe view of the harsh reality faced by the protesters, but for a Western audience this will largely remain an abstract, cognitive activity. Once back in their own environment, outside the cinema, the spectators will hardly be able to exteriorize these acts of resistance which are so significant in the film. Participation is certainly significant within the community of camera operators/activist themselves, as demonstrated by the film, but hard to translate into concrete actions for the audience. We are 'looking at' rather than 'taking part in'. A phenomenological gap between 'here' and 'there' is opened up which is widened by the film's adeptly executed mediation. Snowdon's film is ethical/dialectical, portraying prefigurative politics rather than enacting it. The film provides an insightful and engaging account of the civil unrest in the Arab world and demonstrates the power of prefigurative political strategies. However, the film frames its subject matter in an observational rather than a participatory documentary style.



Fig. 1. Screenshot from *The Uprising* by Peter Snowden.

Reality

A third film to consider is the Russian production *I Love You* (*Я Тебя Люблю*), a documentary shot by a group of amateur videographers in the same year as *Life in a Day*, but this time in a more defined location, the southern Russian city Rostov-on-Don. The directors describe the film as 'a democratic film about ordinary people', a statement that emphasizes their independence from state sponsored productions. Co-directors Rastorguev and Kostomarov collected their footage by casting a small group of participants from 1673 respondents and asking the chosen protagonists to document their own lives. The directors shaped the final film out of the large catalogue of moving images that they received, kneading their narrative from a 'database' of material (Chapman 2011). Although the film does not follow a 'dusk till dawn' structure, the objectives of the filmmakers overlap with Vertov's aim to capture actuality in a participatory way, as confirmed by the filmmakers in an online interview by independent scholar Anna Nieman: "The sieve, the actual hole in the sieve was the un-robbed, un-castrated life, be it smart, or not, pretty, or not, kind, or not, but it has to be unwashed, raw, unprocessed, in the way it happens, unmediated by a film crew" (Nieman 2013).

Besides the raw characters, the cinematography is also 'raw' with frequent occurrences of auto-focus and auto-exposure adjustments plus the use of accidental footage and chaotic camera angles. Similar to what Feldman describes as the seduction of the audience, here the spectator is persuaded to step into a tough post-communist reality. The camera witnesses the three main characters, who live in bare tower-block apartments and are either unemployed or toiling

in repetitive jobs. Conversations revolve around the absence of future prospects, alcohol consumption and harsh jokes, but the honesty and intimacy of the footage simultaneously shows how vulnerable and fragile the protagonists are and how much they depend on each other and their partners.

In *I Love You* we are confronted with a small army of disenfranchised workers looking for love and comfort in the new reality of rogue capitalism that has replaced the now deflated utopia of Soviet communism. Again, the main weapon of the cinematic soldiers is a camera, a digital machine that can accurately 'shoot' visual information. The absence of the communal is palpable, and is embodied by the toiling, swearing and drinking of the main characters. If we can talk about poetics here, the directors deserve credit for achieving a balance between their forfeiture of control during the shooting and their recoupment during the editing phase, rhyming the crude footage into a refined whole. The film's ethics are also precarious, teetering on the voyeuristic, with its display of intimate imagery of the protagonists' relationships. But the directors succeed in respecting their characters all the way through. The film embraces a so-called 'Youtube' aesthetics that will offend some cinephiles but can be seen as affectionate to the concurrent moving image apparatus, the digital Kino-Eye. As such the film comes much closer to Manovich's desired maturation of the database as a narrative tool. However, the key decisions in the filmmaking process are dependent on the directors, as substantiated by them in the already mentioned interview: "We have given them an opportunity to begin talking and then took their syntagms and assembled a coherent text" (ibid.).



Fig. 2. Screenshot from *I Love You* (Я Тебя Люблю) by Aleksander Rastorguev and Pavel Kostomarov.



Fig.3. Screenshot from *I Love You (Я Тебя Люблю)* by Aleksander Rastorguev and Pavel Kostomarov.

Similarly to *The Uprising*, the documentary *I Love You* focuses on strong emotional experiences which are represented in unpolished footage. The participants also struggle, but their situation is not as life threatening as the situation in the Arab World. The film had limited success in the international festival circuit, it was mainly produced with a domestic audience in mind: “For months they’ve toured Russia and Ukraine, appearing in-person at multiple screenings, conducting discussion panels and engaging with the audience” (ibid.). This form of independent, self-organised distribution is significant and important in regard to the effectiveness of the film’s prefigurative elements. Screening the film in the specific cultural context in which it was conceived will make the participatory elements much more effective. Gestures and subtle cultural codes will be understood almost effortlessly, encouraging the audience to analyse and discuss the film with their peers.

By actively involving both the protagonists and the audience, the co-directors have succeeded in taking the film beyond mere representation, by embodying a shared experience similar to the prefigurative responsiveness described by van de Sande (see above). The desired social relations that are aimed for can be described in terms of resilience, loyalty and love. The film shows how the participants are able to uphold these values in difficult circumstances. Instead of the utopian present prefigured in *Man with a Movie Camera*, or the revolutionary ambition of *The Uprising*, the aim seems to be more modest here: to survive with dignity. To see the importance and relevance of such struggle John Holloway’s analysis on the subject is helpful: “Often the struggle of dignity is non-subordinate rather than openly insubordinate, often it is seen as private rather than in any sense political

or anti-capitalist. Yet the non-subordinate struggle for dignity is the material substratum of hope” (Holloway 2019: 158).

Community

A further pertinent example has been produced by a small community centre operating in the shadow of Hollywood, the Echo Park Film Center (EPFC), a non-profit media arts organisation established in 2002 offering film screenings, film classes and equipment rentals and repairs (Rosales 2013). One of their free youth filmmaking programmes resulted in *The Sound we See: A Los Angeles City Symphony*. The film shows contemporary urban life in Los Angeles as seen through the eyes and cameras of the 37 participating teenagers. As a starting point the instructors, the EPFC youth education team, created a 24-hour matrix for the students and asked them to choose both a time-slot and a location. The students were instructed in the use of 16mm Bolex cameras and watched *Man with a Movie Camera* and associated films like Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin die Sinfonie der Grosstadt* (Berlin, *Symphony of a Metropolis* 1927) and Joris Ivens’ *Regen* (Rain 1929). Each team shot a modest amount of footage at their chosen time and location and after processing edited this down to one minute. The 24 sections were joined and a live soundtrack was created by a local music group.

The Sound we See starts with a title sequence echoing the opening credits of *Man with a Movie Camera* but before cutting into action, the caption “This is our City” appears on screen. In the first shot we see the co-creators running enthusiastically through an urban tunnel sparsely lit by fluorescent lights. This functions both as an introduction to the episodes that follow and to the army of young aspiring filmmakers themselves. In the rest of the film, although their different styles and preoccupations can be detected, they remain largely unseen. In the subsequent scenes contrasting locations in Los Angeles are covered: from China Town to a cement factory and from Hollywood Boulevard in the early hours, when only street cleaners are treading across the walk of fame, to a small urban gardening project hidden somewhere in the vast urban sprawl. Even though images of Los Angeles continuously appear in popular movies, here the city shows a different face altogether. For example, the cyclists, homeless people and musicians in the film are all authentic and caught off-guard by the camera. What we see is not an idealised ‘larger than life’ super-city, but a refreshingly ‘real’ Los Angeles seen from the point of view of each of the co-creators.

After the initial success of this project, two of the instructors, Paolo Davanzo and Lisa Marr, have been leading 20 consecutive community filmmaking projects in cities around the world. This ongoing venture is documented online and links to a dedicated channel showcasing the whole series (Echo Park Film Center 2020).

The first episode was used as an educational tool in the subsequent iterations of the project, each time inspiring a new group of participants to partake in the creation of their own film. These films are successively screened in the city of their conception, often accompanied by live music. Additionally, the films are screened at the point of origin, the EPFC in Los Angeles. Finally, the films are released online to encourage further exchange.

The Sound we See: A Los Angeles City Symphony is poetic as a result of its focus on everyday life and DIY approach to filmmaking. Prescribed by the low-budget approach, the scenes are shot with available light, resulting in footage with an atmospheric character. Similarly, due to the scarcity of film stock, shots are carefully chosen and composed. A reverence for time and place speaks through the material, poetically capturing the mindset of the young participants. The precariousness of life in a vast urban sprawl is juxtaposed with moments of beauty and belonging. During classes the instructors extensively use body language (reminiscent of the "jazz hands" used by the Occupy movements), hands-on instruction and group discussion as educative tools. Their enthusiasm, love for low-budget filmmaking and positive attitude toward life in general are all significant as prefigurative tools employed in the process of making.

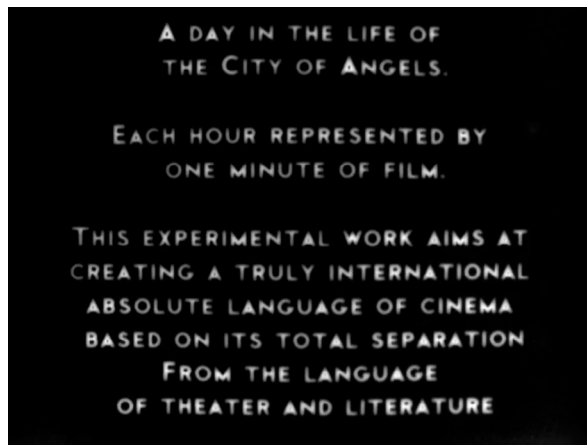


Fig. 4. Screenshot from the title sequence of *The Sound we See: A Los Angeles City Symphony* by Echo Park Film Center.



Fig. 5. Screenshot from the opening sequence of *The Sound we See: A Los Angeles City Symphony* by Echo Park Film Center.

The Sound we See: A Los Angeles City Symphony is a 'glocal' version of *Life in a Day*, much more aware of the tensions and contradictions of contemporary city life than its high-end counterpart. The community aspect of the project is taken a lot more seriously as well, besides filming the actual footage, participants did their own editing and also had a say in further post-production decisions. All of this successfully holds together, supported by the 24-hour grid and the continuous guidance and support of the project leaders who run their centre (and externally affiliated groups) as a big family.

The limitation of the project is delineated by this approach as well, the film does not achieve the critical social and political depth that is offered by the *The Uprising* and *I Love You*. Instead *The Sound we See* is a celebration of youthfulness and collaboration, and as such is successful in prefiguring "desired social relations and practices" in a meaningful and coherent way. The key element here is education in the sense of providing participants with power-to (instead of power-over). This is relevant in the light of Raekstad and Gradin's analysis of power relations and prefigurative politics: "being able to seize the means of production naturally requires you to have certain internal powers of your own - like the capacity to communicate with others and to know how certain machines work." (Raekstad & Gradin 2020: 42). Several of the participants who were involved in *The Sound we See: A Los Angeles City Symphony* are now working at the centre as instructors, educating the next generation. Others have been able to secure further education in the arts or creative industries. The aim is practical here; supporting the creative development of marginalized communities. But this objective is not approached in a linear way: separating methods and outcome. Instead, a more multi-dimensional system is used: a dialogical approach that includes instructors, participants and spectators.

Retreat

The final case to be discussed is not one film but a collection of films, all made within the framework of the Independent Imaging Retreat or, more succinctly: Film Farm. The retreat is an initiative set up by teacher/filmmaker Philip Hoffman and the late writer/filmmaker Marian McMahon in 1994. The yearly gathering takes place at a rural farm in Ontario, deliberately taking the participants away from their urban dwellings. Film equipment is set-up in the barn and darkrooms are located in the area formerly occupied by animals pens. During the first few years screenings took place upstairs while the cows mooed underneath. A series of workshops facilitates exchange between filmmakers who have a variety of experience and skills. Footage is shot and developed without preconceived plan and the rough environment and sober production methods are reflected in the resulting images. A key workshop is focused on eco-processing, using plants and flowers from the yard and adjacent fields as ingredients to mix film developer. This eco-sensitivity is extended in workshops about natural tinting and toning techniques and phytophraphy. This method is described extensively in my paper *Phytograms: Rebuilding Human-Plant Affiliations* (Doing 2020). The resulting catalogue of works produced at the farm coincides with the conditions in which the films were made; the rural surroundings, the old barn, the basic equipment and the assembled aficionados. The Film Farm supplies an environment which not only works as a backdrop or subject but as a particular kind of disposition that becomes part of each film. A more extensive account of the retreat can be found in *An Arrow not a Target* (MacKenzie 2013).

The individual films are not intended to form one unifying whole but are regularly screened together in constantly shifting combinations. An extensive list of completed films, now exceeding 100 titles, can be found on Hoffman's website (Hoffman 2019). Recurring motifs such as the landscape, the vegetation, the buildings, the type of film-stock, the processing method, the improvisational approach to filmmaking and the communal and co-creational nature of the retreat appear in a variety of combinations. These motifs form a patchwork of interlocking parts in a grand narrative, only present in a subtext, pointing back at the source. Going back to Vertov's analogy of cinematic soldiers who fight to bring a new (utopian) reality into the world, the Film Farm could be seen as an anarchistic training camp for asymmetrical warfare of the pacifist kind. Its soldiers dispersing after a week, subsequently articulating fragments of the farm's enduring mission as undercover agents. Once brought back together, a coherence between the films emerges, revealing their initial extraction.

Arguably, the significance of the Film Farm's body of work flows from the dispersion and reunion of the resulting individual works. Individuality and collectivity coincide. Each of the works is made in complete freedom by an

artist and yet the works speak to each other by means of their collective source. When driving through the Canadian countryside a majority of onlookers would probably not notice anything remarkable when passing Hoffman's farm. Yet a growing number of films have been made on the premises, each of them revealing an individual way of being there while simultaneously reflecting the wider community of filmmakers. By repeating the same but always different, the steadily expanding catalogue co-created at the Independent Imaging Retreat reveals a diversity of aspects of rural life, mediated by the enchanting materiality of photo-chemical film.

As such, the Film Farm's films can be described as a remarkable antidote to the drive for an ever more spectacular and dispersed view of the world as previously seen in *Life in a Day*. Simultaneously, the Film Farm's films give a highly personal insight into the lives of the makers, often radically revealing their divergent sexuality, political orientation and/or artistic otherness. The Film Farm's films are mostly screened within an experimental film context and the distribution method is similar to the one used by the makers of *I Love You*. The filmmakers will often travel around with their work, screening selections of shorts in dedicated venues, while afterwards engaging in discussion with the audience. Although this has a limited reach, the unique quality and content of the films can be fully appreciated and understood in such a context. Spectators are often involved in filmmaking in some capacity: as directors, artists, teachers or critical thinkers. This specialised audience has a sensibility to the phenomenological experience that these films have to offer.



Fig. 6. Participants and staff at the Film Farm, 2015

Kim Knowles' concluding remarks about the Film Farm and affiliated initiatives in *Experimental Film and Photochemical Practices* are significant here: "To be an artist in the current climate is to frequently find oneself in a situation of precarity" (Knowles 2020: 177). The community of artists and filmmakers that gathers at the Film Farm is deeply aware of the inexorable problems caused by persistent sexism, racism, colonialism and ecological decline. The Film Farm functions as an incubator, giving artists breathing space to seek a meaningful artistic response to these social and environmental crises that are spinning out of control. During the duration of the retreat the participants look for a coincidence of more equal and inclusive social relations and sustainable media practices. As Uri Gordon points out in his article *Prefigurative Politics between Ethical Practice and Absent Promise*: "activists promoting community sustainability, bioremediation, energy transition and Permaculture system design are among the most attuned to prognoses of collapse." (Gordon 2017: 29). According to Gordon, who approaches prefigurative politics in a more ambivalent way, a possible strategy to fight off despair is to be found in what he refers to as anxious or catastrophic hope. The Film Farm brings together artists who are 'attuned to prognoses of collapse', not only in terms of the aforementioned crises but also in relation to their medium (photochemical film) that is branded as redundant, or their methodology (artisanal practice) that is labeled as economically marginal. The temporary utopian setting that the Film Farm offers, inserts a dose of positivism into the group. This newfound hope is diffused far beyond the grounds of the retreat.

Conclusion

The structural organisation of a film text based on what Manovich has identified as a database configuration is fitting for the portrayal of a community, a collective or a habitat, showing a variety of aspects of the main subject in parallel micro-narratives, bringing out their kinship, affinities, commonalities and contradictions. This can be applied either within the confines of a neighbourhood, a city, a country or can even reach toward a global perspective. Vertov's legacy is enduring and lives on in the hands of many filmmakers, educators and producers who constantly shape and reinvent his communal agenda.

The poetics of the database can be found within rhymes, rhythms and impromptu patterns emerging from its seemingly random and chaotic input. The discussed examples all use this property, either steered by an expert editor or director or co-created by a group of participants. While the notion of the database is prevalently understood as being part of the digital domain, the examples given demonstrate that the concept can be applied in both digital and analog film productions irrespective of technology. In terms of aesthetics, all examples

share a gusto for unpolished images and the deliberate incorporation of technical imperfections. Blurry images, over- and underexposure, scratches and distortions and digital or chemical accidents are embraced by the filmmakers mentioned in this article. Moreover, handheld camera work appears in all films, underlining the presence of the filmmaker(s) within the work.

In terms of ethics, this article has explored prefigurative politics as a guiding principle. Raekstad and Gradin have argued that: "As long as we seek to take power in existing key hierarchical institutions, we will remain stuck in a logic of domination and will not be able to establish a genuinely equal, and democratic society." (Raekstad and Gradin 2020: 33). It is relevant to consider this argument within the context of the film industry as it is routinely organised in a hierarchical way, applying the logic of a top-down approach. The discussed films are exploring a bottom-up approach in a number of different ways, either on a quite limited or on a much more developed scale. Notwithstanding the crowd-sourced footage, the mode of production of *Life in a Day* still follows a top-down approach to decision making: large amounts of data are processed by a small team of editors who shape the final form of the film and decide upon its internal narrative 'logic'. In *The Uprising* and *I Love You* this combination between crowd-sourcing footage and a traditional approach to editing is also applied but with the clear intention to provide a mouthpiece for the activists/protagonists. The further examples discussed (*The Sound we See* and the films coming out of Film Farm) demonstrate that a comprehensive bottom-up approach is possible and that this method can lead to compelling results. In both examples the participants have collectively agreed on a set of preconditions while continuously sharing and discussing their creative decisions.

Mathijs van de Sande has pointed out in the above quoted article that instead of an electoral-representative form of democracy prefigurative politics strives for more inclusive forms of participatory democracy. Corresponding to this argument, the discussed films also explore participation. Each film does this in a distinctive way, demonstrating the limitations and possibilities of such an approach. In *Life in a Day* participation is limited to the voluntary submission of footage. In *The Uprising* brave and altruistic actions are performed, both in front of and behind the camera. As argued above, the participative element is portrayed by the film rather than being an intrinsic part of the production itself. *I Love You* accomplishes participation in two ways. First, by providing a precise context for the protagonists to shoot their own images in an open dialogue with the directors. Secondly, by touring the film in a format that encourages discussion between the directors and the audience. This distribution strategy is also used by the further two examples. *The Sound we See* not only involves the contributors in shooting the film but in all parts of the production process. This project emphasises

participation as a core element, focusing rather on the process of creation and less on the final outcome. Finally, the films made during The Independent Imaging Retreat are the result of knowledge exchange, the use of shared resources and the specificities prescribed by the rural location. As such, a balance is sought between individual liberty and communal interaction.

As noted by Holloway: "we cannot wait for a future that may never come. It is necessary to move beyond now, in the sense of creating a different logic, a different way of talking, a different organisation of doing" (Holloway 2019: 206). As a medium, cinema is uniquely equipped with the power to evoke new realities. Therefore, the medium can be a powerful tool to develop such a different logic. Harnessing this power for the progression of a prefigurative agenda is not a simple task, but as demonstrated by the above examples, Vertov's seed has fallen on fertile grounds. The open ended, experimental nature of prefiguration does not strive for perfection. Instead of making a masterpiece or a blockbuster what is aimed at here is a cultural experience that genuinely involves and inspires people.

Declaration of Competing Interests

I have been an artist in residence at both Echo Park Film Center and Film Farm. I have received a grant from the Echo Park Film Center giving me access to their facilities in exchange for giving a workshop and a presentation. The Film Farm has offered me free participation in exchange for giving a workshop.

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