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Lumière Word Cloud (voicesonfilm, 2017): Creativity, Curation, Projection in Film Education

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Abstract

Lumière Word Cloud *(voicesonfilm, 2017) is a co-curated experiment in the design and execution of academic/student collaborative assessment methods at Third Level. Inspired by classroom conversations regarding the parallels between the earliest forms of cinema – as exemplified by the films of Auguste and Louis Lumière – and the ubiquitous gif file that now appears on every social media platform, Lumière Word Cloud also asks us to reconsider the position and role that cinema history occupies in the contemporary classroom. A film composed entirely of gif files, Lumière Word Cloud also acts as an opportunity to interrogate exactly what cinema means in 2017. The film does not seek to eschew narrative altogether but rather aims to demonstrate the multifarious ways in which the collaborative nature of a film's construction can enhance our understanding of storytelling in the digital age. In this way, Lumière Word Cloud also stands as a challenge to more traditional understandings of not only assessment methods but also to older pedagogic models regarding the status of skills and the transfer of knowledge in the contemporary learning environment.*

Keywords: Moving-picture film; Feature films--History and criticism; Lumière family; Digital curation; Students—Education; Pedagogy; Collaborative choreography; Storytelling

> *In any film, however unpromising, some moment of interest, even beauty, is likely to appear. That is what the camera, left to itself, is like: the objects it manufactures have for us the same natural interest, or fascination, or boredom, or nothing, or poignance, or terror, as the world itself.*[1]

> Stanley Cavell

> *Cinematic ways of seeing the world, of structuring time, of narrating a story, of linking one experience to the next, have become the basic means by which computer users access and interact with all cultural data.*[2]

> Lev Manovich

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[1] Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 104.
[2] Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), p. xv.

One can no longer specialize in a single discipline and hope truthfully to express a clear picture of its relationships in the environment. This is especially true in the case of the intermedia network of cinema and television, which now functions as nothing less than the nervous system of mankind.[3]

<div align="right">Gene Youngblood</div>

Background: voicesonfilm

voicesonfilm is a co-curated, collaborative, audiovisual academic research initiative that provides real-world opportunities for learners to engage in academic content creation. As well as engaging in relevant audiovisual debate through the organization of public events, voicesonfilm is concerned with academic branding, innovation, entrepreneurship, and internship opportunities. Key to the initiative is a continual emphasis on the ever-developing relationship between research and practice.

Beginning in June 2014, the first collaborative content curated by voicesonfilm was a series of five short films examining the life and career of noted international Film scholar, Professor Charles Barr. These films not only examined Professor Barr's pivotal role in the development of Film Studies as an academic discipline, but also examined key areas of critical debate including British film criticism, widescreen technology and the films of Alfred Hitchcock.

Directed and produced by members of the voicesonfilm collective but shot and edited by undergraduates, the five films made with Professor Barr represent the first steps in fostering the kinds of creativity and collaboration between research-active academics and undergraduate students that voicesonfilm was established to develop.[4]

Flickering Origins

As part of their QQI Level 8 degree, final year students on the BA (Hons) Film programme at Dublin Business School participate in a year-long module called Contemporary Cinemas. Like similar modules elsewhere, the primary aim of this module is to allow students to examine the medium from a wide range of theoretical, historical and personal perspectives including returning to the earliest days of the medium to compare early moving images with the super-plenitude of images that move today.

The BA (Hons) Film programme is notable for not requiring any traditional examinations. Instead, students are assessed through a wide range of individual and group activities designed to develop creativity and engagement with the discipline. *Lumière Word Cloud*'s origin as a piece of assessed work can be traced back to a simple classroom remark during the delivery of this module regarding the similarities between the ubiquitous gif (Graphics Interface Format) file and the earliest flickers of cinema as exemplified by the pioneering films of the French filmmaker and master illusionist George Méliès and the Lumière brothers, Auguste and Louis. This period is now irreversibly defined in film history by Tom Gunning's seminal work as the 'Cinema of Attractions.'

For Gunning, early cinema needs to be seen 'less as a way of telling stories than as a way of presenting a series of views to the audiences.' As he continues:

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[3] Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (London: Studio Vista, 1970), p. 41.
[4] *voicesonfilm*, accessed 27 May 2017, https://vimeo.com/voicesonfilm.

> To summarise, the cinema of attractions directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle – a unique event, whether fictional or documentary, that is of interest in itself. […]   Theatrical display dominates over narrative absorption,   emphasizing the direct stimulation of shock or surprise at the expense of unfolding a story or creating a   diegetic universe. [5]

While Gunning's original argument concerned itself with cinema up until about 1907 one can easily theorize that his ideas of images soliciting attention, inciting curiosity, supplying pleasure through spectacle and, as Carol Vernalis notes, demonstrating 'a fascination with the basic mechanics of things' is very similar to our contemporary experience of the various ways in which the GIF now dominates timelines on social media platforms, Instagram, Twitter and most notably, Facebook. [6] Indeed, one could argue, following Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, that moving images, as exemplified by the gif, are now so common and ubiquitous that they no longer represent a 'window on the world' but have become to a considerable extent, the 'very face' of our reality.[7]

Mechanics of Film Making

In December 1895 Auguste and Louis Lumière showed ten films to a paying audience in the basement room in the Grand Café, on the Boulevard des Capuchines in Paris. At this moment in time, generally accepted as the first time an audience had paid to watch a film show, the 'mass-audience problem,' as Leo Enticknap indicates, was finally overcome. [8]

The ten films listed on the programme included *La Sortie de l'Usine Lumière à Lyon* (*Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*), *Le Jardinier* (*The Sprinkler Sprinkled*), *La Voltige* (*Horse Trick Riders*) and, most notably, *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare* (*Arrival of a Train at a Station*).[9]

When we watch these films in 2017 it is still remarkable to note exactly how mundane these moving images make the world of the Lumières appear, as mundane, indeed, as the moving images of our world appear to us today. We see people hurrying home after their day's work; a man feeding a child while his wife stirs a cup of coffee. The films show people going places, setting off for destinations unknown or arriving from who knows where. We see clowning and indifference. We see staging and natural activity. We also watch people disembarking, looking, not looking, or waiting to go elsewhere, wholly unaware that their journey on that day could ever mean so much to the history of the world.

As the result of a classroom discussion that followed a screening of these early films, ten key words were generated. The ten words were chosen as a direct response to the images viewed. On another day in another classroom the words chosen could well have been different, but the words chosen on this particular day were 'Cat,' 'Sea,' 'Train,' 'Crowd,' 'Baby,' 'Horse,' 'Wine,' 'Bounce,' 'Camera,' and 'Walk.'

Some of the chosen words like 'Train,' for example, or 'Baby,' are obvious responses to the Lumières' predilection for filming the *theirness* of their own world. Others, like

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[5] Tom Gunning, 'The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde,' in Thomas Elsaesser, ed., *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative* (London: BFI Publishing, 1997), pp. 57-59.

[6] Carol Vernalis, *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video and the New Digital Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 139.

[7] Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 198.

[8] Leo Enticknap, *Moving Image Technology: From Zoetrope to Digital* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005), p. 12.

[9] David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film*, 5th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2016), p. 10.

'Bounce,' and 'Wine' are far more oblique but can be understood as verbal responses to movement and actions in the frame or watching ordinary people doing ordinary things. These ten words thus became the start of an experiment in creative collaboration.

Each collaborator was charged with finding three .gif files for each of the ten words. This process was undertaken independently and at no stage in the process was there any discussion regarding selection and choice. Each collaborator was also required to provide the url for each .gif so as to act as a reference for the project's sources. The .gif files themselves were captured as screen recordings by using QuickTime. This allowed each .gif to be saved as a .mov file, thereby making the next stage of the project manageable. A folder on Google Drive was created and the harvested files were collected here. Once all the files were received they were dropped into a single editing timeline. The order of the images was simply dictated by the order of the contributions. The only editorial condition was that contributed files were not to be edited for length.

The film itself was organized around the principle of six versions of the same film being shown in a single frame and, starting with the top left, each version starting six seconds after the first. Arranged in this way and once again mindful of Gunning's notion of 'visual curiosity,' *Lumière Word Cloud* represents an attempt to move away from traditional forms of sequential narrative, despite its organising principle, and instead explore what Lev Manovich understands as 'spatial montage.' For Manovich, spatial montage can involve a number of images all appearing on screen simultaneously. That this signals a move away from what Manovich describes as 'traditional cinematic temporal montage' – with its emphasis on the sequential – is useful because, as Manovich continues:

> The logic of replacement, characteristic of cinema, gives way to the logic of addition and coexistence. Time becomes spatialized, distributed over the surface of the screen. In spatial montage nothing need be forgotten, nothing is erased. Just as we use computers to accumulate endless texts, messages, notes and data, and just as a person, going through life, accumulates more and more memories, with the past slowly acquiring more than the future, spatial montage can accumulate events and images as it progresses through its narrative.[10]

Outcome: Lumière Word Cloud (voicesonfilm, 2017)

What is *Lumière Word Cloud*? Following Manovich, we might understand the film in terms of addition and coexistence. As the film unfolds in six staggered versions of itself, images are added and then sit alongside each other at particular moments in the frame, coexisting, even if only for a moment before disappearing, only to reappear as the next identical image emerges. We also understand the impact of the film in terms of accumulation and distribution. Though there is linearity in terms of the film's construction, this sense soon gives way to something far more circular and, indeed, far more poetic. Here, the thoughts of Andrey Tarkovsky come to mind.

Like many other practitioners, Tarkovsky found what he called 'the logic of poetry' in cinema to be 'extraordinarily pleasing.' Though he bases his discussion on ideas of theatrical writing which, he felt, link images through the linear logic of plot. These ideas can be extended to include a response to *Lumière Word Cloud*. For Tarkovsky, film material can be joined together in a way that is different from what he calls 'patterns of logical speculation,' creating, in effect, something far more poetic. As he continues:

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[10] Manovich, *Language of New Media*, pp. 322-326.

Through poetic connections feeling is heightened and the spectator is made more active. He becomes a participant in the process of discovering life, unsupported by ready-made deductions from the plot or ineluctable pointers by the author. […] Complexities of thought and poetic visions of the world do not have to be thrust into the framework of the patently obvious.[11]

In this way, then, *Lumière Word Cloud* can be understood as an exercise in poetic accumulation.

Another way in which the film might be understood is simply in terms of an attempt to reassert the relevance of (early) cinema as an object of serious study in the contemporary classroom and thereby overcome the perennial challenge of making silent film relevant to the next generation of film students. That this is a collaborative assessment exercise makes this reassertion even more significant. In addition, and far more significantly for the purposes of assessment on degree programmes, *Lumière Word Cloud* also soundly demonstrates the value to be found in fostering creativity in individual students. For example, as part of the assessment process, each collaborator was asked to reflect upon their involvement in the project. As one of the collaborators wrote:

What I found about this project in terms of creativity was very surprising. I thought at first that, the entire film is just a big compilation of other people's work. But as I chose my '.gif' files for my part of the film, I came to realize that there is so much more to it than a compilation. When we look at anything, be it film, music, television etc. Everything has essentially been done, in some way or another. Everything is really a remix or a compilation of something else. So, when I chose my '.gif' files and placed them into the timeline, I felt a sense of creativity that I did not think I would feel. I learned that this film is actually a compilation of creativity.[12]

For another of the collaborators, the value of the project could also be understood in terms of it being an exercise in individual development. As they outline:

On a personal level I learnt a great deal in both visual and aural creativity. Certainly on a technical level I learnt how to achieve the various complex requirements a project like this entails but also I discovered how it is possible to combine elements that are designed to convey one meaning and make them become something entirely new.[13]

In terms of collaboration itself, all of the contributors demonstrated their satisfaction with being involved in a co-curated project. As one of the contributors noted:

The project needed more than a single person, it gave it more depth in terms of what kind of images were chosen for it. Everyone has a different sense of creativity and some of us are from different generations. This reflected on our '.gif' choices for the film. Which I think is a very important concern about the film.[14]

Furthermore, as another observed:

Another thing I found to be very interesting when putting together the film was the image selection from the other people in my class. For this film, we had to select a number of '.gif' files relating to these specific topics. Cats, sea, trains, walking, crowds, babies, horses, wine glasses, bouncing, cameras, walking. The relation to

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[11] Andrey Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), pp. 19-20.
[12] *Lumière Word Cloud* (voicesonfilm, 2017) – Contributor's Reflection #1, May 2017
[13] *Lumière Word Cloud* (voicesonfilm, 2017) – Contributor's Reflection #2, May 2017
[14] *Lumière Word Cloud* (voicesonfilm, 2017) – Contributor's Reflection #1, May 2017

these specific words could be anything, it was entirely a self-chosen project. This was another aspect that I loved and I also believe helped shape the film.[15]

Distilling the reflections outlined by the collaborators above clearly signals the possibility that *Lumière Word Cloud* can also be understood as an opportunity for all of the individuals involved, including the members of voicesonfilm, to develop a better understanding of the act of collaborative creation and how the act itself also allows for the possibility of other insights into other pertinent practices and research methods associated with contemporary higher education.

Initial Conclusions

There was a recent moment in film history when the world remediated a quasi-religious monument through the refraction of a thousand different, personal lenses. This was the moment when Obi Wan Kenobi became a child with a beard drawn on; when Chewbacca became a cardboard tube covered in painted cotton wool; when Luke Skywalker became a crudely drawn figure on a badly rendered landscape. That moment was *Star Wars Uncut*, Casey Pugh's crowdsourced remake of George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977). [16] *Star Wars Uncut* was another film examined on the same module as the Lumière brothers' films and further contributed to the creation of *Lumière Word Cloud*.

Filmmaking has always been understood as a collaborative process, with input and group effort often unequally contributing to the successful completion, or otherwise, of a particular project. Whether capturing a train arriving at a station, recreating Babylon in the Californian desert, or programming the undulating flow of a hundred thousand infected people rolling down an alleyway in Jerusalem, we all understand the many ways in which individual effort has resulted in collective achievement. The availability of editing timelines and related software has now ensured that the collaborative filmmaking process is far more democratic now than it has ever been before. As Peter Bosma writes:

> We have moved into an era of participatory culture. The film viewer has increasingly become an active participant in the circulation of films. The threshold for filmmaking has become lower and lower, because it has become relatively easy to contribute to the supply of audiovisual material.[17]

Furthermore, as Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green outline in *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*:

> When material is produced according to a one-size-fits-all model, it imperfectly fits the needs of any given audience. Instead, audience members have to retrofit it to better serve their interests. As material spreads, it gets remade: either literally, through various forms of sampling and remixing, or figuratively, via its insertion into ongoing conversations and across different platforms. This continuous process of repurposing and recirculating is eroding the perceived divides between production and consumption.[18]

On a much smaller scale but equally valid in terms of its impact, especially in relation to the idea of insertion into ongoing conversations, *Lumière Word Cloud*, like *Star Wars Uncut*, fulfils the criteria outlined by Jenkins, Ford and Green. In addition, and returning the

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[15] *Lumière Word Cloud* (voicesonfilm, 2017) – Contributor's Reflection #3, May 2017

[16] 'About' *Star Wars Uncut*, accessed 10-5-2017, http://www.starwarsuncut.com/about#_=_.

[17] Peter Bosma, *Film Programming: Curating for Cinemas, Festivals, Archives* (Wallflower Press, 2015), pp. 31.

[18] Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), p. 27.

conversation back to the classroom, there is something inherently fascinating about viewing *Lumière Word Cloud* as an example of how assessed activities on degree programmes might also repurposed and recirculated, especially when we consider that the students' collaboration in the creation of assessed activities moves them away from the more traditional one-size-fits-all model of a terminal examination, for example. As Manovich suitably concluded in 2001, predicting the explosion of self-created filmmaking:

> Cinematic ways of seeing the world, of structuring time, of narrating a story, of linking one's experience to the next, have become the basic means by which computer users access and interact with all cultural data […] Today millions of computer users communicate with each other through the same computer interface. And in contrast to cinema, where most 'users' are able to 'understand' cinematic language but not 'speak' it (i.e., make films), all computer users can 'speak' the language of the interface. [19]

However, Manovich was not only foreshadowing the role that technology would play in the future when it came to filmmaking; he was also inadvertently predicting the possibility of a major crisis when it comes to the provision of contemporary audiovisual education.

Traditional methods of film education require and understand of cinematic language, with those who understand it more teaching it to those who understand it less. The fact of not being able to 'speak' this language (i.e. make films rather than watch them) has never been a serious impediment to anyone seeking to pursue a career as a film academic. That is, until now.

The fact that all computer users can choose to 'speak' the language of the interface is significant for what it tells us about the abilities of the students who are now entering our classrooms. Their grasp of technology, their whole-life immersion in the digital and all that this immersion wonderfully entails means that nowadays it may well be the case that even though we can all understand the same language (of the interface) the students who we stand before actually speak this language better than we do. In this way, then, perhaps *Lumière Word Cloud* also exists as some form of portent about the future of academics in the digital classroom.

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[19] Manovich, *Language of New Media*, p. xv.

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