THE LION’S GAZE: FILMMAKING AS AN AWARENESS PRACTICE

ROBYN TRAILL

ABSTRACT:
This is an extract from a Masters study describing my exploration of the art of film as an inner awareness practice from the view of the Buddhist yogic tradition and the teachings by Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche called dharma art. I call this contemplative film practice. The article speaks to the initial pre-production and production phases of this research where formless Mahamudra meditations were most important. A camera lens was employed as a cue or reminder to practice the lens of awareness while capturing moving images. In the post-production phase, the creative meditations within Buddhist yogas became a major reference point: visualization, ritual practice, narrative text, and embodied energy practices. The research study included a series of meditation retreats with a schedule of visualization practices, formless meditation, mahamudra meditation-in-action, illusory body practice, and dream yoga. In between retreats the practice of lens art and meditation continued as a walking-photography practice. Two films linked here, Dreamsign and Holofractals, artifacts of this process, are included through various links in the text.

BIO:
Robyn Traill spends his working life wandering aimlessly between various educational, artistic and yogic pursuits. Currently he writes music for film and TV, teaches music and performance from Grade 4 to Grade 12, and practices visual art and music as a path of inner awareness. Robyn identifies as a Buddhist yogin with a natural resonance for a wide range contemplatives, ecstacies, monastics and scholars. His family provides a penetrating and vital atmosphere of feminine energy without which he would have no hope of experiencing the truth and tyranny of his own male privilege.

The everyday practice is simply to develop a complete acceptance and openness to all situations and to all people, experiencing everything totally without mental reservations and blockages, so that one never withdraws or centralizes onto oneself. (Trungpa & Shikpo, 2003, pp. 461-462)

Contemplative film practice is a method of cultivating the filmmaking process as an awareness practice. In the context of my work it is specifically the marriage of Buddhist awareness practice and the art and craft of filmmaking (Traill, 2018). These Buddhist awareness practices are meditations that explore the nature of our mind thereby synchronizing ourselves with the way “things” truly are. Buddhist awareness practices span a range of formless meditations, conceptual contemplations, and visualizations, and what follows is a sketch of the art of filmmaking from the viewpoint of this meditative tradition.

Contemplative film practice is, however, not dependent upon Buddhist practices at all. This art practice is fruitful territory for any contemplative meditation that works with sensory experience as simultaneous with the presence of what might be called “big mind.” Indeed, religious traditions are not necessary, and in some ways the most relevant evolution of contemplative film practice may simply be as a secular expression of art for the sake of waking up to our genuine human way of being and knowing.
From the Buddhist view, our minds and phenomena are in constant change. There is no solidity to existence. There is no solid “thing” present from one moment to the next. The true nature of existence, whatever else it might be, seems unstable to the senses and our consciousness. Our body changes, our mind is constantly shifting, accessing different senses, dreaming, and grappling conceptually to figure things out. We are a flow of heat, water, air, matter, and bacteria. We act like our thoughts, our lives, our personalities are solid and permanent, rather than temporary appearances. We live within a complex set of nested dualities, concepts that split our experience artificially into me and my environment, things being “for me” and “against me,” past and future. Within these dualities we struggle. Our life-force, however, seems to be more of a constant flow, or a constant process than a solid thing. This flow is a flow of light, sound, thought, emotion, consciousness, gaps, perceptions, abrupt shifts, a riot of inner body sensations. Even a sense of our “self” experiencing it all is part of that flow. Different perspectives, frames, lenses pop in and out of the foreground of consciousness, and “watch” ourselves being conscious. Awareness practice is interested in making friends with this constant river of change that is our life and world.

Life is not so much a bunch of things bumping into one another in a big machine-like universe, but potencies, strata, fields, patterns, mandalas, living fabrics. Unceasing energy is always present in our experience if we are able to let go of our personal territory (Trungpa, 2003, p. 29). Holding this view of completely open, non-conceptual space and unceasing energy is referred to in the tradition as “the lion’s gaze” (Sherab & Dongyal, 1998).

The art aspect of this marriage, what I call “contemplative film practice” is to intentionally practice this openness and awareness in daily life with lens-based art forms.

There are three stages to this art practice; I discuss the first two in this article. The first is called “pre-production,” where the practitioner trains in resting in the basic space in which they find themselves, and attune themselves to the conceptual frames and lenses through which the world is filtered, particularly the lens of the “watcher.” The second stage, “production,” is camera work and the practice of responding to the sense perceptions of ordinary life as they are highlighted by lens practice.

The third stage is “post-production” involving the dance of editing and layering the images together on a timeline, and then expressing the interior flow of artistic energy through sound and music. Improvisation and spontaneity are important at this stage as those artistic styles remain close to the constant flow of how life presents itself.

The artifacts of contemplative film practice are the result of exploring the relativity and malleability of our frames and lenses on life: the play of light, the dream-like nature, the inner experience, sound, and silence. This kind of frame or lens practice maintains relevance through the whole production cycle. Two films linked here, Dreamsign and Holofractals, artifacts of this process, are included through various links in the text.

All blue underlined text in this document is linked to these films, or fragments of these films.
Frame Practice

I use the term frames interchangeably with lenses, filters, witnesses, watchers. Frames and lenses are, of course, concepts. The concept of frames separates the world in the frame from that outside the frame. The concept of the lens is that, like our eye, it gathers and bends light. Each of us has a unique “bend” on how we see the world. We can put different lenses up to our experience, and can attempt to catch our own unconscious lenses. The point of playing with lenses is to realize that there is always a different lens. A bigger frame. The most common frame is “me,” or “I.” The yogic response to the appearance of “I” is to ask, “Who is noticing the appearance of this ‘I’?” For a moment you stop looking out your own eyes and glimpse yourself from a bigger space, or sphere of knowing. You let go of the frame. You see through a different lens.

The meditation lens of my work involves questioning the nature of our consciousness and mind. Where is consciousness or mind actually located? Where do thoughts come from? Who is watching this life unfold? What is left if I stop maintaining this personal territory? The Mahamudra and Maha Ati tradition of Buddhist formless meditation says that our awareness has a “nature like the sky” (Urgyen, 2001, p. 152). This is an important instruction. The ultimate frame is the sky, a frame with no center or fringe.

Frame practice can be approached in two steps: first, you perceive a frame, and second, your perception automatically opens up. You “flip” your frame to include everything that was not in the frame. Perhaps the sky. In this way the practitioner is always expanding their self-awareness, expanding their sphere of being, unfolding into a bigger space, instantly touching into their essential, unconditional nature.

Tulku Urgyen (2001) uses many sky and space metaphors when teaching meditators how to realize their own true nature. He says “Rigpa (insight) is like space” (p. 159). It has no center or edge. And later he says that “rangjung yeshe,” self-existing wakefulness, is unconfined and wide open. The confining, limiting factor is the fabrication of the subject and object frame or lens (p. 160). The thought and the thinker are playful appearances, mere frames, in the big space of non-local awareness. In this way contemplative film practice plays with frames and lenses in order to see beyond them.

Contemplative Film Practice: The Lion’s Gaze

The centerpiece of my work thus far is the exploration and development of the art practices of film merged with what I am characterizing as the meditative practice of the lion’s gaze. It began to take shape during a pilot film project in the summer of 2016.

The Buddhist tradition is renowned for its methods of using the conceptual mind to point towards “the view,” which is inherently non-conceptual. It is best to remember that these concepts, as finely wrought as they can be, are only fingers pointing at the moon, not the actual moon. Padmasambhava, the Indian yogin instrumental in bringing Buddhism to Tibet, said that we should be like lions rather than dogs (Sherab & Dongyal, 1998). If you throw a stick for a dog, the dog will chase the stick. This is an allegory for how we habitually chase after thoughts mistaking them for the goal. But if you throw a stick for a lion it
immediately turns to look at the thrower. He advises yogins to be like a lion and look at the source of the thought. The lion looks at the “I” who thinks it owns the thought.

Retreat

Retreat practice is a regular part of a meditation practitioner’s life. In its simplest terms retreat means living by yourself away from human contact for a period of time. A meditation retreat can follow a strict schedule with a specific sequence of meditations from morning to night, or it can be more relaxed with a couple of formal meditation sessions and the rest of the time bringing the meditative frame of mind to the ordinary activities of cooking, cleaning, studying, or simply watching the phenomenal world.

Choosing retreat as the context for filming is important. Life slows down, creating a backdrop of simplicity that illuminates the clarity and flow of the moments. A wide boundary arises between waking life and dreams, solidity and imagination. The retreat atmosphere can seem ripe with moments of liminality, with glimpses of epistemological and ontological groundlessness. Retreat disrupts a practitioner’s heavy conditioning and unexamined assumptions about reality. The possibility is always there to see what has not been seen.

Pre-Production

Choosing to work with a camera on retreat is actually a pre-production decision. It lays the ground for production and orients how the visuals and audio will be recorded. The pre-production stage of a standard film project involves script writing and planning. Pre-production, in the case of contemplative film practice, does not involve much writing, but, rather, the preparation for a meditative practice. The essential elements of a “lion’s gaze” style of meditation, beyond the Buddhist tradition, would include two main qualities.

The first is practicing a sense of psychological spaciousness. All occurrences of outer phenomena and inner thoughts and emotions are allowed to come and go without fixation. When occurrences arise, one’s allegiance is to space around the occurrences. This space should be considered, at least as a thought experiment, as a non-local awareness. An entwining of space and awareness.

The second quality is embodying energy. Within the sense of space-awareness is flow. The full vitality of life is blossoming and dissolving constantly and this flow is a felt sense, a somatic awareness. An entwining of body and awareness.

In terms of pre-production, this somatic-space-awareness meditation, from whatever source one draws upon, brings the director’s lens to the front of consciousness in this practice.

Many of the traditional images and metaphors (lenses) of the world’s meditative traditions, when brought to mind in pre-production, are the actual cues that turn on the camera in the production phase. In the Buddhist tradition they would be cues such as “Be like an ocean” or “Be a child of illusion.”

Expressed in another way: the view and meditation of pre-production are the preparation
for relaxing, dancing, artistically, filmically, into a big, open, energetic space. As big or as precise a space as one can actualize.

Writing

One might think that, because of the importance of non-conceptual awareness, writing and conceptual thought are second-class citizens in the process of contemplative film practice, but this is not the case. The arising of thought is part of the play of the creative space itself. The role of writing in my pre-production process, particularly journaling in the manner of Julia Cameron’s “morning pages” free-writing technique (Cameron, 1992) or Natalie Goldberg’s attention to “first thoughts” (Goldberg, 2010) have proven to open fresh insights and threads to the engagement of meditation and art. Cameron and Goldberg practice a discipline of writing whatever arises in the mind at that moment. The pen does not stop, but records the flow of thought without editing or judgement. The way I sometimes experience this is as if the words are arising out of space without clear cause.

The Mahamudra and Maha Ati language talks of space in different ways: charged space, womb of space, space pregnant with potency. Space can be a synonym for mind, awareness, emptiness endowed with ceaseless display. This kind of free writing is one of my practices to access this space. Many of the words and phrases from this writing became material for what I later call “cueing practice,” particularly in the production and post-production phases. Many contradictions and metaphors embedded in Mahamudra and Ati language are there to put the practitioner in a liminal space (Chögyam & Dechen, 2002) and these come forward when contemplating and writing.

And in some very real sense all is liminal space.

Tools and Technique

Technically, pre-production means testing out cameras, microphones, and recording procedures for simplicity and ease of use. Ideally the technology becomes an aid or support role to the moment of being present and then extending into the present moment. The intention to meditate-in-action is purposely connected to and invoked in the preparation and wearing of the recording device. The camera then provides the same role as lighting a candle or arranging a meditation cushion for a traditional meditation session.

The Script

The way I think about the script for a contemplative film in this study is basically an “exposition of consciousness.” In pre-production it is helpful to articulate and familiarize oneself with the details of life’s appearances that arise to our consciousness. In production, which is essentially camera work, these details provoke a somatic response to record sense impressions of those moments. The list of these details can be considered a “shot list” for the production phase of filmmaking.

• the five sense impressions
• the mind moving between them
• the stability or fickleness of the flow
• the awareness of body movement
• the moment of choice, or judgement
• the inner sensation buzzing in the background
• the shifting of different lenses and frames
• the uncertainty arising from nowhere
• the awareness of the space of mind
• the watcher expanding and contracting

The pre-production stage is an opportunity to refresh an understanding of the basic nature of how consciousness unfolds. This will influence the movement of the camera in response to image and sound in the production phase. In the production phase, the filming itself, these words, seed ideas, or touchstones, orient the attention, and cue the attention to rest in awareness and dance with what arises.

For the sake of simplicity it is helpful to talk about pre-production and production as a sequence, but I find the relationship to be more of a continuous, reflexive loop.

Production

Advice to Self

Stay with the heart

tune in

to the flow of the moment

without agenda

rest

settle in that space

be that space

you are the art that is

each moment.

You are space looking at itself

from nowhere

without center or fringe

spontaneous

brush stroke or thought

... arises.
dance with the play of phenomena

Glimpse the space too vast

for “self and other” to gain a solid purchase

How can you know before the occurrence of a knower?

Who’s observing the knower?

From where are they looking

and at what?

Who just asked that?

Settling into this undefinable space

is the lion’s gaze.

empty, luminous,

awareness.

without center.

Camera as Meditational Aid

The production phase, and its basic art-mediation, involves holding or wearing a recording device in response to the flow of sensory and mental occurrences. Small portable cameras are easy to use and keep close at hand. The way they are used in this study is mostly to capture point-of-view footage of the sight and sound of everything from waking up in the morning, cooking food, going for walks in the woods, practicing meditation, driving in a car, visiting shopping malls, and making visual art and music. In a more courageous or fully artistic manifestation, the camera can be part of the spontaneous movement of the body in space.

On the outer level, the camera is an extension of the eyes, ears, and body as it captures sight, sound, and movement. The camera can also take on an inner value, though it takes the practitioner’s intention for this to operate. The work of Barbara Bickel (Bickel, 2016) and Medwyn McConachy, both whose video work is found on the Gestare Art Collective web site (www.gestareartcollective.com) both involve the camera lens as extension of the body into a felt sense of the world’s rhythms and layers of meaning. One of the ways they do this is through various ritual practices that reveal connections within society, our human psychological make-up and the physical environment itself. I place myself in similar territory to Bickel and McConachy in that the camera is a support for meditation and awareness training. It is an expressive tool for bringing awareness and joy to our lot in life.
My intention is that the camera encourages my awareness and inquisitiveness. A small camera requires little thought or attention before use, which is a key virtue. The mainstay style of practice of the Mahamudra and Maha Ati is the generation of, and close attention to, spontaneous moments of awareness. Putting hands on a small camera and pressing record are small gestures and movements that can synch up with this style of practice.

**Cueing During Production**

Cueing is a form of contemplative practice. The elements of an exposition of consciousness can be used as cues to open and give space to whatever is occurring at that moment. Compelling cues, slogans, or frames are part of the meditative tradition, part of pre-production contemplations all the way through to the end of the contemplative film practice cycle.

For thirty-five years I’ve worked with various cues, phrases, and slogans, most of which are cut from the fabric of the Buddhist teachings I’ve received. Cues are a reflective technique used on the part of the contemplative filmmaker for coming to the present moment with some awareness. A cue is a short-hand for a longer teaching or meditation instruction. This short form of the teaching is purposefully put to memory so that it arises in the mind in response to somatic experience. The words and phrases flip the mind of the practitioner to pay attention with a little extra insight. The dawning of a cue such as “Regard your experience as a dream” can also create a strong somatic, or yogic response to a moment because it brings all of the rich experience represented by the cue.

What follows is a working list of thirteen cues with some examples of how they arose in certain imagery from the films *Dreamsign* and *Holofractals*. I have provided time codes and screen captures from the films as examples.

**1. Portable Stage Set**—The Buddhist view is that humans create backgrounds within which we live our lives. These backgrounds are part of our subconscious narrative. This cue brings awareness to this background of the basic space around ourselves. It may have a particular size or mood at any given moment. We each create the tone of the lighting. The stage set is inhabited by characters, the principle being ourselves. It is a hidden stage set where each individual is the writer, producer, director, actor, and art designer. As a practitioner I can explore how I am the source for this stage set, and then how I operate within it as a pre-existing background. It is the play of a set of unconscious frames and lenses. The frame *Holofractals* (00:47) is a self portrait superimposed on top of the image of a snake I drew from a dream. It was like a visitation from a deity of some kind. The impact of the experience led to all manner of self-reflection and narrative about what was being revealed here. In the end the only certainty I have is that it is all my mind. I am the snake, the deity, and the confused person trying to find meaning. 

Taking the cue of the stage set heightens the practitioner’s awareness practice and questions the fabrication of what is occurring.
2. Holofractal Perception — The smallest perceptual moments of sight, sound, feeling, or smell can reveal the ceaseless energy of the moment. In that way the wholeness of life is present in the smallest glimpse of sensory experience (Brakhage, 2010). In contemplative film practice the holofractal cue allows the camera to take a macro lens on things while simultaneously decentralizing and expanding into the view. This frame *Dreamsign* (1:03) is in a series of fractal moments: a wisp of smoke, an ink brush stroke, and cream curling in coffee. When I experienced these occurrences they pointed to the fragility of the world as it arises.

3. Movement — Movement is change. It is flow. Catching the constant flow in our life undermines the illusion that things are solid. Water, wind, beings, machines, inner feeling. It is a constant. *Dreamsign* 4:45 is a screen shot of flag poles reflected in the water. This moment causally arose from the wind and the moon’s tidal pull to move the water, the sun angling at a particular moment in the spin of the Earth, and the movement of both my attention and intention when caught in the flow of the light. An ephemeral, yet cosmic scale moment of flow with details as fine as sparkles dancing on the water.

4. With a Nature Like Sky — Often our human experience does not seem particularly spacious. This cue reminds me to simply raise my lens to the horizon, then raise my own gaze to the expanse of what is occurring in that moment. While in Toronto I was moved by this cue, by how much we try to cover up the sky, how easy it is to ignore, and how powerfully it transformed the claustrophobia of the urban environment. In the frame *Dreamsign* (7:25) a vertical view of the sky from Dundas Street floats on a straight-up shot of the sky from a boat dock. I hear the city, but it doesn’t steal my mind away.

5. Pain is Not a Punishment — In the frame *Holofractals* (2:59) the self-portrait is intense. In fact, self-portraits have been flashing into view for a few seconds at this point. It is hard to look at yourself and see the struggle embedded in the lines and colours. Chaos, uncertainty, depression, sadness, and fear are all part of the play of the mandala of experience. Strong energy characteristically makes us shrink our lens and forget our background stage set. “Pain is Not a Punishment” cues us to see strong energy as neither for us nor against us. In fact, it often reveals where we are holding on to a small lens or frame that has outlasted its usefulness. Then, curiously, pain might be a reward.
6. Things are Symbols of Themselves—Things are completely what they are. They are not symbolic of a concept of something other than what they are. Our discomfort, in particular, is symbolic of our essential energy in a very direct way. To practice “things being symbols of themselves” (Trungpa, 1979, p. 57) is to regard the directness of whatever is happening as touching the hot wire of existence without intermediary. No buffer. Straight drink.

The frame from *Dreamsign* (7:30) is just a bee flying to a flower. And just a car driving down the road. On one hand they might symbolize beings travelling together through life. The moment of these images captured my attention because the flow and fragility of life was simply there and felt in a particularly direct way.

7. Shadows and light—Our visual field is constantly flowing with the movement of celestial bodies. The ever-changing angle of the sun keeps everything fresh. As the earth heats and cools from the sun, pressure zones are created causing wind and weather that cause the forms we see to dance with movement, moisture, light, and dark. These are amplified by the fickle physical processes of sight and tune us to the dream-like nature of ordinary experience. The frame from *Holofractals* (5:11) is from a time-lapse video of the evening light changing while I practiced meditation. I remember thinking that I should be able to notice the change in the light as I sat there, but I was never able. I found that I could easily notice clear changes in light within 30 second intervals, and the closer the intervals became the closer I imagined feeling the earth and the sun careening through space.

8. Oceans and Waves—The oceans and waves cue is another trope to unify small occurrences (waves) with the background of emptiness and energy from which they arise (ocean). Our identity and stage set are waves. The frames and lenses are waves. Our awareness is non-local and without owner. It is the ocean. The frame from *Dreamsign* (4:10) exemplifies many cues, and not only are the vivid ripples of water dissolving as soon as they arise, but light from the sun is striking earth for the first time at that instant, both reflecting back out into the bigger space and also absorbing into the water. It is a moment of energy without anything to hold on to.

9. Body-Mind as One Space—Our own body, as it breathes and moves through space, is a reflection of our mind. Wearing a camera captures the movement of our body and mind. The body-mind cue brings awareness to how movement reveals our state of mind and shifts our state of mind. The frame from *Holofractals* (4:11) was taken when I recorded the sound of my footsteps which are an integral thread in the sound
design from 3:23 to 5:03. The practice of walking and resting the mind in the movement of the body was a central activity of this study.

Andrea Carvalho expresses this body-mind connection beautifully in reviewing a sculpture exhibit, interstice: the space [often small] between two objects or events on www.kipjonesart.com (kipjones, 2011).

The relationship between our mental and physical spaces cannot be understated; in a number of ways they are one and the same. Space is not unlike a living organism. It can change or be changed, affect our moods, be mysterious and even ambiguous. For kipjones, space, and its experience has been a major focus in his practice.

10. Speed — The rapidity of our thoughts and the speed of phenomena around us are excellent relationships to explore. The speed of life can be met with a slow, spacious relationship to the camera. Exploring the flickering patchwork quilt quality to experience brings insight to perception and thought. The frame from Holofractals (1:58) is from such an exploration where I was walking down a forested road with the camera on my shoulder. As I walked I tracked how my attention continually flashed to the centre line on the road, and back to a more panoramic perspective, so I filmed some close perspectives of the centre line. In the editing process, post-production, I mimicked the fragility of my attention by jumping from one to the other. The sequence takes a lot of energy to watch. How much of our personal energy is spent mitigating the effects of disjointed experiences? It is exhausting to be a “scatter brain.”

11. Time — I find that working with time-lapse footage allows me to see what is difficult to see. When the moon rises I mostly see it anchored in the sky, but know it is arching beautifully. The meditation is to slow down enough to become sensitive to small changes. The frame from Holofractals (00:57) is a time-lapse sequence filmed while I sat for an hour watching a sunrise. Everything in my experience arises and falls like those clouds. Suddenly a child is conceived out of nothing. It slowly grows and leaves the mother’s body, but it is difficult to pinpoint when the child first appeared. I suspect the way the clouds dissolve may inform how I myself will eventually dissolve from this existence.

12. Generosity — Generosity is a force of opening. It extends me into the world, and leaves me and the world changed. Being generous with a camera is like inviting reciprocity with the world. Offering to connect. Generosity is a willingness to chemically interact with phenomena and beings. To willingly be changed. Generosity as a cue loosens our territoriality as an artist. It is more concerned with “other.” This frame from Dreamsign (5:18) arose from exploring the intersection of the natural environment and the urban environment. This space under these bridges is basically ignored. Historically it used to be a community, and now it is dominated by highways flying overhead. To my sensibility, this place is a power spot. It is at a narrows linking a harbour and a large protected basin. The views are still beautiful. Many people in the world live in close proximity to these kinds of structures, or have had their lives interrupted by them. Sometimes it is
just a little too much to fully feel the narrative I have about this place. Sometimes I feel fortunate to know this place, as it still has gifts to give.

13. Life is Like a Dream—This is a very important yogic cue for disrupting a meditation practitioner’s allegiance to subject-object duality and to the solidity of external phenomena. The daytime Buddhist yogic practice for this cue is called Illusory Body (Holecek, 2016, p.158). Illusory Body is the practice of checking with yourself if you are really perceiving your current experience, or if there is something about the present state that is “dream-like.” When you walk outside the colors might be off. You might not feel the weight of your body with familiarity. Checking for gravity is common. Jumping a bit. Dropping objects. When you turn away from a sense object you can turn back to see if it is still more or less the same or if it has transformed in some unusual way. The practice feels like suspending automatic belief in the solidity of what you are experiencing.

This practice is also quite powerful when you review your moving images or photographs. Sometimes you see or hear something new or unnoticed. You ask yourself, “Are you watching your own dream?” The cumulative discipline is two-fold. The first questions our conceptual includes questioning our the conditions to open up awareness-emptiness. The the night, during dream-to question if their dream is lucid dreaming which is an Yoga. Dream Yoga is beyond dream images like the snake frame from Holofractals (3:21) in the sky. “Sky flowers” is of illusion, imagination, and in the sky occurred in the editing suite as part of the post-production process, but the original experience watching the flowers move in relation to each other gave the moment a power that cut through any impulse to invalidate the moment as merely ordinary.

The “life is like a dream” cue, which is anchored in traditional yogic meditation, continues to operate in the final process of filmmaking: post-production.

Further Topics

Pre-production and production are very receptive stages in the artistic-meditative work of contemplative film practice. Of course there is the expressive, active quality of capturing images with a lens, but the majority of the work is seeing. There is an overarching quality of standing back and receiving the world. The Lion’s Gaze is, in a sense, the practice of looking at who is receiving the world.

Post-production—film editing, music, and sound design—move contemplative film practice towards a much more artistic dance with phenomena. Post-production moves from the Lion’s Gaze to the Lion’s Roar. This shift is significant enough that post-production deserves its own article, and would explore the virtues of spontaneity, chance operation and improvisation as emblematic of how life unfolds.
Gazing With a Lion’s Heart

From the point of view of Buddhism, meditation practice is almost useless if it remains the exclusive realm of cushions, gongs, and meditation halls. As in all sectors of our life, it is good to bring meditative awareness into the daily art of perceiving our world and the activity of expressing our human heart. Awareness and art can then mingle in a reciprocal loop: art shapes our culture which shapes our view of ourselves which shapes art.

The contemplative approach to filmmaking begs the questions:

- Does it help in experiencing life without centralizing upon oneself?
- Does it help to relax mental reservations and blockages?
- Does it facilitate an authentic inner journey of waking up to our self-existing spaciousness and energy?

The artifacts of contemplative film practice are not about entertainment, but about waking up. The filmmaking process, to some degree, should challenge our foggy, habitual relationship to our perceptions. The films themselves might invite viewers to reflect on the nature of the “watcher” of the film, to see mind and phenomena arising in dependence upon one another.

The central allegiance of contemplative film practice is to the insight and discovery of being fully human, in all its simultaneous ephemerality and vividness. In the service of a culture of openness and possibility, contemplative film practice has no external goal other than the heart-felt somatic experience of wisdom, self-awareness and compassion.

Notes

1 The pilot study was a video project with another artist-educator yogin as participant. We practiced meditation and did collaborative art as a context for discussions about how yogic practice informed our art and our work as educators.

2 This research exclusively used an iPhone as a video recorder. On two occasions I used a portable digital audio recorder to record location ambiences and instrumental music in natural spaces. All the files were digital, and references to “film” are an aesthetic expression connected to the strips of celluloid I learned to edit in my high school years.

References


