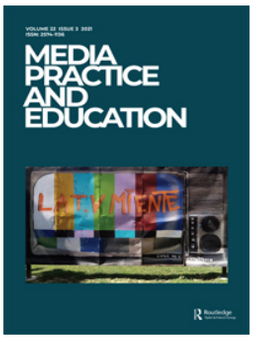

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Media Practice and Education

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjmp21

Film, mental health, and COVID-19: a case study of the facing the mind project

Mani Sharpe

To cite this article: Mani Sharpe (2021) Film, mental health, and COVID-19: a case study of the facing the mind project, Media Practice and Education, 22:3, 258-275, DOI: 10.1080/25741136.2021.1989770

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/25741136.2021.1989770

Published online: 15 Oct 2021.

MEDIA PRACTICE AND EDUCATION
2021, VOL. 22, NO. 3, 258–275
https://doi.org/10.1080/25741136.2021.1989770

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

REPORT

OPEN ACCESS Check for updates

Film, mental health, and COVID-19: a case study of the facing the mind project

Mani Sharpe

Lecturer in Film, the University of Leeds, Leeds

ABSTRACT

Composed of a series of webinars that ran from June to August 2020, 'Facing the Mind' was a project developed through collaboration between the University of Leeds and the Third Sector, with the specific aim of improving the well-being of a small group of participants, recruited from the local community. Taking the project as a case study, the objectives of this article are thus twofold. Firstly, it will critically reflect on the interdisciplinary methodology deployed by the organizers, which combined creative practice with academic discussions associated with cinematic representations of the face. Secondly, it will chronicle some of the many logistical, ethical, and pedagogical challenges faced by the Facing the Mind team in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a national lockdown at precisely the point at which the project was due to launch.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 7 July 2021
Accepted 4 October 2021

KEYWORDS
Film; mental health; well-being; faces; creative practice; COVID-19

Composed of a series of webinars that ran from June to August 2020, 'Facing the Mind' was a project developed through collaboration between the University of Leeds (North England) and the Third Sector (a term used in the United Kingdom to describe the domain occupied by non-profit, non-governmental, and value-driven organizations), with the specific aim of improving the well-being of a small group of participants, recruited from the local community. In their original plans, the organizers hoped to achieve this aim by harnessing the power of two methodologies. One of these was creative practice, with the team planning to design a range of artistic activities in which participants would be invited to partake, as the project developed. According to a recent report, published the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing, for example, creativity can have a number of potentially transformative effects on the mood of an individual, including stimulating imagination and reflection, encouraging dialogue with the deeper self, enabling expression, changing perspectives, and contributing to the construction of identity (2017, 20).

The second, and less conventional, way in which the organisers hoped to achieve their aim was through academic discussions, rooted broadly in the discipline of film studies,

CONTACT Mani Sharpe m.sharpe@leeds.ac.uk Lecturer in Film, the University of Leeds, Leeds
No conflict of interest or competing interests to declare
Full Ethical Review of the project was granted to this project by the Leeds Research and Innovation Service
I can confirm that this article is not under consideration for publication anywhere else, nor has it been published in any form prior to submission to any UCL Press journal

and specifically in research on cinematic representations of the face. There were several reasons why I chose the face as the guiding theme of this project. Faces are universal, in the sense that everyone is born with one; for this reason, the concept is easily grasped. In the world of cinema, faces are ubiquitous: from the early days of filmmaking, the face has always been a recurring image to which directors return, namely through the visual idiom of the close-up (Steimatsky 2017, 1). In both the cinematic world and the non-cinematic one, faces operate as a liminal threshold, mediating between the immaterial world of mental concepts and the material world of objects; between our own defined subjectivities and the subjectivities of others. For better or worse, faces are often aligned with our identity: with who we think we are, or who others think we are, generating, in turn, further questions related to gender and sexuality, ethnicity and race, intelligence and beauty. Crucially, faces can act to both facilitate disclosure, in the sense that they convey a vast amount of information through verbal speech or non-verbal expression (the eyes, eyebrows, lips, etcetera); and to facilitate deception, in the sense that they can be masked, inexpressive, or duplicitous. Giorgio Agamben, for instance, designates the face as 'the location of a struggle for truth' (2000, 90). Anchored in a belief that encouraging the participants to visually represent their faces could help them to articulate and share emotions that were perhaps too difficult to express verbally, a belief loosely linked to the precepts of art therapy (Malchiodi 2011), the team thus ultimately hoped to produce two attendant outcomes throughout the course of the workshops: one, a collective piece of artwork informed by academic scholarship on the (cinematic) face; the other, an improvement in participant mental health, measured through feedback, with the former directly contributing to the latter. In its combination of two methodologies – creative practice and scholarly research – Facing the Mind can perhaps be best described as an experimental exercise in participatory praxis, a process by which ideas and theories are grasped through doing and making. Readers may wish to consult the website set up to support learning during the project and house the artwork generated after its completion, which can be accessed here: https://facingthemind.leeds.ac.uk/.

The team itself was made up of four people: Dr Mani Sharpe (Lecturer in Film at the University of Leeds, responsible for project management, funding, website design, and academic research); Tom Bailey (project manager for Mojo Film, a production company and social enterprise based in Leeds; responsible for participant management); Mark Cruse (a freelance artist, responsible for leading the creative element of the webinars); and Molly Higgins (graduate of Fine Art and History of Art at the University of Leeds, hired as a Digital Intern, and initially tasked with producing a making-of documentary about the project). Facing the Mind was funded by Ignite, a scheme set up by the Cultural Institute at the University of Leeds, specifically to encourage researchers to craft initiatives that build relationships between the University and external organisations, in turn promoting engaging and impact-led research.

Taking Facing the Mind as a case study, the objectives of this article are twofold. Firstly, it will critically reflect on the interdisciplinary methodology deployed by the organizers, exploring the value of combining creative practice with academic research and discussion. Secondly, it will chronicle some of the (many) logistical, ethical, and pedagogical challenges faced by the Facing the Mind team in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a national lockdown at precisely the point at which the project was due to launch. In a recent case-study of a participatory film-making initiative, launched with

young refugees, Katja Frimberger and Simon Bishopp have expressed a desire to 'aim for a reflexive research practice, making transparent the epistemological assumptions and various discursive moments that underpinned and shaped their 'messy' practical project ethics' (2020, 60). Aiming for a similar degree of 'transparency', this article is therefore really about two projects: one that took many months to plan, and was meticulously organized, but did not happen; and one that took merely a few weeks to plan and was spontaneously delivered, but did happen.

Starting out: first ideas

The roots of Facing the Mind can be traced back to January 2019, when I attended an acoustic gig night at Inkwell Arts, a creative art space and café based in Leeds, founded to promote positive mental health and affiliated with the national charity Mind (https://www.inkwellarts.org.uk/). Intrigued by the concept underpinning the space, and energised by the inclusive atmosphere, I subsequently enquired as to who was in charge of the arts programme at Inkwell, before I was put in contact with an artist named Mark Cruse. Cruse, it transpired, was the individual who had founded Inkwell Arts, organizing and leading a series of internally and externally funded creative practice classes there.

My own motivations for setting the project up were multifaceted. On a personal level, I had previously been in a relationship with an individual who had struggled with poor mental health, prompting an interest in initiatives used to promote well-being. On an academic level, I saw Facing the Mind as an opportunity to come to a deeper understanding of the critical concepts I was in the process of researching, through discussion, dialogue, and multidirectional idea-exchange. Finally, on a pedagogical level, I was interested in the practical strategies used by Cruse to deliver plastic art and digital media in the community, primarily as, up until this point, my own experience of teaching had largely been restricted to historical-theoretical film classes taught within various universities, and my knowledge of film-making (as opposed to film analysis) was limited, at best.

Over the following eight months, Cruse and I engaged in many interesting discussions about how we could collaborate on a joint creative project. By September 2019, we had sketched out a clear timetable that we included in our funding bid for Ignite (submitted and awarded in November 2019). According to these initial estimates, we planned to deliver the project over the course of six weeks, between April and May 2020, at the University of Leeds and Inkwell, for a handful of participants. In Week 1, we planned to screen a copy of Ingmar Bergman's 1966 film *Persona* (whose narrative famously frames the faces of the two central female protagonists using a series of highly unconventional formal techniques [see Coates 2012, 158–181]), in order to provide a platform for discussion. In Week 2, participants would be invited to attend a public lecture at the University of Leeds, during which I would introduce the concept of the Kuleshov effect, a famous cinematic experiment in which three unchanging close-up shots of a man's silent face are juxtaposed with three shots of different objects (a bowl of soup, a dead girl in a coffin, a woman lying seductively on sofa), thus generating the impression that the man is experiencing three different emotions (hunger, sorrow, lust).[1] Each of the workshops planned for Weeks 3–6 would then require the participants to recreate a single shot from the Kuleshov effect (using equipment housed in Inkwell Arts, and iPads provided by Leeds Library,

as part of the 100% Digital Scheme) whilst encouraging the group as a whole, to discuss a range of epistemological, ontological, and aesthetic questions, such as: how have certain directors represented the face as a 'window' to the mind? How do 'cinematic faces' mirror our experience of faces in the world – including our own, and the faces of others? Can we ever 'know' what someone is thinking through the surface of their face? What does 'to know' someone mean? The sessions would also include an opportunity for the participants and organisers to discuss ideas whilst eating together.[2] Finally, in November 2019 and February 2020, we welcomed Bailey and Higgins to the team. After completing a Full Ethical Review of the project[3] granted by the Leeds Research and Innovation Service at the start of March 2020, everything was in place.

Starting over: COVID-19

It was at this point – from early March onwards – that universities began to feel the first tremors of the COVID-19 pandemic, with lecturers rapidly cancelling in-person classes in favour of online webinars, until the country was officially placed under lockdown by the government on 23 March. Likewise, much of the global art therapy community was 'propelled almost overnight into navigating how to adapt technology as a primary and essential platform for delivering services, including how to develop creative and art-based virtual spaces for therapeutic work' (Miller and McDonald 2020, 16). For the objectives and outcomes of Facing the Mind, this predicament proved to be devastating, with immediate effect. In the first instance, it meant that neither the University nor Inkwell could be used in order to deliver the lecture or workshops, or screen *Persona*. Nor could we use the film-making equipment housed at Inkwell, or Leeds Library. Nor could the participants and organizers eat together, as planned, or even meet in-person. Nor could Higgins produce the making-of documentary that she had been tasked with creating. Nor, it seemed to me, could Cruse and myself rely on the pedagogical scaffolding that we had spent months meticulously refining before lockdown. Nor could we, finally, and perhaps most importantly, expect the group to make a collective film – at least not in the format we had anticipated. Faced with what seemed like a series of insurmountable logistical, pedagogical, and ethical challenges, I seriously considered postponing the project until the 2020/21 academic session, with the aim of delivering it as it was originally conceived.

It was only after receiving news that postponing the project might plunge its funding into jeopardy (due to financial restrictions generated by COVID-19), that the team tentatively began to rethink the timing and format the project, revising it as a series of six, two hour webinars, due to take place consecutively, for six weeks, in June and July 2020, on Zoom. Cruse was also justifiably adamant 'that going ahead with the course online would have significant benefits for those most likely to struggle with isolation during the pandemic', despite the fact that prolonged exposure to digital screens can cause fatigue.[4]

One of the first things that I did during this period – from March 2020 to June 2020 – was to radically revise the form of the theoretical interventions that I aimed to deliver at the start of each session, giving rise to a pedagogical trajectory that was much less orientated towards a specific *creative outcome* (the Kuleshov-inspired collective film), and much more orientated towards a more flexible constellation of *learning outcomes*, similar, in fact, to those often used to structure academic modules associated with film studies. This, of course, was a strategic move, taken in order to resolve the fact that at

this point, we had no idea what would be logistically-technologically possible in the sessions, given that they were now due to take place online. According to this new programme, the sessions would thus be organised as follows. In Weeks 1 and 2, participants would be invited to study various examples of Early Cinema (1880s–1910s), focusing specifically on what is often conceptualised as the anti-psychological impulses of facial expression films, populated, as they are, with what I termed 'mindless faces'. In Weeks 3 and 4, I would then shift focus to the poetics of Modern Cinema (1910s–1960s), examining more specifically how directors began to frame the face 'as a window to the mind', before concluding, in Weeks 5 and 6, with some thoughts on contemporary cinema (1960s–), and the concept of the 'face-as-mask', especially as it related to the question of gender.[5] We also decided to generate feedback from the participants during two extra-curricular sessions, conducted orally by Bailey and Higgins on Zoom, in Week 5. These sessions were to be based upon a series of standardized qualitative (open-ended) questions composed by Bailey and grouped into four broad sections: How we run things; Academia & Arts; Creativity and Well-being; Anything Else. The answers were to be transcribed in anonymous form by Higgins.

Looking back, this decision – to radically alter the theoretical side of the project in an attempt to compensate for a sudden breakdown in objectives and outcomes – generated a number of advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, it provided a certain degree of clarity in a period marked by instability, especially insofar as the PowerPoint presentations that I intended to deliver could easily be shared with the group via Zoom; they could also be recorded so that participants were able watch them again after the session. On the other hand, these alterations also rendered the pedagogical foundations of Facing the Mind significantly less collaborative than I had initially hoped, abruptly placing the onus on Cruse to rapidly devise a series of practical activities that would not only correspond to this new theoretical trajectory (which was no longer exclusively focused on the Kuleshov effect), but also accommodate the new technical challenges posed by working online. Whether the time and energy that I invested in somewhat chaotically assembling this new programme could, or should, have been directed towards helping Cruse to craft a revised series of creative exercises, orientated towards a clearly defined creative outcome, is a valid question.

Finally, it was during this period – from March 2020 to June 2020 – that I decided to design a website associated with the project, populating it with brief summaries detailing the historical significance and pedagogical relevance of the twelve films I now intended to include on this programme (four for each unit, see project website for more details), alongside a range of academic articles and clips that the participants could read and watch before the sessions, if desired. As we nervously prepared to deliver Facing the Mind online, testing equipment, finalising responsibilities, and recruiting the seven participants[6] who would eventually attend the sessions, the anticipated artistic outcome of the project – in other words, what we would actually be asking, or encouraging, the participants to achieve, or create, or even work towards – was still unclear.

Drawing faces and invisible faces: weeks 1 and 2

After such an acute period of instability, it was almost to our surprise that the first webinar, organised as a two-hour session on a Friday morning, went as well as it did. The webinar

was essentially organized into three parts. In part one, Tom Bailey outlined the aims and expectations of the project, emphasising the importance of listening and collaboration in creative practice, before I delivered a short PowerPoint presentation on 'mindless faces' in Early Cinema, focusing specifically upon *Baby's Dinner* (Lumière 1895), and *Fred Ott's Sneeze* (Edison 1894). Skilfully deploying two cameras to alternate between verbal instructions and visual illustration (Figure 1), Cruse, meanwhile, subsequently delivered what both the organizers and participants agreed was one of the most effective artistic sessions offered as part of the project: a simple drawing exercise, based on tracing the proportions of the human face, and which gave rise to a wonderfully creative collection of sketches that participants shared with each other during the session, providing constructive criticism, in turn (Figures 2 and 3). In later feedback, participants 'found that creative sessions [such as this one] opened up mediums which they often neglected, such as drawing and traditional media', encouraging them to 'pick up pencils and draw for the first time in years'. In an academic article on the relationship between art and wellbeing, Hester Parr has likewise drawn attention to the fact that portraiture has 'been deployed as a strategy of social and therapeutic management since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries' (2007, 126).

It was also during this initial session, in Week 1, that we became aware of two complications that would recur throughout the project: one linked to medium, the other linked to technology. In our initial plans, for example, we had expressly designed Facing the Mind to be a monomedia rather than a multimedia project – that is to say, a project devoted entirely to one artistic medium: film-making. Clearly, asking the participants to attend the first session with any type of sophisticated, or even rudimentary, digital equipment (for example camera-phones) risked immediately plunging the project into a logistical crisis; and indeed, part of the reason that this initial exercise had worked so well, in terms of engagement, inclusivity, and accessibility, was because it required nothing more than a pencil and a piece of paper. Nonetheless, the general consensus amongst

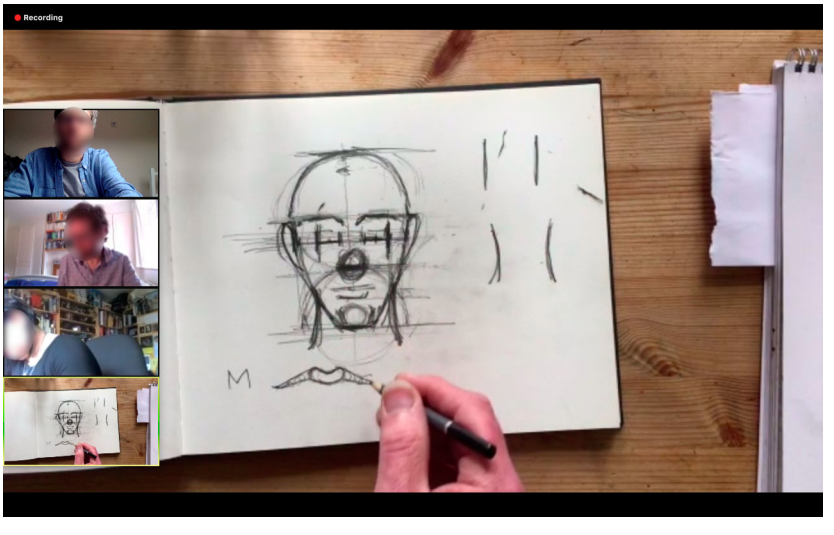

Figure 1. Screenshot from the guided facial portraiture session, delivered on Zoom in Week 1.

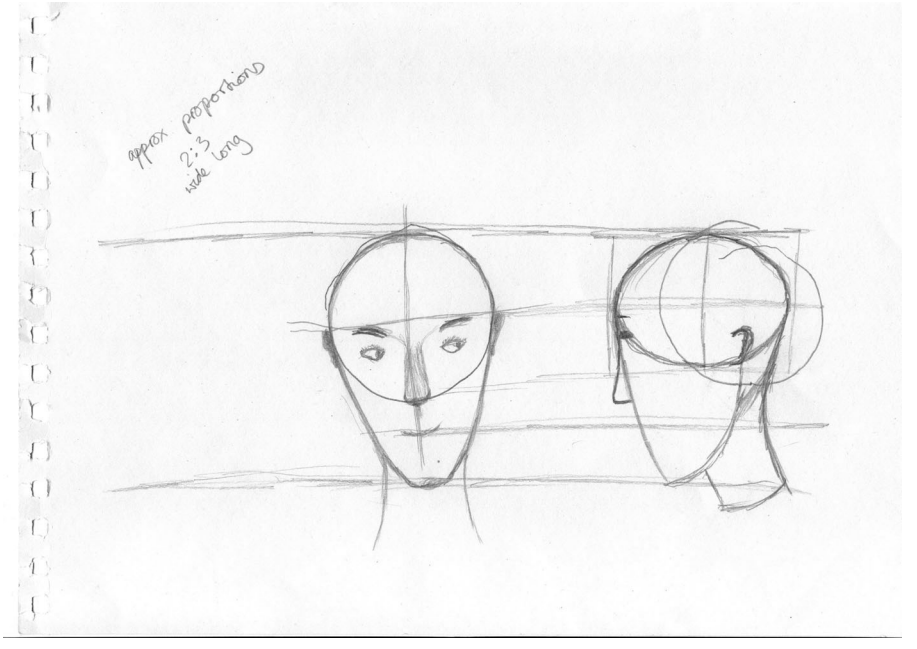

Figure 2. A sketch produced by one participant during Week 1.

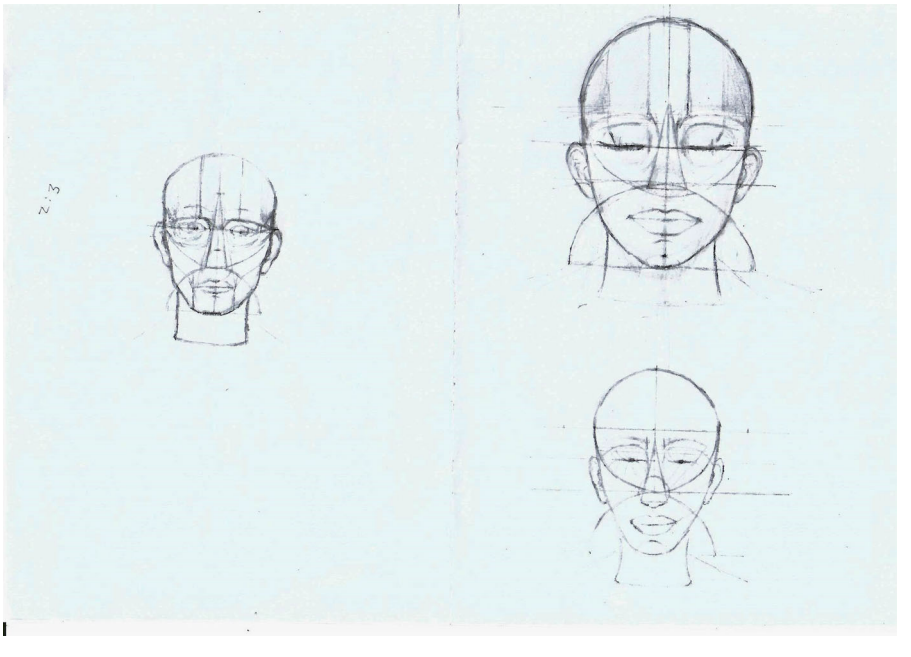

Figure 3. A sketch produced by one participant during Week 1.

organizers was that creating some type of short film through the sessions was still not only possible, but preferable. The question, therefore, was how to achieve this, online, in six weeks.

Complicating the situation even further was the issue of technology. During the first webinar, for instance, I had noticed that two out of the seven participants had entered the session as disembodied voices, rather than embodied faces, rendering them essentially invisible to the other contributors and organizers, and thus inadvertently raising a range of ethical and aesthetic questions regarding the visibility and invisibility of the face, even as I was in the process of introducing them (does showing our face empower or disempower us? What about when we conceal or 'mask' the contours of our face?). Gentle probing revealed that for one of these participants, this invisibility was the inadvertent symptom of an inoperative webcam; whilst for the other, it was deliberate decision, taken to limit the audio-visual capabilities of their computer, presumably in order to mitigate the potential symptoms of what is known as 'Zoom anxiety'.[7] For different reasons, neither of these participants could therefore be expected to share images of their artwork synchronously with the group as the webinars were unfolding. Indeed, for the latter, the technology that we had decided to use for the project was a potential trigger for precisely the type of mental challenges we had set out to tackle.

In the days following the first webinar, Cruse attempted to resolve this technological dilemma by, firstly, requesting that the first of the two aforementioned participants send him their graphic facial sketch by email, and secondly, by creating a 2.5D digital version of it (hovering somewhere between the respective flatness and depth of 2.D and 3.D art), using the motion graphics software, Adobe After Effects. The following session of the project was then effectively dedicated to discussing the outcome of this act of extra-curricular collaboration, in turn, ensuring that the participant in question was able to 'exhibit' their work to the group in the same way as the others had done the week before, and identifying After Effects as a potential tool that the other participants could use to develop their own creative practice. The drawback of this act of exhibition, however, was that it effectively precluded the potential for any kind of creative activity in the session, generating the impression that little progress had been made towards the still vaguely understood artistic outcomes of the project, and that the group – as a whole – was less engaged than in Week 1. 'It would be helpful to have a recap of the aims of the project at the start of each session' noted one participant in later feedback, before continuing: 'as it is not clear what the end product is meant to be, or what we are working towards'. As we will see, similar tensions, between the needs of individuals and the needs of the collective, between ethics and pedagogy, and between the importance of showing and the importance of doing, reappeared throughout Facing the Mind.

Faces, objects, and new materials: weeks 3 and 4

Following the historical-thematic programme that I had sketched out in haste merely a few weeks before the start of the project, in Week 3 I delivered a short, twenty minute talk on the Kuleshov effect, to the participants and the other organizers. As we had predicted in our original plans, this proved to be a popular and flexible subject, opening up many avenues of investigation, both aesthetic and pedagogic. During the hour-long creative session that followed my intervention, for example, Cruse conducted a simple yet effective thought experiment, challenging the participants to, firstly, consider the emotions, thoughts and feelings, conveyed by the three objects/faces included in

Kuleshov's original footage (for example, soup + face = hunger), and then to identify three different objects that could be used to convey three different emotions.

One of the most unexpectedly challenging aspects of running Facing the Mind online related to the availability of resources and materials. As previously mentioned, in our original plans, we had envisaged directly providing participants with equipment. In our planning, we had essentially worked backwards, firstly establishing the intended outcome of the project – a collective film – before then establishing the technology with which, and the medium in which, the participants would be unequivocally required to work: digital cameras and moving images. Now working online, with various forms of traditional media, the organizers found themselves faced with a dilemma: either encourage participants to attend the remaining sessions with their own materials, as they had notably done in Week 1 (a pencil and a piece of paper); or attempt to provide them with further materials, thus increasing the potential for a coherent set of artistic outcomes, yet potentially decreasing the potential for artistic experimentation.

It was directly after our Week 3 session that Cruse, with support from the organizers, took the decision to pursue the latter option, proposing to design an artistic resource pack that he intended to use with the group during the creative exercises planned for Weeks 4 and 5. In this pack, participants would be provided with a template based upon the six shots featured in the Kuleshov effect, and a range of stock photos, composed of thirteen different objects, and eleven different faces,[8] all of which had been scaled in order to fit the proportions of the template (Figures 4 and 5). Despite the logistical complications involved in delivering this template to the participants (given that not all of them had printers, it had to be sent by post), coupled with the fact that it was distributed three weeks after the project had begun, this template proved to be a highly valuable pedagogical tool as it provided the participants with a structured but supple framework in which they could then experiment creatively. Armed with this template, the group

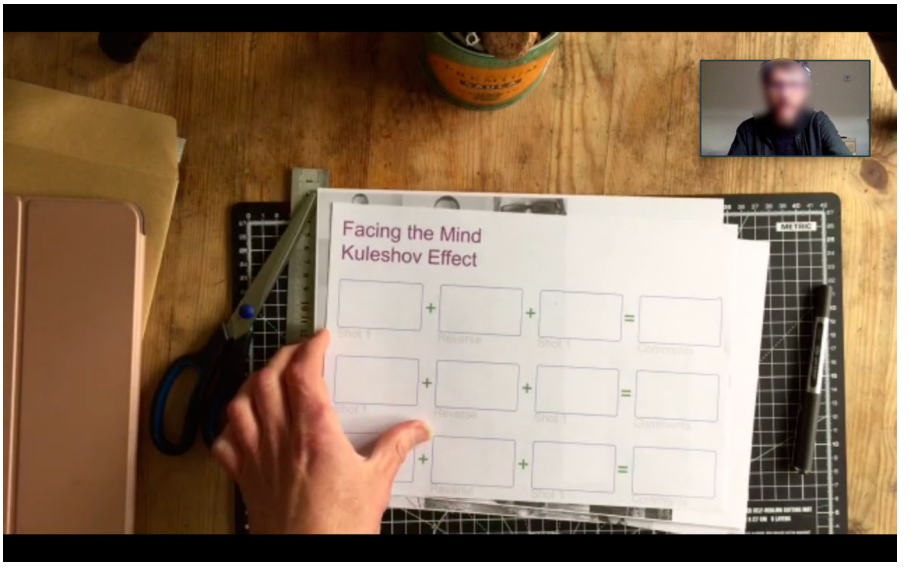

Figure 4. Some physical art resources posted to the participants for the Week 4 session.

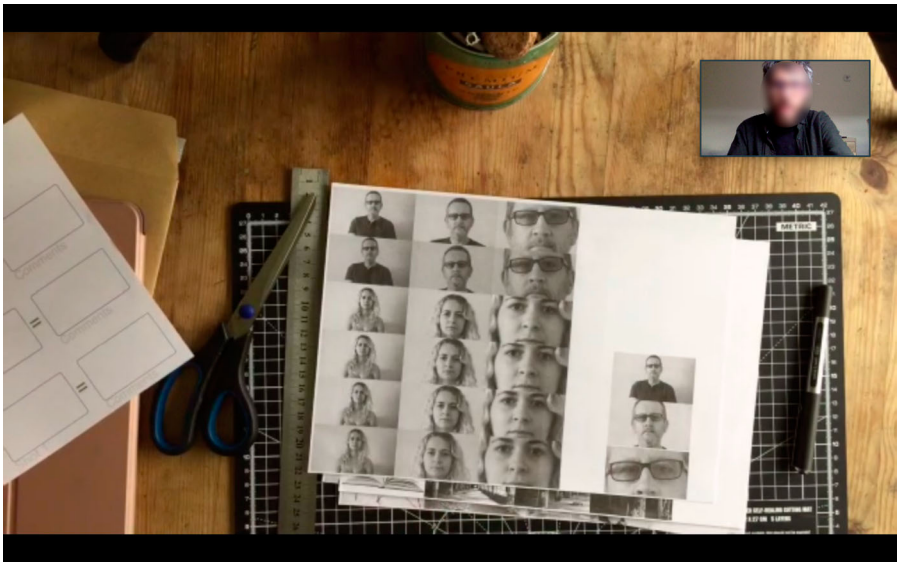

Figure 5. Some physical art resources posted to the participants for the Week 4 session.

subsequently spent much of the Week 4 session engaging in a range of highly productive conversations about how meanings and messages can be generated though the simple interplay between a face and an object alone.

Weeks 5 and 6: artwork or artworks?

Throughout Weeks 1–3, the organizers constantly grappled with the question whether it would be better to encourage the participants to collaborate on a single piece of collective artwork – and if so, how – or on various pieces of artwork. As it turned out, the project naturally veered towards the latter, with many of the participants using Cruse's Kuleshov-inspired template as a platform from which they then developed their own creative ideas in their own time, giving rise to a compelling archive of graphic portraits, Kuleshov-inspired storyboards, poems, craftwork, paintings, photographs, and collages (Figures 6 and 7). It was also towards the end of Week 4 that the Digital Intern, Molly Higgins, unexpectedly revealed that she had begun to produce a series of short films inspired by the programme that I had rapidly devised before the start of the online sessions (Figure 8). After much debate, the making-of documentary that Higgins had initially been tasked with directing was abandoned.[9]

The more artwork the participants and Digital Intern produced, however, the more the organizers became aware of a further outstanding issue: until this point, at least, we had not been able to develop a clearly defined system to archive any of the artistic outcomes of the project.[10] In response, Cruse once again displayed a shrewd skill in proposing creative solutions to logistical problems, setting up a Google Drive folder onto which the participants and the Intern were encouraged to upload their creative endeavours. This quickly proved to be a formative decision in the final stages of Facing the Mind, primarily as it created a shared yet private exhibition space that participants could consult outside

Figure 6. A piece of artwork produced by one participant during the project.

of the sessions, taking inspiration from the work of others if desired. It also provided me with a centralized pool of artwork from which I could draw when developing the website.

Finally, it was in Week 6 that Cruse broke away from the traditional media upon which he had hitherto relied – namely drawing and collage-making – instead encouraging the

Figure 7. A piece of artwork produced by one participant during the project.

Figure 8. Still from a short film produced during the project by Molly Higgins.

participants to engage with a piece of editing software called OpenShot. Given that my own critical interventions had been exclusively devoted to the history of moving images, there was a clear rationale to this decision, coupled with the fact that some of the participants had begun shooting short films based on the Kuleshov-templates provided to them several weeks earlier. Likewise, video technology has often been identified by academics working in the domain of public engagement as an 'important element in social relations, inter-subjectivity and knowledge production' (Pink 2001, 87), with Sara Kindon going so far as to stress the 'transformative potential' of participatory filmmaking practices (2003, 142–53). Nonetheless, the session itself proved more complicated than envisaged. Some participants had issues with connectivity, or couldn't access the software. Others had taken the initiative to download the software before the session, therefore granting them what seemed like an advantage over their peers, or had downloaded the wrong piece of software, complicating the situation even further. Others were worried about viruses, or not being able to keep up with the procedural steps required to perform the task at hand, itself based upon testing the Alpha Channels function in OpenShot.[11] Still others managed to follow the instructions until the programme crashed, leaving them frustrated and anxious about timewasting. Towards the end of the session, one of the participants tellingly remarked: 'it's not like working with a pen and a piece of paper'.

Final session: exhibition and elation

In total, Facing the Mind generated a vast range of creative outputs, many of which I was only vaguely aware, at least until Cruse set up the aforementioned Google Drive, in Week 5. I have already outlined, and indeed, included some of the graphic portraits and idiosyncratic collages produced by the participants in Weeks 1–4. However, by far the most

impressive output was the collection of short films, shot and edited by certain participants in the latter stages of the project, which the group watched together, in awe, during a final virtual session, held in August 2020.

More or less inspired by the face/object dialectic underpinning the Kuleshov effect, and displaying a dazzling degree of formal experimentation, these short films had taken different forms. One participant, for example, had spliced silent images of a twitching eyeball, framed in an extreme close-up, with silent images of a hammer, hovering over an unbroken mirror. After approximately twenty seconds of rising tension, the silence of these images is abruptly superseded by a one-second blast of synchronized sound, as the reflection of the hammer is smashed into fragments. Another participant had drawn more liberally from Kuleshov's footage, alternating between two unchanging photographs: one depicting a female face, the other, a stained glass window in a church. As the film develops, so too does the scale of the images – from a mid-shot of the face and a long shot of the window, to a close-up of the face and a mid-shot of the window, before this perceptual dialectic is finally resolved, when a close-up of the face is combined with a close-up of the window, depicting Christ on the cross – all of which generates the impression that the woman is not only looking at the window in question, but also experiencing some kind of religious epiphany. Another participant had injected a more melancholic tone into their film, alternating between static photographs of graveyards, and the inanimate faces of dolls, statues, and skulls. Still another participant had blurred the specificity of the cinematic medium even further, basing their film on a beguiling amalgamation of static close-ups of graphic drawings of faces, exhibited in the Stanley and Audrey Burton Gallery at the University of Leeds: some human, others non-human, or quasi-human (Figures 9 and 10). Evoking various experiments in avant-garde abstraction and modernist ambiguity, this short film, in particular, entitled *Gallery*, reminded me of Chris Marker's 1962 masterpiece *La Jetée/The Jetty*, which revolves around a comparable emphasis on static faces.

Figure 9. A still from 'Gallery', a short film produced by one participant during the project.

Conclusion: impact and legacy

As I hope to have shown, Facing the Mind was an interesting but imperfect project, at points complicated, convoluted, inspiring and invigorating – sometimes all at once. In this respect, it was a project that very much supported Stephanie Hemelryk Donald's definition of creative practice as 'almost always involving a team effort', requiring prolonged and persistent skills in 'listening and negotiation' (2019, 72), alongside Hester Parr's understanding of community-orientated collaborative film-making as 'never a straightforward process, nor easy to manage or predict in terms of equality and dominance' (2007, 130). With this in mind, I would therefore like to conclude by summarizing the impact of the project, as well as its legacy.

Judging from feedback generated during the two extra-curricular sessions, conducted orally by Bailey and Higgins on Zoom in Week 5, and transcribed into an anonymised written document by Higgins, Facing the Mind was clearly most successful when participants were encouraged to engage in activities associated with the plastic arts: guided sketching and collage-making, using pencils and paper alone. Upon reflection, these activities seemed to work for two reasons: firstly, as taking part did not require any specialized knowledge or extensive preparation, but also, and perhaps more importantly, insofar as they appeared to offset, or at least mitigate, the potentially draining effects of online learning, namely screen fatigue and Zoom anxiety.

It is perhaps therefore unsurprising that the least successful session on Facing the Mind was the one that attempted to combine online learning with digital skill-building, leading one participant to state that they found this stage of the project especially 'challenging and hard', and Cruse to generously organize a dozen extra-curricular sessions with individuals to assist with technical problem solving. Somewhat ironically, however, without this late shift in focus, the project would not have generated such a dazzlingly ambitious archive of audio-visual outputs. All of which leaves me, as the person tasked with reviewing Facing the Mind, with somewhat of a conundrum: would it have been better to devote

Figure 10. A still from 'Gallery', a short film produced by one participant during the project.

this project exclusively to traditional media, thus, in turn, limiting the scope of the artwork produced, yet optimizing the accessibility of the sessions? Or to have amplified the focus on digital media and film-making, thus, in turn, dilating the scope of the artwork, yet rendering the sessions potentially less accessible? To these questions I do not have a definitive answer.

Despite the somewhat disorganized delivery of Facing the Mind, one thing that the participants did emphasize in feedback was that experimenting with artistic creativity had indeed generated a positive impact on their mental health, and that the activities offered on the course had, moreover, formed a welcome emotional, and moral, counterpoint to the anxiety-inducing emergence of COVID-19. Where COVID-19 had led to a generalized feeling of social isolation, Facing the Mind had provided a sense of 'community', even if this community was virtual and ephemeral. Where COVID-19 had led to a spike in boredom and aimlessness (especially for those who had been deprived of employment during the many staffing cuts that took place throughout the crisis), Facing the Mind had provided a source of stimulation and purpose, at once mental and corporeal, academic and artistic. Where COVID-19 had provoked a range of 'weird and unsettling' feelings, Facing the Mind had proved empowering and 'liberating', even if 'creating something new was different and scary'. Given that the chief aim of Facing the Mind was to instigate an improvement in the mental health of the participants, such feedback provided a reassuring indication that it had been a relative success, with COVID-19 rendering the project both harder to manage and even more necessary than when we had originally launched it. As one participant put it: 'the sense of capacity created by the project has been a real positive for mental health'.

Finally, Facing the Mind was a project that proved somewhat prophetic, gesturing towards the myriad ways in which British culture and society has since been altered by COVID-19. One clear impact of the pandemic, for instance, is that it has led to a national spike in mental health concerns, catalyzed by the challenges of 'working from home, temporary unemployment, home-schooling of children, and lack of physical contact with other family members, friends and colleagues' (The World Health Organization 2020). Another is that it has sparked a rise in traditional media practices, with sales of amateur pencil and painting sets booming; so much so, in fact, that one journalist, writing for *The Guardian,* has spoken of an 'arts and crafts renaissance' (Wood 2020). Another effect relates to the legal enforcement of masks in many public places, a law that has evoked the third unit of the syllabus, entitled 'the face-as-mask'. But perhaps the most curious effect of the pandemic is that it has arguably led to a paradigm shift in how the human face has been conceptualized, not only within the public domain, with face to face encounters becoming an increasingly rare phenomenon, for example, in university teaching rooms or GP surgeries, but also within the private domain of the home, with the stratospheric rise of face-orientated video-telephonic platforms: Microsoft Teams, Facebook portal, and, of course, Zoom. As one participant succinctly put it:

Facing the Mind made me think about faces, and what may, or may not, be behind them, about how much of our interpretation can be subjective and prone to projection, and that we can't ever be sure of what subjectivities and projections others bring. Being part of a Zoom class where the focus is mostly on faces on a screen also made me think about how important a part of communication facial expression is.

Notes

1. Footage of Kuleshov's famous experiment can be seen on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i8akNCJQz-0
2. Recent scientific research in nutrition has suggested a strong link between food and mood. See Polivy and Herman (2005), for more details.
3. The organizers spent many weeks ensuring that the project met the ethical protocols of the University, particularly relating to questions of confidentiality and anonymity. According to our original plans, for example, the face of a model, recruited as part of the project, would be used in the collective film. Participants would be provided with forms to ascertain their consent if they wished to feature therein. The organizers intended to use a separate form to acquire consent for featuring in the making-of documentary. If quasi-anonymity had been requested, Higgins was due to deploy non-facial shots of hands or other body parts of the participant in question; if total anonymity had been requested, they would not feature in the footage at all. For further details about strategies adopted to preserve the confidentiality/anonymity of participants recruited for participatory film-making projects, see Parr (2007, 122–123).
4. For more information on digital fatigue and COVID-19 see Alevizou (2020).
5. On Early Cinema and the concept of mindless faces, see Gunning (1997:, 23–24) and Naremore (1988:, 34–67). On Modern Cinema and the concept of the face-as-window, see Werth (2006); Steimatsky (2017:, 27–80); Doane (2003); and Aumont (1992:, 77–100). On Contemporary Cinema and the concept of the face-as-mask, see McNeill (2010:, 111–122); Ezra (2010); Coates (2012:, 1–14, 166–176); and Steimatsky (2017:, 110–126).
6. To recruit the participants, Cruse and Bailey sent out an advertisement/survey to two mailing lists: one associated with Inkwell, the other with Arts & Minds, a Leeds-based network set up to promote mental well-being and creativity; both of which targeted people with existing mental health issues. In this survey, prospective participants were required to confirm that they had faced mental health challenges; that they were interested in art; that they lived in, or near, Leeds; and that they possessed an operative laptop, tablet or computer.
7. Recent psychological studies have identified Zoom meetings as the source of potential anxiety, catalyzed by the fact that, like other video-telephonic services, it essentially functions like a two-way mirror, projecting the human face both backwards and forwards towards the individual and the collective. See Degges-White (2020), for more information.
8. For example, a kettle, a wine glass, a book, an orange; the face of a doctor, a baby, a cat, three friends drinking beer, etcetera.
9. As the project was moved online, the ethics and logistics of this making-of documentary became increasingly fraught with problems. At one point, I suggested that Higgins could combine images of her own face with excerpts of disembodied narration (transcribed from the feedback sessions she had conducted with the participants), in order to generate the impression that the participants were figuratively speaking through her. The results of this audio-visual experiment, however, were extremely disjointed, leading me instead to encourage Higgins to focus on her own creative practice, which, in turn, became a source of inspiration for many members of the group.
10. According to Ania Zubala and Simon Hackett, since the pandemic began, many online art therapists have struggled with similar questions about how to store potentially sensitive artwork online (2020, 166).
11. Similar to a Green Screen, Alpha Channels allow the user to merge the foreground of one moving image into the background of another.

Acknowledgements

the author would like to extend their gratitude to Mark Cruse, Alison Fell, Rebecca Jarman and Paul Cooke, who provided feedback on this article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work is funded by the Cultural Institute at the University of Leeds.

Notes on the contributor

Dr. Mani Sharpe is a Lecturer in Film in the Centre for World Cinemas and Digital Cultures at the University of Leeds. He has published in journals such as *Journal of European Studies*, *French Cultural Studies*, *Modern and Contemporary France, Studies in French Cinem*a and *French Studies*. His most recent work has focused on the poetics, politics, and ethics of the cinematic face.

Filmography

Baby's Dinner (FR 1895, Louis Lumière)
Fred Ott's Sneeze (US 1894, Thomas Edison)
La Jetée (FR 1962, Chris Marker)
Persona (SW 1966, Ingmar Bergman)

References

Agamben, G. 2000. *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
Alevizou, G. 2020. *Virtual Schooling, Covid-gogy and Digital Fatigue.* Online. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/parenting4digitalfuture/2020/04/08/virtual-schooling-covid-gogy/ (accessed 7 January 2021).
All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing. 2017. "The Arts for Health and Wellbeing." *Inquiry Report – Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing*, 14–23.
Aumont, J. 1992. *Du Visage au Cinéma*. Paris: Cahiers du cinéma.
Coates, P. 2012. *Screening the Face*. New York: Palgrave Macmillian.
Degges-White, S. 2020. *Dealing With Zoom Anxiety*. Online. https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/lifetime-connections/202004/dealing-zoom-anxiety (accessed 31 December 2020).
Doane, M. A. 2003. "The Close-Up: Scale and Detail in the Cinema." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 14 (3): 89–111.
Donald, H. S. 2019. "Follow the Yellow Brick Road: The Passeur, the Gatekeeper, and the Young Migrant Film-Maker." *Film Education Journal* 2 (1): 48–61.
Ezra, E. 2010. "Cléo's Masks: Regimes of Objectification in the French New Wave." *Yale French Studies* 118/119: 177–190.
Frimberger, K., and S. Bishopp. 2020. "Voice, Autonomy and Utopian Desire in Participatory Film-Making with Young Refugees." *Film Education Journal* 3 (1): 58–77.
Gunning, T. 1997. "In Your Face: Physiognomy, Photography, and the Gnostic Mission of Early Film." *Modernism/Modernity* 4 (1): 1–29.
Kindon, S. 2003. "Participatory Video in Geographic Research: a Feminist Practice of Looking?" *Area* 35: 142–153.
Malchiodi, C. 2011. *Handbook of Art Therapy*. Guilford: Guilford Press.
McNeill, I. 2010. *Memory and the Moving Image: French Film and the Digital Era*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
Miller, G., and A. McDonald. 2020. "Online art Therapy During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *International Journal of Art Therapy* 25 (4): 159–160.
Naremore, J. 1988. *Acting in the Cinema*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University California Press.

Parr, H. 2007. "Collaborative Film-Making as Process, Method and Text in Mental Health Research." *Cultural Geographies* 14: 114–138.
Pink, S. 2001. *Doing Visual Ethnography*. London: Sage.
Polivy, J., and P. Herman. 2005. "Mental Health and Eating Behaviours: A Bi-Directional Relation." *Canadian Journal of Public Health* 96 (3): S43–S46.
Steimatsky, N. 2017. *The Face on Film*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Werth, M. 2006. "Modernity and the Face." *Intermédialités/Intermediality* 8: 83–102.
Wood, Z. 2020. *A Good Yarn: UK Coronavirus Lockdown Spawns Arts and Craft Renaissance*. Online. https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/may/04/a-good-yarn-uk-coronavirus-lockdown-spawns-arts-and-craft-renaissance (accessed 31 December 2020).
The World Health Organization. 2020. *Mental health & COVID-19*. Online. https://www.who.int/teams/mental-health-and-substance-use/covid-19 (accessed 31 December 2020).
Zubala, A., and S. Hackett. 2020. "Online art Therapy Practice and Client Safety: a UK-Wide Survey in Times of COVID-19." *International Journal of Art Therapy* 25 (4): 161–171.