

Flashes of unruly light

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ABSTRACT

Lenses are optical devices which focus and disperse light by means of refraction and a lens flare is an aberration that occurs when non-imaging forming light rays pass through the camera lens system, creating various artifacts that render the image unclear. Star beams and light bursts, haze and glare are often unwanted as they impede our perception of reality, making us aware of the mechanics of image making. Paradoxically, in other instances the lens flare is used precisely for its ability to conjure a sense of the real. Incorporating flares to a photograph or film (either produced in-camera or through CGI) is an attempt to emulate the imperfections of the optical. By concentrating of these flashes of unruly light, I want to think about what they might signify and to consider them both physically and conceptually.

In the final stages of editing a video work SCOPE (2022), a rather slow day led to an exploration of the special effects that come with the editing software. Guided more by curiosity than intent, I try out a few post-production animated effects with evocative titles like *Horizon Blur*, *Vertical Drift* and *Pixie Dust*, when I come across the effect *Lens Flare*. A 3.4 second animation of a starburst of light followed by a series of polymorphous rings, flares and spheres which track across the center of the frame horizontally from left to right. Having played with different effects at various time registers, a single flare was inserted into the final artwork. As a moving-image artwork SCOPE takes its visual cues from an 'Our Universe Space kit' in both form and content.¹ The addition of a lens flare invokes many sci-fi movies about intergalactic adventure, that have given us such vibrant imaginings of space. With this emotive reference, the inclusion of starbursts of light, fits comfortably within the work. The computer-generated effect is overlaid on a sequence of footage that technically, a lens flare could ever have occurred 'in-camera' as lens flare requires a direct light source - like the sun, bare bulb, or torch - to pass through the camera's optics, creating glare or a haze of light on the resultant image. But this fact seems irrelevant, as logic doesn't always prevail when making art or sci-fi films, the lens flare simply fits within a conversation around perceptions and visions of space. The relatively arbitrary inclusion of a special effect lens flare is one that subsequently warrants more thought.

Lens flares have now become a key focus of my artistic research, where I am looking into their structure and form, as well as how they denote ideas of the magical, spiritual, and cosmic. Becoming more attuned, these aberrations start to appear everywhere, from filters on Instagram; the weather app when its sunny and in numerous films, televisions programs and adverts where sparkles of light make an object or scene somehow more ethereal. They also surface in the works of many photographers and artists, and within my presentation I will show some examples. However, since the 1970's it is fair to say that lens flare has been synonymous with the science-fiction genre and alongside its key component light, has become a ubiquitous element in any movie about space and the supernatural.² Bright beams of light convey a sense of otherworldliness; the aliens have landed but we are blinded by their presence. As a technical tool lens flares can be useful to suggest swift movement, transmission of information or to obscure clear sightings. In this genre, the lens flare is as central as the characters. Their use, form and frequency have been subject to many articles and blogs, they have reached almost cult status.³

Within this presentation, I want to explore lens flares from how they are produced, to when they might be wanted or unwanted. What do they signify in different contexts and why has this legacy artifact endured from analogue processes of image making into digital technologies. Does the method of production influence our emotive responses and are they more authentic if made 'in-camera' rather than the layers of post-production? I am interested in how artists and filmmakers have used them as a metaphoric tool to invoke different feelings or as a trick to dazzle.

¹ SCOPE, is a single channel video work (duration 5:33, looped) made by the Author with voice over and musical composition by Giles Packham, 2022. The work can be view of the artists website: <http://www.suzannemooney.net/works/scope/>

² Blockbuster films like Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) and *E.T.: The Extraterrestrial* (1982); George Lucas's *Star Wars* trilogy (1977) and David Lynch's *Dune* (1984) being key examples.

³ When researching I came across a video montage by the special effects artist, Ben Radatz who painstakingly compiled every lens flare in the film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, assembled together to create a glorious spectacle of light.

