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Angela Jouini

Hand / Camera / Phone: Mobile Cameras, Migration, and Knowledge Production in Our Hands

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Mobile phones are linked to migration in many ways: as a communication tool, as a trade object, or as a means to exchange practical information on where to find shelter, cross borders, or circumvent the police. Using mobile phones as cameras, the movie *Midnight Traveler* (Hassan Fazili 2019) refers to all of these dimensions, while also going beyond them by placing film production and knowledge production into the hands of those who migrate.

- A mobile phone's combination of different functions including telephone, messenger, map, and camera renders it vital for migration movements and allows it to be used as a tool for documenting from a migrant's perspective.
- Handheld mobile phone cameras have the potential to blur the distinction between the filmic world and its means of production, collapsing what is in front of the camera and what usually stays hidden behind it through the gesture of a hand reaching into the image and grabbing the camera while filming.
- Mobile phone filmmaking challenges the privilege of the eye and the visual, offering tactile techniques of spectatorship and forms of knowledge production based on touch.

CONTEXT

Mobile phones have a close relation to the hand itself, when they are used as handheld cameras, or in the way a touchscreen is operated. When mobile phone cameras are used in documentary filmmaking to tell a migrant's story on their own terms, they offer a "hands-on" approach to digital knowledge production that incorporates not only the reality of its production but also the potential for a change of perspective.



PRELUDE

A young girl films with her mobile phone. The child's perspective becomes evident by the camera's height and its shaky movements, by her singing behind the camera and her interest in the goats or the leaves playing in the wind. A moment later, she turns the mobile phone in her hand in a playful manner, her fingers reach in front of the camera, we see parts of her body or her face with glasses from below – she must be holding the camera in her lap.

Cut.

A group of refugees plans to cross a European border through a forest. They gather around a mobile phone that shows a map in satellite view with lines that mark the border and stars that mark meeting points. One hand holds the phone, another comes from the side, a finger points at something on the map; one hand uses two fingers to pinch and zoom, change the view. We hear people talking about gunshots that can be heard in the border region where the film was recorded.

Cut.

A man sits in front of a window. It is nighttime and you can hear protests in front of the building, a Bulgarian refugee shelter. At first, the man, Hassan Fazili, and his wife, Fatima Hussaini, who films her husband with her mobile phone, observe the scene from the safety of their room. At some point, he stands up, reaches for the mobile phone with his hand and asks his wife to turn it off. While it is still filming, he grabs the camera phone. He wants to go and film outside.

These scenes are from the documentary film *Midnight Traveler* (2019) directed by Hassan Fazili, who, with his family, used three mobile phones to document their flight from Afghanistan to Germany. The three scenes illustrate the close relation between mobile phones used as cameras and the body – more specifically, the hands that operate the former. When Nargis, Hassan and Fatima's daughter, plays with the camera and turns it around in her hands in the first scene, she also brings her fingers in front of the camera and into the image. The second scene described above is another example of the *handling* of mobile phones that highlights its importance for refugee movements. In the third scene, we see the act of *handing over* the camera from one person to another. We actually observe someone grabbing the camera, thus bringing the hand that holds the camera into the image. The notion of the *handheld* camera is to be taken literally here.

MOBILE PHONES AND MIGRATION

Mobile phones are linked to migration in many ways: while they most obviously connect and enable communication with family and friends at home or elsewhere, they are also commonly used to contact smugglers and other helpers; they might additionally be used as trade objects; and they are often used to exchange practical information on where to find shelter, the best ways to cross the border, or how to avoid border control and the police (Ullrich 2017). There is a scene in *Midnight Traveler* where Nargis uses the phone to play music and dances to it while she cleans the family's room in a shelter home. We see family members holding phones or Hassan Fazili looking for a signal, which hints at the fact that phones are used for communication – for example, with their producer in the United States to whom they sent all their shot material, even though this is not addressed explicitly in the film. And, in some scenes, such as the one planning the route through the forest described at the beginning, we see how mobile phones are used as maps to lay out the route to cross the border. This highlights the importance of mobile phones for refugees, but also in the Fazili family's everyday life: "These functions illuminate the phone as a companion and lifeline rather than simply a device for capturing footage" (Dreiling 2021: 181). All these functions are combined within the digital device that many of us carry in our pockets and that is turned into a camera to film a documentary

that becomes *Midnight Traveler*. What is striking about this film is that it is fully told from the refugee's perspective. It was Hassan Fazili's decision to make a film about his family's flight from Afghanistan, the achievement of which was made possible by mobile phone cameras in the first place. *Midnight Traveler* therefore goes beyond the promise of authenticity associated with being a film shot by refugees: its documentary value in a much broader sense lies in the way mobile phones are used as filmic devices.

HANDHELD CAMERA

The way mobile phones are used as handheld cameras is central to the understanding of their relation to reality in documentary film. The mobile phone camera in *Midnight Traveler* can be described as flexible, sometimes shaky and blurry, characterised by its ability to move freely. It shares these characteristics with the aesthetics of a handheld camera, as it is discussed in film theory. However, the scenes described above, where the hand that operates the camera also reaches into the image, ascribe an additional quality to the use of handheld mobile phone cameras.

German film scholar Florian Krautkrämer (2014) discusses how in documentary films, the boundary between filmmakers and those who are filmed becomes blurred. Unlike in fictional film, filmmakers and protagonists have their common origin in a shared reality. Krautkrämer claims that this is even truer for mobile phone formats that address their own production within the image through perspective, resolution, or a shaky camera. He goes on to argue that *hors-champ* – what happens outside an image but still inside the film's world – and *hors-cadre* – what happens behind a camera and outside the world built in fictional films – overlap in documentary films, and even more so in mobile phone films. In *Midnight Traveler* it is precisely the hand that enters the film's image that marks the convergence of the film's world and the area of production behind the camera. The hands that grab the camera are the ones that operate it in the following scenes, showing us the world of the people attached to them. It is Hassan Fazili, an Afghan filmmaker, family father, and refugee who takes up the camera to document his and his family's life fleeing the Taliban. The act of filming becomes an important part of their life. Consequently, the act of filming is an important issue within the film itself, making visible its own production. The camera is part of the reality it films and Hassan Fazili grabbing it with his hands marks this inseparability. The filmic world and the real world are the same, and they are connected through the act of taking the camera into one's hands. By bringing the hand that holds the camera into the image, that which is in front of a camera and that which usually stays hidden behind it – the two spheres that are separated in fictional films – collide.

UNDERMINING THE DOMINANCE OF THE EYE

While classical photography is primarily optical, privileging the eye over the hand, the photographic gesture in mobile phone photography and filmmaking is more closely tied to the hand. "For the most part people no longer take pictures with their eyes at all, but with their hands alone" (Thiele 2010: 300), writes media scholar Matthias Thiele. According to Thiele, the close connection between the eye and the camera is loosened both by the outstretched arm, which creates distance between the mobile phone camera and the body, and by a display instead of a viewfinder being held in front of the eye. In this respect, it can be argued that the handheld mobile phone camera undermines the longstanding cultural dominance of the eye and the visual over the hand and the tactile. In her discussion of mobile phone filmmaking, Lisa Gotto proposes that the visual and the tactile are no longer separate spheres, which she understands as a challenge to the "primacy of the visual" (Gotto 2018: 240) in film theory. Gotto claims that with mobile phones "we always have both, the camera and the screen in our grasp – our hand encloses

the entire device and thereby holds the entire dispositive in our hands” (Gotto 2018: 239). In addition to being used as cameras, mobile phones can also be used as screens on which one can watch professionally produced films or user-generated content. The touchscreen is again operated by hand and finger gestures such as zooming, pinching, scrolling, or swiping. Grasping and comprehension of the world in the digital age is thus decisively organised by tactile techniques, as Gotto further argues: images become touchable; through our fingers and hand practices they are no longer distant. The medium and the images move closer to the body, as they are operated by the touch of a finger. As touchscreens have become inseparable from our daily lives, Wanda Strauven sees a “change toward [...] tactile spectatorship, [...] a very material form of spectatorship, grounded in touch” (Strauven 2021: 244). She points out that these are images that in order to use and make sense of, we need to grasp with our hands. Thus, with today’s predominance of the touchscreen, “we witness the emergence of an alignment of touch, vision, and immaterial objects of knowledge, which become accessible by way of a screen” (Schneider 2012: 58), as Alexandra Schneider adds.

KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION IN OUR HANDS

Digital knowledge production and film production are “hands-on” practices. Documentary truth, as created through handheld mobile phone cameras, encompasses the reality in front of the camera as much as the film’s reality – that is, its production. This connection is made visible through the hand that holds the camera and that occasionally crosses the (no longer existent) border between what is seen in front of the camera and what stays hidden behind it when it reaches into the image. By blurring these lines, the reality of a film’s production becomes part of the reality that the film documents, making it known to the viewers. In addition, access to digital images and information through mobile phones is organised through hand gestures when we operate a touchscreen. Mobile phones and their digital images put knowledge production into our hands. At the same time, as Hassan Fazili takes the mobile phone camera into his hands, so he takes telling his migration story into his own hands. Documentary film production and knowledge production move closer to the body through handheld mobile phones. As demonstrated in the example of *Midnight Traveler*, this holds the potential to create and showcase different ways of knowledge production about migration when we see documentation not *about* migration but *by* migrants, telling their stories on their own terms *with the means at hand*.

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IMDB entry: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8923500/>

German distributor: https://www.trigon-film.org/de/movies/Midnight_Traveler

International distributor: <https://www.thepartysales.com/movie/midnight-traveler/>

Berlinale film file: <https://bit.ly/3FYQYPuBerlinale>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Angela Jouini (née Rabing), MA, is a film and media scholar at Freie Universität Berlin and a doctoral candidate at Universität Bremen. In 2021 she was a Fellow at MECAM in Tunis as part of the Interdisciplinary Fellow Group “Aesthetics & Cultural Practice.” Her research focuses on digital aesthetics of cinematic realism with a special interest in mobile phone filmmaking. Further research interests include documentary film, queer cinema, and film and migration. Moreover, she is an editorial board member of the online journal *nach dem film* and was project coordinator of the International Bremen Film Conference (2017–2022). She recently published “An den Grenzen des Dokumentarischen” (in: *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft*, No. 25, 2021) and edited issue 18 of *nach dem film*, “Aesthetics and Theory of Digital Film” (2020). Moreover, she is co-editor of two publications following the Bremen Film Conference, including a volume entitled *Cinema Crossing Borders* (*Grenzüberschreitendes Kino*, ed. with W. Pauleit and D. González de Reufels, 2019).

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