

New perspectives on an imperfect cinema: Smartphones, spectatorship, and screen culture 2.0

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Abstract

This paper discusses smartphone spectatorship with a focus on user participation, interactivity, and the fusion of digital media and moving images. In the renaissance of mobile filmmaking and participatory culture, there is no longer a definite difference in the quality of cinema and mobile media tools. Instead, users' embodied and social presences define the framework of viewing and production. By reflecting on the sovereignty of smartphone film culture, this paper highlights the behavioural and cultural trajectories of mobile movie consumption, where content access merges with content production.

Keywords: embodiment, interactive viewing, participatory film culture, smartphones, spectatorship, user-generated content

Introduction

The bourgeoisie of cinema is being disintegrated on the altar of perfection, while the cinema of the people is revived. Juan García Espinosa's 'imperfect cinema'[1] gains importance in the era of the blurring boundaries of spectatorship and participation, and the increasing complexity and multitude of visual and auditory domains. When citing Espinosa, Hito Steyerl contemplates the transformation of aesthetic representation and the 'fractured and flexible temporalities' of consumption.[2] This manifesto of abundance and involvement extends the boundaries of moving images to a space away from

the shelter of cinema. The proliferation of mobile devices – smartphones or tablets – provide but a few examples of this tendency to relocate not only the cinematic experience, but also the cinematic imagery to spheres of *non-spectatorship*.

Smartphones and smartphone spectatorship borrow a great deal from cinema and post-cinematic screens, but synthesise these features with the continuous interaction between the viewer's body, the screen, and the interface. This synthesis is the result of the smartphone not being a dedicated screening apparatus: whereas its screen and software are capable of streaming, playing, and visualising moving images, the small screen, the sensory presence of a surrounding environment, and the countless other parallel running applications on the device may cause distractions. In addition, smartphones yield tactile and kinesthetic interactions with moving-image sequences that are perceived through unique bodily constellations. While balancing mediated (diegetic) and unmediated (physical) realities, viewers become immersed in creating their own viewing experiences. This, as Steyerl notes, 'transforms quality into accessibility, exhibition value into cult value, films into clips, contemplation into distraction'.[3]

The question of mobile or smartphone film consumption is not a recent matter as it has been approached in both popular culture and academic discourses.[4] A great deal of analyses highlight mobile devices' convergence into cinematic tools (i.e. movie screens, cameras),[5] while others build on the deficits of image and sound quality in films and video material made on, made for, or accessed on portable devices.[6] Among the advocates of convergence, Roger Odin examines consumer practices, including mobile filmmaking and streaming.[7] Likewise committed to a formalist view, Paola Voci and Catherine Fowler discuss the cinematic roots of small-screen spectatorship and conclude that mobile viewers engage with movie narrations in a similar manner to that in a theatrical screening room.[8] Their conclusion stems mainly from the idea that viewers' knowledge and previous encounters with the pictorial toolbox of cinema help engaging with movies in different viewing spaces. This notion complies with Francesco Casetti's conclusion exploring the relocation of cinema onto various screening platforms. He holds that the cinematic medium persists even on the small screen of Apple's iPhone – even if movie watching happens in unenclosed public spaces.[9]

Mobile phones in these works are often compared with more established screening and recording techniques, such as cinematic and televisual produc-

tion. The contrasts, however, are now greatly diminished by the rapid development of phone cameras, screens, and sound systems: there is no longer a definite difference between the quality and fidelity of professional and mobile media tools. This means that despite the attention to mobile cinematics in the past decade, the renaissance of mobile filmmaking and participatory culture requires an updated framework focusing on users and their embodied and cultural presence.

This paper aims to highlight the sovereignty of smartphone film and video culture and the ways in which it connects viewers' bodies with moving images. My goal is to highlight fairly nascent, yet rapidly changing practices of audiovisual consumption, where the roles of content production and content access often merge and the proportion of online presence and mobile encounters increase. The screen culture at present is deeply embedded in the values that Espinosa's imperfect cinema once meant for the Cuban film industry: the active presence of *ordinary* people behind the camera and in front of the screen.

Smartphone cinema, smartphone spectatorship

A series of monologues are filmed with a mobile phone against bright-coloured backgrounds: this is the underlying situation behind the story of Michelangelo, whose invisible and inaudible character interviews the key figures of a New York fashion show parallel to a police investigation of a murder on the catwalk. Sally Potter's movie *Rage* centres on Michelangelo's mobile phone camera to strip down the distancing power of the film apparatus, of directing, and of acting, and to create what she calls *naked cinema*.^[10] The portrayal of the characters – a designer, a fashion critic, some models, and other fashion-industry personalities – slowly sets them free from mannerisms and poses. As the movie translates racial and social stereotypes and the issues of fashion industry into humorous, simple, but vivid representations, it also experiments with a formal language for bringing the characters' faces and bodies within the reach of the viewer. Potter tells the story exclusively through the characters' viewpoints – showing nothing more than them talking one at a time into the camera, expecting the viewer to connect the dots and solve the mystery.

Rage introduces two points of departure for the following analysis of smartphones, spectatorship, and mobile film production. First, the movie reflects on the fact that, by merging the spheres of viewing and interacting, handheld devices create sensory and bodily immediacy. Second, it highlights the ways in which smartphone film and video culture universalises participation[11] and anonymises users and creators. Naked cinema that Potter promotes in *Rage* attempts to recall this simultaneous presence of intimacy and public in both viewing and creating.

One of the most evident and crucial factors of smartphone film experience is interaction and the way interaction results in personalised encounters with moving images. Following the duality of sensory connectedness and cultural involvement presented through the example of *Rage*, I divide this analysis into two sections. The first section examines the modes of interacting with a movie and its presentation during screening. In this section, I propose that viewing is defined by the interactive capacity of smartphones; the fact that it yields adjustments through the touchscreen and through screen positioning. Such adjustments can control stimulus intensity (e.g. luminance, image size, volume) and narrative presentation (e.g. scene order, playback speed). This stands in contrast with cinematic film experience, where the screening apparatus defines the modes of viewing and the temporal frame of the content.

In the second section, I turn to a broader cultural intervention and study smartphones as always-available tools for both generating and accessing audiovisual content. Smartphones grant access to audiovisual content anytime, anywhere. In addition, smartphones' image capture quality approximates that of professional equipment. Nothing can demonstrate this better than the sophistication of user-generated content and the fact that even celebrated filmmakers use smartphones to shoot feature films to screen them on any type of screens from cinemas to pocket-sized devices.

To reflect on the blurring boundaries between viewing and generating content, I approach smartphone film experience through the two distinct capacities of the smartphone user: that of the viewer (who holds the perceptual, mental, and bodily abilities for movie watching) and the consumer (who participates in the production, distribution, and access of content). For this, I borrow methodological solutions from discourses related to interactive screenings, embodiment, and a media-historical and media-theoretical framework of film viewing. With the goal of effectively assessing the principles of smartphone spectatorship, I establish and follow the logical derivation

of socially and culturally determined patterns of participatory film culture and revisit a spectator-centred approach. My analysis of viewer behaviour occurs from the perspective of a potential viewer in generalised viewing circumstances. I assume a baseline routine of moving-image consumption in unenclosed spaces (e.g. on a busy street or in transit), where people, objects, and social norms may interfere with viewing activities and prompt changes in screen position, aspect ratio, stimulus intensity, and flow of content. While my description builds upon what I calculate to be the primary potential ways in which a viewer can engage in smartphone spectatorship, I also acknowledge the existence of a diversity in habits, viewing spaces, and stimuli.

Embodied interaction

Personalised viewing experiences are not unique to smartphones. In fact, it is perhaps safe to say that all screening media possess aspects that in some way alter the presentation or perception of content. These are bound to a number of factors, for instance, the properties of a shared place, the technical specifications of a screening apparatus, or a viewer's perceptual abilities and interests.[12] Yet handheld smart devices stand out from other domestic or public screens: the relationship that is defined by the bodily connection between a device and its user catalyses hitherto-unseen freedom in movie watching.

Interaction with smartphones and their content is attributed in this paper to the following material properties. The first is mobility, the device's capacity to be moved within the physical space and in relation to the user's body.[13] This signifies that a smartphone can be taken to and used in various spaces due to its light weight and small size, and the screen's position (and consequently the visual angle) can be adjusted to the user's sensory abilities and preferences at any time. The second set of key properties springs from interface design and the touchscreen, which allow for tactile operations.[14] Bodily involvement and the options that a smartphone and its interface afford accommodate a broad scope for personalising movie watching. Some of these options have been integral parts of and customary to other screening platforms: pausing footage, browsing scenes, or setting volume are features of any video player and even television sets.[15] Yet, as Odin also points out, haptic contact during smartphone spectatorship increases the range and even the frequency of these adjustments.[16]

On account of smartphone design and the haptic interventions they afford, interactions can be manifold, and as I introduced above can be categorised as actions that alter stimulus intensity or narrative presentation. Some types of interactions, such as changing the volume, freezing a frame, or moving the screen, are more ubiquitous than others; for instance, enlarging parts of a frame (which Odin seems to appreciate)[17] is supported only by a handful of smartphone video player applications. Nevertheless, the most popular smartphone video players on the market all have user interfaces designed for haptic interaction during viewing.[18] The marketing for these applications openly claims superiority to cinema's static screen, celebrating functions such as screen-orientation and image-size settings, split-screen or popup replay windows, position seeking, as well as playing in fast and slow motion.

Interactions with smartphones epitomise a largely different process than interactive videos or movie screenings, such as those part of the *Kinoautomat* project. One of the first-ever interactive screenings were presented in the Czechoslovak pavilion at the Montreal Expo in 1967.[19] During the screening of the movie, *One Man and His World*, 124 viewers voted for one of two possible outcomes at different tipping points in the story, which defined how the main character encountered the next key event in his adventures. There, the alternation of viewers' focus on physical and diegetic elements was moderated as part of the spectacle: at each voting session, the film was stopped and the lead actor appeared on stage and presented the audience's choices. The outcome of the narration in the *Kinoautomat* was not something the audience could influence however: the screenplay contained two different plot lines at each moment when a choice could be made, but they both led to the same climax and the film ended in the same way anyway.

Interactive screenings, such as the *Kinoautomat*, limit the scope of interventions to pre-determined question-and-answer situations. While watching, viewers engage with the movie until the point when the screening is intermitted, and their attention is directed to actions in the physical space. In the case of smartphones, however, interactions may occur at any time and are based on impromptu decisions and personal preferences. Presumably, this means that the smartphone viewer's power and active role in defining content presentation enhances engagement with a movie narration: manipulations executed through haptic interventions in favour of stimulus intensity and narrative presentation may trigger an increased sensation of involvement. However, deciding about the modes and content of spectatorship en-

hances media awareness too. In the next section I will engage in a more detailed investigation of this paradox of involvement and distraction by presenting the basic characteristics of user control and interaction.

Interaction as distraction?

Semio-pragmatic accounts of mobile spectatorship, such as those by Casetti and Odin, imply that viewer behaviour emerges from the options and needs of interactions and the sensory or cultural indices that signal them.[20] The viewer's environment (i.e. a space that is not necessarily dedicated to movie watching) can trigger adjustments in response to eventual distractions and wandering attention. Casetti explains this by claiming that while present in a collective space, the viewer seeks to exclude (or at least diminish) undesirable disturbances in order to recreate the intimate experience of cinema. Within the boundaries of what Casetti and Sampietro call *existential bubbles* ('invisible barriers that offer refuge'),[21] the viewer invests her body in mediating between the movie and the physical reality to construct an effective and pleasant viewing experience. Supporting this, handheld control allows for haptic interactions at any time which require even less cognitive or motor involvement than lifting a controller or turning the pages of a book.[22] In fact, some types of interactions require so little attention that they likely go unnoticed. But in order to understand the impact of interactive watching, I must examine the mechanisms behind interactions through viewers' engagement with audiovisual narratives.

Theoreticians agree that moving-image narrations can induce the sensation of presence in a fictional world by momentarily masking the physical space and the screening apparatus.[23] This sensation lasts until the point when external stimuli (e.g. tasks, distracting noises) or internal motivations (boredom, disgust, mind wanderings) disconnect the viewer from the narrative. Whereas this thesis is applicable to a wide range of viewing scenarios, in the case of smartphones it must be combined with the question of interactions. While examining portable screens, Nanna Verhoeff arrives at a similar crossroads, which she resolves by treating viewing as part of a screening arrangement.[24] She claims that a portable device either *takes* physical space or *makes* space by forming the realms of usage and connecting the users' hands with input devices (touch screen, keys, etc.). This suggests that a personalised viewing experience assembles on the axis of the user's body and the

device, and such bodily control defines the balance between the sensations of diegetic and physical presence. So, while Verhoeff's identification of the specific relationship of the screen to space is accurate, the most critical element enabling the fusion of viewing and interacting is not the device itself, but instead the user and her mental and motor involvement. More specifically, what affords interactions is her knowledge of interaction mechanisms as well as her access to and perception of the indicators that signal these mechanisms.

The smartphone's graphical user interface reveals clues about locations and modes of touch, which are familiar physical gestures for commanding the device.[25] Most mobile media player applications employ clickable panels that appear on top of the video as a response to a touch of the screen and contain symbols remediated from previous digital or analogue video players. Reframing Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's remediation theory, these symbols and functions are perceived familiar due to sensory, cultural, and technological references.[26] These references provide sensory indices regarding the modes and areas of interaction and implement cultural and bio-mechanical operation methods to help users to orient themselves among the various functions. These factors altogether likely minimise awareness and automatise interactions. Thus, since familiar gestures and indicators accommodate usability and reduce media awareness, it is reasonable to assume that haptic interaction would not considerably influence the viewer's engagement with the content.

In addition to automatised interaction mechanisms, personalised presentations of a movie tailored to a viewer's preferences might also strengthen engagement and the sensation of presence as well as the walls of Casetti's imaginary bubble of mobile viewing. Personalisation may happen in relation to the following: first, one's bodily features and sensory abilities prompt adjustments of stimulus intensity, such as the screen's distance from the eyes, the loudness of the soundtrack, or the brightness of the image; second, personal preferences, interest, and cultural background propel the desire to engage or disengage with the narrative and its features by, for instance, freezing a frame, zooming in on a character or object, or skipping scenes; third, social factors – the space of watching and the people inhabiting it or the available time frame – can lead to compromises between watching and other activities.[27] In sum, interactions serve to satisfy curiosity or to achieve or maintain the desired level of engagement with the narrative world. They, furthermore, are executed through familiar gestures in response to familiar clues.

Being in charge of the screening of a movie by manual control increases engagement with the narrative and decreases the likelihood of moving attention from the movie to irrelevant or unrelated matters.

According to an opposing hypothesis, however, interactions are often provoked by distraction, which can indisputably redirect a viewer's focus from the movie to the source of distraction – be that on or outside of the screen or related to mind wandering. This statement is deduced from smartphone design; the small size, handheld operation, hypermediacy, and the fact that they are used in unenclosed spaces, parallel to other activities. Although smartphones are celebrated by many[28] for the endless options for personalising movie or video watching, fragmenting or adjusting the presentation of moving-image sequences can affect the sensation of presence, emotional engagement, and comprehension. Maria Engberg and Jay David Bolter even highlight that a narrative a viewer accesses on platforms supporting interactions becomes unique, which may not approximate what was intended by content providers or filmmakers.[29]

In regard to the question of engagement and distraction, I argue that the palette of interactions manifests itself through two strategies: interaction either arises from external motivations, such as when external stimuli prompt interventions, or from internal factors, such as interest or curiosity. External factors more likely distance viewers from the movie and motivate them for adjusting the screening in order to restore an immersive state. Internal motivations, however, engage the viewer with objects, characters, and events represented in the diegetic space.

Changes in a movie's or video's presentation create the same illusion of control over the narrative as in the *Kinoautomat*. Yet, interactions effectuate a holistic experience that involves the screen and its presence in the physical environment relative to the viewer's body and senses. While in the absence of interaction indicators (anything similar to question panels or buttons that interactive screenings use) the viewer's subsequent activity is not well pronounced, the coincidence of output and input in one device (the *touchscreen*) enables technological, cultural, and cognitive reflexivity. The connection of the physical body, the smartphone, and the audiovisual stimuli encompasses spatial and temporal plasticity to recompose the quality, the order, and the intensity of sound and images, and to create a tailor-made sequence with subjective immersive quality.

All things considered, two opposing ideas define spectatorship on smartphones: the small screen, mobility, and interaction mechanisms increase the likelihood of distraction and wandering attention; also, the options for personalising the screening through familiar methods and the haptic link that connects the apparatus to its viewer suggest increased engagement. In an empirical study recreating some of these factors (namely, the screen's size and external distractions), I found that smartphone viewing has an effect on the sensation of presence, emotional engagement, and comprehension.[30] According to these findings, the small size of the smartphone can be compensated for by positioning the screens and making other adjustments to create an uninterrupted viewing experience; but viewers are nevertheless susceptible to distraction, which may affect viewing experience and practices.

Interaction and participation

Defining spectatorship on mobile screens through the spheres of bodily connection and interaction is pertinent because it aids the discussion of how smartphones' mobility, ubiquity, and handheld control democratise film and video culture, shape aesthetic practices, and condense moving-image consumption. Embodied interaction can transform the aesthetic frame of contents both when watching and when generating moving images: for instance, by holding the screen in a vertical position, one includes the interface as an outer frame of the artistic composition.[31]

Embodiment, the underlying logical tie behind the multiple aspects of mobile spectatorship, distances, but at the same time, connects engagement and interaction in the dimensions of the smartphone spectacle. This spectacle is far away, but still so near Tom Gunning's cinema of attractions.[32] In the abundance of mediated representations, a smartphone screen *per se* is hardly anything sensational. Yet, smartphones offer the pleasure of participation, which, in the end, couples with an impression of tailor-made conformity. Joost Broeren follows a similar argument, only to illustrate how YouTube and user participation signify a new era of attractions.[33] He departs from the idea that, as opposed to narrative film, cinema of attractions at the turn of the twentieth century was hallmarked by technological limitations (or rather, specifications), which defined both the duration and content of films. Identifying exhibitionism as the other analogy between early cin-

ema and social video sites, Broeren pronounces that home videos, commercials, and professional content alike are subject to the fast-paced consumer patterns of our times.

Nevertheless, when observing consumer behaviour from the perspective of a viewing platform that incorporates the alloy of online and offline (virtual and physical) presence, it is necessary to acknowledge the role of commercialisation and the commodification of media and culture. The abundance of content indubitably poses questions of quality and quantity, but the preeminent point is how viewer participation shapes movie consumption. In cinema, the physical distance from the screen initiates an immersive state based on the senses, suggesting that being too close would make viewers vulnerable by their own bodily presence. Ironically, this kind of presence is perhaps the reason why smartphones have grown a fan base for spectatorship: intimacy, subjectivity, and ubiquity play genuine roles in elevating small handheld devices to the niveau of cinematics.

Condensing spectatorship

The patterns of movie and video consumption on smartphones stand in a rather paradoxical constellation of spectatorship and personalisation. This diverges from David Bordwell's *intensified continuity* and *post-continuity*[34] or Steven Shaviro's *accelerationist aesthetics*[35] toward a representational nihilism where moving images are subject to personalised encounters. In her contribution about speed watching on handheld screening devices, Neta Alexander places spectatorship in the framework of temporality in both a social and physical sense.[36] Alexander claims that time is not only mirrored in fast-forwarding footage or skipping frames, which serves to compress footage into the period designated for movie watching (and not the other way around, as in the case of cinema, for instance); it also becomes apparent in the ways the aesthetic traditions of commercial movies have changed. By analysing the customs of playing moving-image content by compressing its length even by half, Alexander concludes that participatory spectatorship entails the viewer's simultaneous distancing from narrative information and close involvement with it: missing frames or even scenes and not knowing what exactly was lost 'puts the viewer in a limbo of watching and un-watching',[37] similar to what I described as non-spectatorship above. While this

practice seems to mean an economical use of time, it implies a changing tendency in consumer behaviour and a trend of gamification, both in terms of content and spectatorship. Saving time by speed watching or manually skipping scenes seems to be some sort of a life hack in response to an abundance of content and a hunger for information and stimulation.

A return to Gunning and his work on early film confirms the duality of involvement and detachment: he suggests that attraction requires a certain level of alienation – precisely because of the need to eliminate the awareness of the screening medium and to foreground the narrative.[38] Familiarity with smartphones and the related interaction mechanisms enables focused viewing where the content itself is the central element. Though as explained earlier, when the viewer's attention oscillates between content and the sensory or cultural modalities of the device or the surrounding environment, viewing may become less engaged. This, in the end, seems to explain harsh criticism from filmmakers about consuming movies on smartphones and other types of mobile devices.

David Lynch is one source of this critique. In a video recorded for the DVD edition of *Inland Empire*, he says:

Now if you're playing the movie on a telephone, you will *never*, in a trillion years, experience the film. You'll think you have experienced it, but you'll be cheated. It's such a sadness that you think you've seen a film on your *fucking* telephone. Get real![39]

In 2003, years before the first iPhone was released, even Steve Jobs doubted that handheld devices would be used for screening movies in the future. He candidly admitted he was 'not convinced people want to watch movies on a tiny little screen'.[40] In addition to the fact that these statements were made over a decade ago, in a time of scepticism, they must be regarded keeping in mind Lynch's ironic and critical style of expression and without ignoring the fact that Jobs eventually did make an obvious stand for mobile multimedia. During his MacWorld presentation about the new iPhone in 2007,[41] Jobs live-streamed parts of a television series and a feature film on the iPhone, demonstrating the options for not only watching sequences but even changing aspect ratios.

The unmistakable clash between optimising feature films or television series to handheld devices by the touch of a finger presented by a tech professional ('It works like magic!')[42]) and an artist's ultimate rejection of smartphone spectatorship is not exclusively about timing or technological

developments; not even about a conservative advocacy of the filmic medium. It rather concerns the assumed quality of mental and physiological engagement with a movie and its narrative – precisely what Casetti’s hypothetical viewer strives for when surrounding herself with an existential bubble.[43] More recently, the award-winner director of *Son of Saul*, László Nemes professed concern about his film being distributed on portable media platforms, outright calling smartphone spectatorship ‘the end of the world,’ thus privileging the physiology of the celluloid and the perpetuity of the cinematic experience.[44]

Participatory film culture

The dystopian idea of film consumption rejecting artistic intentions in favour of portable devices, where form, narration, and aesthetics become nothing more than a crate for transmitting information, is certainly unsettling. Still, much like Espinosa’s imperfect cinema, smartphone film spectatorship creates more opportunities rather than being labelled threatening or disparaging to film art. The legacy of cinephilia notwithstanding, this statement implies that participation has outgrown the movie fan’s passionate interest in film and cinema. Through the broadening arsenal of screens, viewers have received a reliable supply of tools for watching and interfering with content simultaneously. In fact, portable smart devices have a great deal to do with establishing an alternative film industry, where users are able to *create*, *access*, and *watch* films and videos, to *distribute* them through social media, to *browse* for additional information, and to *evaluate* contents – on the very same personal multimedia platform. This means that anyone in possession of a smartphone can contribute to the wide palette of content by recording and sharing whatever they find relevant.

In addition to the novel dynamics of the mobile film and video industry, the options for simultaneous creating, transmitting, and watching disrupts users’ roles, appointing them as *producers*[45] or *viewers*[46]. Axel Bruns’ and Dan Harries’ terms reflect on the trend that the active mass media user, who is in charge of navigating the abundance of mediated content (the *prosumer* of the mass media era),[47] transforms into a creator and consumer of on-demand content. This introduces a consumer/producer culture, which is strengthened by smart devices that are always ready at hand or sitting in one’s pocket and offer near-cinematic image and sound quality. In this culture that

Bruns and Harries envisioned, the roles of production, distribution, and consumption merge within the domain of online content and convergent media technologies. And despite the disparagement of mobile multimedia, the abundance of magazine articles and analyses of participatory consumption, of how-to-filmmaking tips, and online collaborative platforms,[48] present a clear picture of the fact that there is a part of the film industry that is actually based on participation and is shaped by the conflict between conservationist and more permissive agendas.

This point is well illustrated in Robert Rodriguez's 2013 short film *Two Scoops*, made in partnership with BlackBerry and 'You'. The first version of the action-filled short film was shot and then presented online. Although the main storyline was complete, the film contained unfinished scenes and green screen features, and Rodriguez reached out to the public to participate in completing it. *Two Scoops* is about a pair of twin sisters who run an ice cream truck during the day but at night they search for their missing father and others kidnapped by a mysterious monster. One of the scenes that was to be completed by crowdsourcing depicts the twins' agent calling on a video phone to share information about their father's potential kidnapper. The scene was filmed with a green screen to be later filled by self-recorded footage from any aspiring actor wanting to play the role of the agent. For this, Rodriguez provided the script and suggested using anything from mobile phones to webcams. Apart from missing scenes and sections of dialogue, people were asked to help design the ludicrous monster and the weapons to fight it, as well as to send their photos to feature as missing people's pictures on the community bulletin and lamp posts. Public participation gave *Two Scoops* new aesthetic features.

Handheld aesthetics and expressive rectangles

By democratising individual interactive experiences, smartphones have inspired not only consumers but even professionals, such as Chan-wook and Chan-kyong Park (*Night Fishing [Paranmanjang]*), Sean Baker (*Tangerine*), and Jenna Bass (*High Fantasy*) to shoot films on smartphones or to make use of the aesthetic framework of mobile filming, as Sally Potter did in *Rage*. Moreover, a great number of short and feature-length films, like *The Silver Goat* or *Roma*,[49] have been distributed chiefly or even entirely on portable smart devices or streaming sites. Films shot on smartphones often proclaim the

presence of the mobile device as an economic rather than an aesthetic feature. In other words, smartphones in filmmaking are more often used for decreasing budgets than for creating a new audiovisual language. There are notable exceptions though, for instance *High Fantasy*. In that film, the director uses handheld aesthetics – a shaking and fast-moving camera recording mostly from short distances – which, as Miriam Ross explains, suggests a human observer, an unmediated witness.[50] This specifically aids the narrative and captures the aspects of embodiment and intimacy when the characters wake up in the morning to find themselves trapped in each other's bodies.

In other cases, however, producers and distributors pronounce and praise smart- or portable-devices for economic reasons. Setting an example, *The Silver Goat* was proclaimed the first film ever made specifically for viewing on portable devices. Attempting to prevent the film from sinking into the overabundance of Hollywood blockbusters, the release campaign followed the newest trends in movie consumption: *The Silver Goat* premiered in the United Kingdom through an iPad application aboard a double-decker bus traversing the film's shooting locations in Central London, with a red-carpet moment at a bus stop on the South Bank. Its subsequent international release was also conducted through the application, which, by then, was available for multiple mobile platforms.[51]

Although the PR touch is evident, such a release strategy is not only significant with regard to publicity and the creative ways in which independent filmmakers make use of technology to reduce filmmaking and distribution costs. It also reflects on the ways cinematic viewing customs and consumption strategies are challenged and extended by handheld screens. Along with other types of mobile smart devices, the iPad used at the premiere of *The Silver Goat* is portable and personal yet still public: it can be taken outside of a designated room to a bus, to the open space of London. By referencing cinema (the ordinary space for film premieres), the iPads turned the iconic red Routemaster into a screening room containing simultaneously public and private viewing experiences – private in the sense that each viewer had a slightly different encounter with the content on their own screening device, while publicly sharing the same space. The app's release also supported this duality: although promising unique and intimate engagement with the movie, access included geotagged information and download statistics.[52]

The Silver Goat marks another equally crucial matter, which I attribute chiefly to mobile distribution and less to handheld recording devices[53] and mobile aesthetics, as in the case of *High Fantasy*: the scenes selected for the

movie trailer and other marketing material foreground medium shots and close-ups. These shots and the fairly long takes showing one or two characters at a time with little in the way of changes in perspective or camera movements seem to fit the mobile-screen experience and the potentially distracting viewing environments. They present only a small amount of visual information organised around an enlarged semantically meaningful object, such as a face or upper body. Framing in the trailer for *The Silver Goat* compensates for eventual shifts of attention (e.g. looking away from the screen), as the majority of information can be accessed through the auditory channel alone. The dominance of body- and face-centred shots is not representative of the entire movie. This suggests that the filmmakers deliberately used scenes in the trailer that embellish content optimised for small-screen viewing, perhaps to attract smart-device users.

Charlie Lyne, in a video essay titled *Frames and Containers*, revisits Sergei Eisenstein's theory of the cinematic frame and its dimensions.[54] Lyne's reflection on *The Dynamic Square* by Eisenstein vivifies a scheme for the plasticity of the film frame and the possible deviation of it depending on its container. The idea behind the plasticity of the frame lies in filling the visual dimensions for the sake of storytelling and creating the illusion of immediacy.[55] Thus, by the dynamics of visual narration, the viewer becomes unaware of the screen's physical presence, while the frame opens opportunities for focusing the gaze and manipulating immersive qualities. There have been numerous movies, video installations, and film projects to embrace Eisenstein's expressive rectangles, from *The Grand Budapest Hotel* to the Vertical Cinema project and *The Numberlys*, 'the world's first *tall* short film'. What is specific about the case of smartphones, however, is that perspectival changes are ubiquitous, familiar, and spontaneous both while capturing and watching.

When it comes to mobile video aesthetics in user-generated content, smartphones challenge even the basic cinematic terms of image capturing by often neglecting the aspect ratio that a horizontally held smartphone provides. *Wired* columnist Clive Thompson blames the ergonomics of the device. 'It feels weird,' he writes, to hold a smartphone horizontally.[56] And while perhaps vertical images are no longer strange (if they have ever been),[57] they clearly affect both image content and perception. Since (unimpaired) human vision captures a landscape view, a vertical composition of moving images may cause an uncanny feeling, and this bias in visual representation can influence narrative comprehension too.

Conclusion: New perspectives on an imperfect cinema

Based on the results of interactivity, corporeality, and viewing in unenclosed spaces, Engberg and Bolter define mobile cinematics as polyaesthetic.[58] Such a term captures the changing modes of movie consumption which are catalysed by the increased accessibility and participatory nature of moving-image culture. Acknowledging participation in making, accessing, and viewing movies, I approached this phenomenon from a sensory and a representational angle. The first implies the viewer's embodied presence in controlling her sensory and cognitive access to audiovisual narration. As Engberg and Bolter also underline, bodily control defines the aesthetic framework of a movie being watched: as the viewer moves the screen from or toward her sensory organs or changes playback settings, sound becomes louder or softer, image becomes more immersive or detached, objects become enlarged or compressed. Each encounter with moving images on portable smart devices is unique, engendered by the matter of subjectivity.

Using a representational angle, I analysed a transforming mediascape induced by the specifications of the most ubiquitous screening devices. I argue that these specifications, namely the portable and handheld design of smartphones, comprise both aesthetic and cultural trends, chiefly because the formal characteristics of movies connect to the culturally constructed conventions of cinema; but also because online consumption, multi-window representation, the increasingly mediatised environments, and parallel activities all have an effect on film and video consumption and production.

Imperfect cinema in Cuba in the 1960s was introduced to convey the people's perspectives of the revolution: Cubans from all across the country contributed to the newly emerging film industry to share episodes of their own lives. This led to a new aesthetic form and to films that were available for the public free of charge. Imperfection was set in contrast to the 'perfect' films of Hollywood; films mirroring everyday lives confronted the carefully designed aesthetics of the 'dream factory'.[59] Participation, widely available content, and screens that are deemed inferior to Western cinema are phrases that recall the arguments that marginalise smartphone movie culture. But even though portable devices are often treated as *imperfect* or even detrimental to movie making and watching, the trends and examples addressed above unquestionably elevate the discussion around mobile cinematics from one of pure conventionality to that of cultural practices and artistic manifes-

tations. Several artists have experimented with the limitations of the apparatus in the past decade, celebrating a 'lo-res' culture.[60] But perhaps an equal number have exploited what modern mobile devices and their cameras can offer – completely obliterating evidence of a (sometimes intentional) lack of professional equipment.

Considering users' corporeal intervention, pocket devices entail not only the emergence of interactive viewing and participatory film and video culture, but also its diversion from the cinematic medium, which Lev Manovich had foreshadowed as a colonising force of identity and imagination,[61] but which instead became the signifier of the link between amateur and commercial culture. In line with Eisenstein's aforementioned proposal, both viewership and visual representation follow the framework of screening technologies and practices as opposed to the framework of filmmaking.[62] Mobile media content gained sovereignty as part of an institutionalised instrument of social, cultural, aesthetic, and technological components, to hit cinemas, major film festivals, and mobile platforms *very* near you.

Author

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- www.youtube.com/watch?v=VKPaK670U7s (accessed on 7 February 2020)

Notes

- [1] Espinosa 1983.
- [2] Steyerl 2009.
- [3] Ibid.
- [4] For example, Artaud Double Bill, which deals with the problematics of mobile cinematics.

- [5] Berry & Schleser 2014; Engberg & Bolter 2017; Odin 2016.
- [6] Casetti & Sampietro 2012; Fowler & Voci 2011; Odin 2012.
- [7] Odin 2012, 2016.
- [8] Fowler & Voci 2011; Voci 2010.
- [9] Casetti 2008b, 2011b, 2012; Casetti & Sampietro 2012.
- [10] Potter 2014.
- [11] Participation is understood as the involvement of professional and non-professional users in generating and distributing (sharing) audiovisual content with the help of their mobile device in an online sphere.
- [12] Bordwell 1985.
- [13] Goggin 2006, 2008.
- [14] Goggin 2006.
- [15] See Benson-Allott 2015.
- [16] Odin 2016.
- [17] Ibid.
- [18] The top-rated streaming and video player applications with the most downloads from Google Play Store and Apple App Store in spring 2020.
- [19] Hales 2005.
- [20] Casetti 2012; Casetti & Sampietro 2012; Odin 2012, 2016.
- [21] Casetti & Sampietro 2012, p. 21. See also Casetti 2008a, 2011a.
- [22] See Benson-Allott 2015; Odin 2016.
- [23] See, for instance, Bálint & Tan 2015; Bezdek & Gerrig 2017; Prentice & Gerrig 1999.
- [24] Verhoeff 2009, 2012.
- [25] See also Szita 2017.
- [26] Bolter & Grusin 1999.
- [27] See Alexander 2017.
- [28] Commercially, but even in academic research (see Odin 2016).
- [29] Engberg & Bolter 2017.
- [30] Szita 2019.
- [31] Neal & Ross 2018; Ross 2014; Szita 2019.
- [32] Gunning 1986.
- [33] Broeren 2009.
- [34] Bordwell 2002.
- [35] Shaviro 2013.
- [36] Alexander 2017.
- [37] Ibid., p. 105.
- [38] Gunning 1995.

- [39] Lynch 2007.
- [40] Chen 2010.
- [41] Steve Jobs Keynote at Macworld 2007 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VKpaK670U7s>).
- [42] Ibid.
- [43] Casetti 2008a, 2011a; Casetti & Sampietro 2012.
- [44] Press conference for Son of Saul (www.index.hu/video/2016/03/04/saul_fia_sajtotajekoztato/#).
- [45] Bruns 2009.
- [46] Harries 2002.
- [47] Toffler 1980.
- [48] For example, ScreeningRoom, a content-making community for independent filmmakers.
- [49] Netflix acquired exclusive rights for distribution for Roma.
- [50] Ross 2014.
- [51] Tagholm 2012.
- [52] Ibid. and Third City (www.thirdcity.co.uk/silver-goat/).
- [53] The movie was shot with a Canon 5D camera.
- [54] Lyne 2017.
- [55] Eisenstein 1982.
- [56] Thompson 2017.
- [57] Neal & Ross 2018; Ross 2014.
- [58] Engberg & Bolter 2017.
- [59] Davies 1997.
- [60] For some notable examples, see Fowler & Voci 2011; Odin 2012.
- [61] Manovich 2001.
- [62] Eisenstein 1982.