

Smartphone Cinematics: Contextual Essay

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This piece of writing accompanies ‘Smartphone Cinematics’ (Vimeo link: <https://vimeo.com/565486598>) – a video essay which chronicles the impact that the smartphone has had on cinema over the past 14 years – both upon creative production practices and upon our aesthetic experiences of film viewing.

Mobile filmmaking has first and foremost been considered as the domain of the amateur, a vernacular form of creativity predominantly considered within the discourse of citizen journalism. Less critical consideration has been undertaken regarding the smartphone’s infiltration into mainstream cinema. The indelible impact of smartphone communications is now visible across many contemporary feature films – we now regularly see characters speaking on phones, characters texting one another, with key narrative expositional insights being revealed across these modes. Text messaging and online communications are receiving increasingly creative and dynamic graphical treatment in film, cinema and on-screen narratives. This video essay does not focus on the inclusion of these quotidian smartphone practices – rather it identifies instances where there has been a definite aesthetic impact, a notable change in traditional film form, style, and practice, in addition to a change in cinematic spectatorial behaviours.

The video essay is formally structured into four segments: *on*, *for*, *about* and *with*. *On* considers films made on smartphones; *for* - films made to be viewed on smartphones; *about* - films where smartphones feature as an antagonist in the narrative and *with* - films that call for synchronous smartphone use. Hybrid instances that cross over more than one of these categories will also be noted. Using a dual split screen, each section focuses on a contrasting

pairing to illuminate the polarities of smartphone cinematics. The spectrum of aesthetics is laid bare through this contrasting juxtaposition.

Using the medium of on-screen text messaging, barrage and bullet cinema aesthetics,¹ and different framing formats to communicate and develop the argument, the video essay visually reflects upon the impacts that these mobile technologies have had upon the stylistics and aesthetics of mainstream film production practices and cinema viewing behaviours.

In *on*, a visual consideration of films made *on* smartphones is considered through the examples of *Tangerine* (Sean Baker, 2015) and *Night Fishing (Paranmanjang)* (Park Chan-wook, 2011). Where *Tangerine* is characterised through the adoption of a mobile vernacular traditionally associated with portable recording such as unstable imagery and shaky camera moves, *Night Fishing* eschews this. The results are “cinematic” in their aesthetic quality in an attempt to render imperceptible the tools of production. The comparative clips also include behind-the-scenes insights into the contrasting directorial approaches: where one is distractingly frenetic, and the other calmly contemplative.

In *for*, two films designed to be viewed on smartphones are compared. Scenes from *Rage* (Sally Potter, 2009) and *Sickhouse* (Hannah Macpherson, 2016) are positioned side-by-side to exemplify the contrast between their horizontal and vertical framings. *Rage* was the first ever feature film to be designed for mobile phone viewing and distribution² whereas *Sickhouse* was made for viewing on *Snapchat*. The first is artfully and cinematically crafted; the other filmed on an iPhone and uploaded to the social media platform in 10-second fragments. This segment is endemic of the widely recognised challenges of “how to make content that fits the specificities of ‘built from the ground up for mobile’ with the need to be able to utilise it on other platforms where a vertical format is not commonly accepted”.³

In *about*, a single and very similar scene from the films *App* (Bobby Boermans, 2013) and *Jexi* (Jon Lucas and Scott Moore, 2019) are directly compared. In the horror film *App*, a

smartphone app called IRIS literally terrorises the film's characters, infecting their everyday lives through surveillance. *Jexi* is a comedy about a smartphone AI assistant that takes over the protagonist's life. Notably, these are both instances where the technology is gender coded, with women's voice and characteristics. The sequence reveals tropes of technophobia and media-phobia through the oppositional lenses of horror and comedy genres. This is part of a wider trend in which "post-cinematic horror trades centrally on a slippage between diegesis and medium; the fear that is channelled *through* moving-image media is in part also a fear *of* (or evoked *by*) these media, especially as regards the displacement of older media by newer ones and the uncertainty that such changes occasion".⁴ Both films relay the consequences of our new reliance on the ubiquitous smartphone device and its invasion of our lives and subversion of our privacy.

APP is a hybrid example – a film with a synchronisable smartphone app and features again in the fourth segment of the video – *about*.⁵ This segment of the video essay uses split screen to simultaneously show both the on-screen and on-phone content of the film. This sequence reveals how these examples unify theme, form, device and apparatus. The example presents a complex interplay and interlocking between form, content and delivery engaging explicitly with anti-technology rhetoric.

Collectively, the four segments of this video essay underscore the "increased centrality of the mobilized and virtual gaze as a fundamental feature of everyday life".⁶ Furthermore, the direct comparison format works to amplify the aesthetic and affective qualities of smartphone cinema, illuminating the broad spectrum of practice and approaches – where texts can either celebrate or erase the legacy of the smartphone medium.

Notes

¹ For further, in-depth analysis of this phenomena, see Tessa Dwyer, "Hecklevision, barrage cinema and bullet screens: An intercultural analysis." *Participations: Journal of Audience & Receptions Studies* 14, no. 2 (2017), 571-589 and Xuenan Cao, "Bullet screens (Danmu): texting, online streaming, and the spectacle of social inequality on Chinese social networks." *Theory, Culture & Society* 38, no. 3 (2019), 29-49.

² For further analysis of this film see: Sarah Atkinson, *Beyond the Screen: Emerging Cinema and Engaging Audiences* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 63-65.

³ Dave Neel and Miriam Ross, "Mobile framing: Vertical videos from user-generated content to corporate marketing." In *Mobile media making in an age of smartphones*, ed. Marsha Berry and Max Schleser (London: Palgrave, 2018), 157

⁴ Shane Denson, *Discorrelated Images* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 157

⁵ For further in-depth analysis of this example, see Sarah Atkinson, "Mobile Cinema." In *The Screen Media Reader: Culture, Theory, Practice*, ed. Stephen Monteiro (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 197-218; Alexander Svensson and Dan Hassoun. "'Scream into your phone': Second screen horror and controlled interactivity" *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 13, no. 1 (2016), 170-192

⁶ Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 4

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Svensson, Alexander, and Dan Hassoun. “‘Scream into your phone’: Second screen horror and controlled interactivity”. *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 13 no. 1 (2016): 170-192.

Filmography

Academy Museum: The iPhone from "Tangerine" (Academy Museum of Motion Pictures, 2017)

APP (Bobby Boermans, 2013)

Cell (Tod Williams, 2016)

Countdown (Justin Dec, 2019)

Crazy Rich Asians (Jon M. Chu, 2018)

Jexi (Jon Lucas and Scott Moore, 2019)

Night Fishing (Paranmanjang) (Park Chan-wook, 2011).

One Missed Call (Takashi Miike, 2003)

Paranmanjang (Night Fishing) - Making film (Moho Film, 2011)

Rage (Sally Potter, 2009)

Sickhouse (Hannah Macpherson, 2016)

Tangerine (Sean Baker, 2015)

Author Biography

Sarah Atkinson is Professor of Screen Media at King's College London and co-editor of *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*. Sarah has published widely on the film, cinema and screen industries including extensive work into the Live Cinema economy. She has worked on numerous funded immersive media projects and virtual reality initiatives. Sarah also adopts practice-based methodologies through the creation of her own original works which include video essays, short films (including *Live Cinema – walking the tightrope between stage and screen* which was nominated for the Learning on Screen ‘Best Educational Film’ Award 2020), an interactive cinema installation *Crossed Lines* which has been exhibited internationally and an interactive documentary featurette – *The Anatomy of a Film* – included on both the Artificial Eye UK Blu-ray release and Lionsgate’s USA DVD release of *Ginger & Rosa* (Sally Potter 2012).