

# Letter from the Editors

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# Letter from the Editors

By Lucia Szemetová and Jacob Browne

Dear Reader,

Welcome to Issue 18 of *Frames Cinema Journal*, “**Phone Camera at the Intersection of Technology, Politics, and Transmedia Storytelling**”!

This issue centres on the phone camera, a device which has garnered increasing attention, both as an effective political tool amidst recent and current global events, and as an apparatus facilitating new communicative strategies. For years, too closely associated with the vernacular, the phone camera has evaded critical attention. However, the varied formulations of phone camera recordings and their recycling attract ever more scholarly attention. The phone camera offers a particularly insightful viewpoint on changing modes of cinema, helping to better understand the technological, ideological, and aesthetic shifts through non-normative uses of visual media. This issue contributes to the growing scholarship on the device and its use by filmmakers, granting it the attention it deserves as a powerful and creative deployment of modern technology.

The works included in this issue offer a range of timely studies of the phone camera, looking at the intersections between phone footage as narrative or aesthetic device in both documentary and fiction films. The articles examine the ways in which the phone camera challenges the boundaries of media studies, moving nimbly between platforms and remediated formats; the phone camera’s ability to document major political events from the ground up,

from a panoply of perspectives; as well as the transformative potential for the transnational dissemination of such footage, and its consequent impact.

What is striking when surveying the articles and features collected here is the sheer variety of issues and approaches suggested in considerations of the phone camera. The utopian note sounded in explorations of the phone camera as a vital part of the citizen-activist's toolkit is countered by its potential to allow the tendrils of surveillance to reach further and further into our everyday activities, its connectivity both liberating and confining its users. Equally, the device's accessibility yields not only new possibilities for artistic or personal expression, but also a limitless potential for artifice and inauthenticity, a world populated by catfishes, trolls and fake news factories. No single keyword or theoretical gesture will completely unlock the phone camera, and so it seems appropriate that this issue has generated more featurettes and shorter pieces than previous editions of *Frames*, as though the academic gaze itself is unavoidably diffracted when directed through the lens of the phone camera.

Our **Features** section's articles highlight the works of filmmakers engaging with phone footage while also tracing a tension around identity and the individual that emerges from the apparatus. Focusing on a named and well-known theoretician-practitioner, **Lawrence Alexander** examines the iPhone as both artefact and tool of media archaeological enquiry through Hito Steyerl's *Abstract* (2012). **Tanya Shilina-Conte**, on the other hand, focuses on Ana Nyma's (Anonyme) documentary practice and explores phone footage in the framework of global anonymous cinema. Bridging the two, **Stefka Hristova** suggests the case study of smart phone selfies, which operate both as portraits, expressive of personal identity, and as data-prints, tools for tracking and tracing individuals, arguing for a continuity between 19<sup>th</sup> century anthropometric processes and contemporary mass surveillance and biometric enterprises.

Our **POV** section presents exciting accounts of the possibilities offered by the phone camera. It divides into two pairs of perspectives, the first of which includes personal insights into the phone camera's role in projects aimed at fostering self-expression. Thus, **Samuel Fernández-Pichel** reflects on the Patio 108 project, a collaborative platform that relies on short video testimonies recorded with cell phones mainly from the margins of Seville, from his dual perspective both as a participant and as a researcher. **Iakovos Panagopulos** gives his own professional insight on the Storylab's series of ethnomediaological workshops to Tejon Native Americans tribe members using mobile devices to tell their stories. The second pair of POV featurettes examine the role of the phone camera in the media circuit around specific recent events. In her piece on the circulation of phone footage of the August 4th 2020 Beirut port explosion, **samira makki** reflects on the afterlife of death images in their recycling and recirculation. **Jenny Gunn** examines the usage of the smartphone by rioters documenting their participation in the insurrection of the Capitol on January 6<sup>th</sup> 2021.

The **Film Featurette** section brings into attention a number of key films, both fiction and non-fiction, that are essential in any discussion of phone camera scholarship. Again taking up the issue of self-fashioning, **Tomas Elliott** considers the politics of sharing selfies in *Visages Villages* (2017), the ensemble piece from Agnès Varda and photographer JR. Through *Midnight Traveler* (Hassan Fazili, 2019), **Miche Dreiling** explores the aesthetic potentiality of handheld footage, including use of the smartphone camera, in documentary film practice. Similarly, **Max Bergmann** focuses on smartphone aesthetics in *Buddha.mov* (Kabir Mehta, 2017), functioning as a self-reflexive commentary on documentary filmmaking and the mediation of oneself on social media. Moving on to fiction films, **Alex Damasceno** considers the aesthetic properties of the horror film *Sickhouse* (Hannah Macpherson, 2016), composed solely of 10-second Snapchat videos, and the ways in which this formal approach defamiliarises the footage for the audience.

In our new **Scene Review** section, **Sam Thompson** takes up the issue of realism in relation to the phone camera, analysing the final sequence of Sean Baker's *The Florida Project* (2017), in which the film shifts to iPhone footage, to argue how the film offers a self-conscious commentary on the material conditions of filmmaking.

Finally, **Sarah Atkinson's video essay** for this issue reflects visually on smartphone aesthetics in recent mainstream cinema, in terms of both subject matter and cinematography. It discussed films made *on, for, about* and *with* smartphones.

Our **Book Review** section features reviews of Lee Grieveson's *Cinema and the Wealth of Nations* (2018) by **Maria Fernanda Miño Puga**; of David Martin-Jones' *Cinema Against Doublethink: Ethical Encounters with the Lost Pasts of World History* (2018) by **Sanghita Sen**; of Lydia Papadimitriou and Ana Grgić's edited collection *Contemporary Balkan Cinema: Transnational Exchanges and Global Circuits* (2020) by **Anna Batori**; of Sady Doyle's *Dead Blondes and Bad Mothers: Monstrosity, Patriarchy and the Fear of Female Power* (2019) by **Srishti Walia**; Anna Backman Rogers' *Sofia Coppola: The Politics of Visual Pleasure* (2019) by **Ana Maria Sapountzi**; of Dominic Lennard, R. Barton Palmer and Murray Pomerance's edited collection *The Other Hollywood Renaissance* (2020) by **Chris Horn**; of Jill Murphy and Laura Rascaroli's edited collection *Theorizing Film Through Contemporary Art: Expanding Cinema* (2020) by **Sam Thomson**; of Olivia Khoo's *Asian Cinema: A Regional View* (2020) by **Paulina Anna Zurawaska**; of Warren Buckland's *Narrative and Narration: Analyzing Cinematic Storytelling* (2021) by **Matthew Bosica**; of Libby Saxton's *No Power Without an Image. Icons Between Photography and Film* (2021) by **Jonathan Winkler**. We would like to especially highlight the contribution of the Film Studies MLitt students of St Andrews (the last four reviews), whose scholarly approach to the books signals a bright future for each of them!

With this issue, we are delighted to also be publishing the dossier "**Re-Discovering Kira Muratova**", curated by **Dina Iordanova**. With this dossier, **Iordanova** offers an

introduction to Muratova in her preface, and presents material emerging from the workshop *Kira Muratova @ St Andrews (2020)*. An audio essay by **Victoria Donovan** muses on what Muratova might have made of the age of lockdowns and social distancing, while video essays by **Masha Shpolberg** and **Irina Schulzki** consider her work in relation to the spaces of socialism and the cinema of gesture respectively. Finally, a POV Featurette by **Raymond De Luca** considers the blurring of distinctions between humans and non-humans in Muratova's *Chekhovian Motifs (2002)*.

Happy reading!

Lucia Szemetová and Jacob Browne

**Co-Editors-in-Chief**

\* This letter's thumbnail image is a still taken from the exhibition view of *Abstract* (Hito Steyerl) from the Käthe-Kollwitz-Preis 2019, Akademie der Künste, Berlin.

\*\* The issue's banner image is *Protest in Budapest, Hungary (2018)*, by Hanna Eichner.