

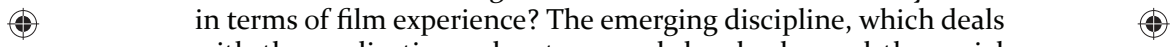


KATA SZITA


HAPTIC CINEMA

Smartphones and the Spectator's Body

Introduction



In the latest decade, an emerging number of users have exploited the novelties that smart devices brought for entertainment. Television and video, and later computers and portable video players have already reformed cinema's heritage, and now the smartphone is strengthening its role as a moving image medium as well. It is a tool that functions as the extension of the body, and is capable of connecting users with a variety of visual and audio content — even on the go. But what does this connectivity mean in terms of film experience? The emerging discipline, which deals with the application, advantages and drawbacks, and the social and economic effects of mobile media is often limited to content (such as forms of communication or consumption),¹ politics (digital rights, global and local policies),² or mobile filmmaking (filmmaking and distribution).³ Little attention is paid to the aspects of the user-device interaction which deal with the ways how older media shape and recreate the relationship between the spectator and the smartphone. Informed by interdisciplinary approaches, this paper attempts to turn the spotlight on this

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- 1 Larissa Hjorth and Gerard Goggin, *The Routledge Companion to Mobile Media* (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2014); Richard Seyler Ling, *The Mobile Connection: The Cell Phone's Impact on Society* (San Francisco: Morgan Kaufmann, 2004).
 - 2 Dan Steinbock, *Mobile Revolution* (London: Kogan Page, 2005).
 - 3 Marsha Berry and Max Schleser, 'Mobile Media Making in an Age of Smartphones' (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Roger Odin, 'Spectator, Film and the Mobile Phone', in *Audiences*, ed. by Ian Christie (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), pp. 155-69.
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relationship and its effects on film and video experience and viewing strategies.

Departing from Bolter and Grusin's influential theory that each new medium in a way relies on the content or form of an earlier one,⁴ it proves to be valuable to regard smartphones as movie screens and seek for the details in which they relate to cinema screens or other devices and modes of domestic consumption to understand spectator behavior. The view over the public-private and exploratory-performatory dualities facilitates the description of the factors that influence the spectator's feeling of presence, as well as the role of the device in creating a novel kind of engagement with the narrative.

The smartphone is an inherently private tool, a personal property, but in most cases it functions in relation to public spheres: it connects its user with content and fellow users through the web, and is frequently used in public environments. It should also be emphasized that smartphones are often regarded as tools for secondary activities, a fact that bears an impact on the modes of usage and the amount of the consumed content. While cinema and several other types of screens are placed within a space that facilitates the presentation of information, certain environments in which smartphones are used often require users to balance their attention between the two sets of tasks and stimuli.

Consuming content on mobile platforms such as smartphones or tablets involves the information intake and the active filtering. A smartphone, therefore, is not only a platform for delivering information, but also has its legacy as a self-standing media tool of practice and control that invites its user to connect with the interface and manipulate the experience. Performing manipulations on moving images effectuates a more subjective choice of content, and more liberty in adjusting the viewing to the space, the time, and the duration.

In her analysis of the Nintendo DS game console, Nanna Verhoeff introduces a practice-based, dynamic approach to portable devices.⁵ A 'theoretical console', as she calls the DS

4 Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).

5 Nanna Verhoeff, *Mobile Screens: The Visual Regime of Navigation*

reframing Hubert Damisch's concept of the theoretical object, is understood as a tool of social and historical status, which is not defined by its physical properties, but rather by the modes and context of usage. Just like the smartphone, the theoretical console communicates with its user through the input and output devices (touch sensors, buttons, and the screen, respectively); therefore, its importance lies in its capacity for communication, instead of the attributes of the hardware itself. The smartphone interface is designed to present one set of functions at once, and each of these functions appear as an individual medium that mimic the look and the operation of physical or virtual devices, such as tools or computer applications, while challenging their spatial, temporal, and behavioral conventions and relocate the attention from the physical dimensions of the device.

Hereinafter the text will apply the notions of remediation and the theoretical console to inspect the tasks and opportunities that smartphones as movie players hold. It will also demonstrate in more detail how the smartphone spectator shapes the audiovisual content and the consumption in accordance with the modes of behavior adopted from previous moving image media, and will reflect on the effects of the user-device interaction on the overall film experience.⁶

Smartphone Film Experience

Mobile spectatorship is influenced by the continuous reinterpretation of the cinematic spectacle, thus it shapes the modes of consumption according to earlier media conventions. The key factors that affect spectator behavior are the touch screen interaction and the physical properties such as the size and the portable design. The peculiarity of the portability lies beyond the question of mobility; it also points to the possibilities for adjusting the viewing activity to the environment. Moreover, the

(Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012); Nana Verhoeff, 'Theoretical Consoles: Concepts for Gadget Analysis', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 8 (2009).

6 The below description applies a schematized view of smartphone usage, although acknowledging the diversity of spaces, stimuli, and habits.

touchscreen, which often serves as an exclusive way of operating the device, allows the user to shape the presentation of any moving image sequences by customizing the length and the playing speed, or by interrupting the footage at any time. Thus, the proximity and the physical contact between the user and the device facilitate an interactive mode of viewing in which one can explore the diegetic space as one would explore objects in reality. It means that through interactions with the video player application and through bodily movements such as moving the screen, one can apply changes on the perceptual relationship with the footage.

Portability

It is clearly the portable design of the smartphone that defines it as a tool for secondary tasks. Allowing to be carried to and used in multiple spaces makes it ideal to fill in the time gap among a number of other activities, but it also projects a novel kind of consumer and viewer behavior when it comes to movie watching. While various spaces can become inferior to the specific kind of activities carried out within it, some environments where smartphones are typically used are *active spaces* with peculiar systems of actors and behavioral norms, functioning independently from the viewing activity. Michel Foucault claimed that any spaces of spectatorship exist in material terms whereas the screening prompts different spatial and temporal dimensions; a phenomenon that he described with the term *heterotopia*.⁷ But while the material presence of a theatrical screening room is masked by the diegetic reality to a great extent, in active spaces the two dimensions of the physical and virtual world coexist and therefore are perceived at the same time.

Francesco Casetti approaches the paradox of the simultaneously existing spaces and the spectator's role in adjusting the screen to the demands of the environment through his 'existential bubble' concept.⁸ Whilst being present in a collective space, the spectator endeavors to recreate the intimate experience of cinema to close

⁷ Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', *Diacritics*, 16 (1986).

⁸ See for instance Francesco Casetti, 'The Last Supper in Piazza Della Scala', *Cinéma & Cie*, 11 (2008).

out any undesirable disturbances. In his text co-written with Sara Sampietro, they explain that ‘when using a medium in public situations, one often surrounds oneself with invisible barriers that offer refuge, even though one continues to feel open to the gazes of others’.⁹ Casetti and Sampietro argue that existential bubbles are fragile, and have easily violable, but also easily amendable walls. The smartphone is connected to the body, and the spectator interacts with the film by holding or moving the device. When moving it closer to their eyes, the wall of the bubble strengthens; when moving it away it includes more of the physical world into the experience. By forming one’s private sphere within the collective, the spectator synthesizes the external and filmic stimuli, and therefore becomes physically immersed in *creating* the experience. This interaction recreates the connection between the screen and the spectator’s hands and eyes, and consequently induces a novel type of bodily and cognitive involvement.

The solution that Casetti and Sampietro propose is key to understanding how remediation, and the interconnection of media in general, guides viewer behavior, even when it is challenged by the viewing space and the attributes of the screening apparatus. Their description also helps to understand that although the spectator tends to turn the active space into a viewing space by making the movie the primary stimulus similarly to what Foucault proposes, this attempt will fail because the attention will oscillate between the two sets of stimuli and the two sets of tasks. And as a result, film experience is defined by the noises, visual elements, and behavioral norms generated by the active space just as much as the device and the movie sequence itself. However, the power over the sequence makes it possible to adjust to the constantly changing viewing conditions that the environment dictates.

9 Francesco Casetti and Sara Sampietro, ‘With Eyes, with Hands: The Relocation of Cinema into the Iphone’, in Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau, *Moving Data: The Iphone and the Future of Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), pp. 19-32 (pp. 21-22).

Touch of the Screen

It is the touch sensitive screen that connects the sense organs with the movie. Besides the perceptual and cognitive processes through which film footages attain a spectator and environment-specific interpretation, smartphones also invite haptic interaction with the images through a bidirectional, dynamic form of communication. Besides providing visual information, the screen invites the spectator to touch it, or, as Nanna Verhoeff claims, it *must* be touched.¹⁰ The phenomenological experience of witnessing transforms into a material, physical contact of haptic visibility in two ways. Firstly, the visual representation of bodies, objects, and textures evoke kinesthetic and cutaneous memories, and secondly, there appears the desire to touch and interact with the objects of the diegetic space, get to know them, bring them closer, or freeze them, as the proximity of the device urges.

By relying on muscles and receptors of the skin, one is unable to gain information about the size, texture, or weight of the virtual object; instead, visual and sonic representations evoke haptic sensations. In her book *The Skin of the Film*, Laura Marks explains that the eye mediates the depicted images as textures, which spectators connect to their haptic memories.¹¹ She describes the power of images as something that induces embodied spectatorship, thus increasing the sense of bodily presence through the multimodality of the movie. In the case of smartphones, this embodiment is extended by the physical sensation of touching the screen and independently exploring the images.

By its attributes, the smartphone encourages interactions: the touch screen affords touching, the video player application affords interacting, and the digital movie clip affords tampering with in order to shape the presentation and gain more information about the appearance and functions of the diegetic space. It implies the user's awareness of the biomechanical modes of interaction in the physical world in order to perform actions on the virtual interface, such as placing one or more fingers on the touch screen.

¹⁰ Verhoeff, *Mobile Screens*.

¹¹ Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

In response, the interface delivers information about further modes and locations of touch, and it sends a sensible feedback about the completion of the respective task. The vast majority of video player applications apply well-known gestures and symbols, and simple methods for such operations, which often follow the protocols of other, ubiquitous devices to minimize awareness and automatize communication.

Interaction and Awareness

Similarly to a number of other interactive screening apparatus, the interaction with the footage facilitates the adaptation to the features of the viewing space and immersion into the diegetic world. Smartphone film experience, thus, is shaped by the system of stimuli arriving from the footage and the environment as well as the behavior of the spectator. Supposedly, the spectator's active role in the constant flux of the cognitive experience triggers a higher level of immersion: manipulations that are accomplished through touches and other bodily movements in favor of the intensity of the stimuli (e.g. speed, luminance, volume, image size) and the ways the narrative is presented can result in an increasing feeling of presence. Yet, conscious decision about the necessity and the time of such adjustments, as well as the external factors that prompt them, generate a higher level of awareness of the apparatus too. I will return to this paradox, but first let me highlight the basic characteristics of the user-device interaction.

As it was briefly noted in the previous section, the graphical interface of the smartphone provides information about the location and modes of touch, and the user is required to perform familiar physical gestures to command the device. Most video player applications employ clickable panels that appear upon touching the screen and contain symbols borrowed from previous digital or analogue video players. Thus, the familiar methods for interaction reduce media awareness, and it is reasonable to assume that these operations would not influence the feeling of presence considerably. However, as it was also described earlier, many of these interactions happen as a response to environmental stimuli, which redirect the attention from the narrative to the surrounding

space. Another approach is the user's involvement in discovering the diegetic world through tactile operations, and the extent to which the bodily involvement in this process creates a physical kind of immersion in the narrative. But again, fragmenting the presentation of a movie sequence with occasional pauses or repetitions will also increase media awareness and consequently reduce immersion.

Witmer and Singer suggest a view over the concept of presence through engagement, and claim that it is defined by involvement and immersion, that is, the focus of the attention to a given set of stimuli that are considered meaningful and the feeling of being part of a virtual world with the possibility of interference.¹² Following this notion, I interpret engagement in smartphone film experience on a five-level scale that is based on the impact of medium awareness and psychical involvement over the feeling of presence, and that ranges from telepresence (feeling present in the diegetic space) to mediative presence (feeling present in the physical space and maintaining conscious awareness of the medium). Telepresence, a term widely used in virtual reality and human-computer interaction studies, tends to describe the extent to which a virtual environment can create a feeling of 'being there.' In smartphone spectatorship it implies the above-mentioned lack of medium awareness and the familiar modes of interaction with the addition of ecological involvement, thus the possibility to navigate the diegetic environment by repetition, zooming, or the like. The second level of the scale reflects on the sensation of being part of the narrative events, whereas the third signifies 'parasocial'¹³ connection to the characters involved in these events. Parasocial presence generates empathy, and consequently effectuates reactions to emotional manifestations within the fictional world.¹⁴ Reactions given to the

12 Bob Witmer and Michael Singer, 'Measuring Presence in Virtual Environments: A Presence Questionnaire', *Presence: Teleoperators and Virtual Environments*, 7 (1998).

13 Matthew Lombard and Theresa B. Ditton, 'Measuring Presence: A Literature-Based Approach to the Development of a Standardized Paper-and-Pencil Instrument', in *Presence 2000: The Third International Workshop on Presence* (2000).

14 For an extensive discussion about fictional world emotions, see Ed S. Tan, *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film: Film as an Emotion Machine* (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996).

movie or video (that Ed Tan termed as artifact emotions) belong to the textual level of engagement, in other words the spectator's reflection on artistic conventions, storytelling methods, and sound and image presentation. The level of engagement is substantially dependent on the environment: distractible sonic and visual stimuli decrease the level of immersion into the virtual world and increase the awareness of the mediated experience.

Involvement signifies a viewing experience akin to a performance, in which the interaction between the post-cinematic user and the digital image introduces a new, *material* presence in the real-time morphosis of the narrative. Within the subjective temporal dimension of the newly created sequence, the spectator generates a self-reflective private time and stimuli. This performatory mode of viewing facilitates learning about the narrative actions; however it hinders observing the diegetic elements in the way it was artistically intended.

According to David Bordwell and his constructivist view over fiction film narratives, meaning construction is a process of hypothesis testing, and it is informed by perceptual data, narrative schemata, and one's prior knowledge.¹⁵ It means that instead of considering every pieces of visual or sonic details, spectators use concepts to systematize and draw conclusions of the depicted actions. Making judgments based on perceptual data indicates bottom-up processing, whereas the conscious searching for confirmation or disproof for a hypothesis is top-down. In regard to smartphones, visual and auditory information may arrive from both the movie sequence and the surrounding environment, and such non-anticipated stimuli are *involuntarily* contextualized and given meaning through frameworks of knowledge. In addition, a *conscious* search for specific clusters of information motivates the spectator to zoom in on characters and objects or watch scenes over and over again. Thus, watching while creating (and creating while watching) is a process of perceiving and contextualizing stimuli from multiple sources, and shaping the narrative presentation in accordance to these sources.

¹⁵ David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (London: Methuen, 1985).

Conclusion

Being in physical connection with the screen, the small distance between the eyes and the mediated object effectuate an intimate relationship between the user and the apparatus. Moreover, the conscious control over the image and the phenomenological experience link the convenience of witnessing a story and the pleasure of influencing the plot. By altering the pace or order of the scenes, the spectator immerses in the process of creating to produce a form of presentation that corresponds with the environment, but provides information with the best possible efficiency. Hence, the viewing activity on smartphones replaces the *exploratory* experience to a *performatory* one, where the interaction is facilitated by the physical proximity of the device and its affordance of touching.

The current lack of sufficient empirical results, that could be applied to this specific case to strengthen the aforementioned theories, makes it difficult to find a universal answer to how much the bodily connection and the interactivity impact the feeling of presence and narrative comprehension on smartphones. Nevertheless, the portability and the direct operability of the smartphone proved to create a novel, personal film experience that is influenced by the interplay between the preferences and experience of the spectator and the environment. Since smart devices provide the space to easily manipulate the digital footage, the constant communication between the device and its user affects behavior, the time of watching, and the cognitive processes.