

**A PHENOMENOLOGY OF RECIPROCAL SENSATION
IN THE MOVING BODY EXPERIENCE
OF MOBILE PHONE FILMS**

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The facility of recording moving images on mobile phones augurs the concomitant possibility of innovative filmmaking that finds a route to new audiences. Rather than providing evidence for a technological determinist view of new media practices, making films using mobile phones appears to grow organically in situations and locations separate from any obvious traditional media influence. This article shows how these phone films function in a formal and discursive sense, wherein the relationship of spectator and filmmaker is materially affected by the mobile phone screen's mediating but connective influence. Whilst recognising that phone films embrace filmmaking across disparate genres and styles, I interrogate how these films use storytelling and the communication of narrative to connect the spectator and filmmaker often in an intimate, one-to-one relationship. This, I will argue, can be conceived as a rhizomatic (in the Deleuzian-Guattarian sense) or a quasi-cellular interaction with screen representation. From this I develop my central argument that the phone film connects, sensorially and in ways specific to its mode of address, the body of the spectator with that of the filmmaker through the apparatus of the mobile phone camera. In this, the ontology of phone film discourse emerges within the privileging of narratives that foreground certain relations, experiences and spectatorial expression.

The notion of what I will refer to as phone films is a relatively straightforward matter to explain: I use this term here as a shorthand description of a broad range of

fiction or non-fiction films made using the in-built camera of a mobile phone as part of their production apparatus. This much is reasonably straightforward, and distinguishes phone films as a discrete category separate from the more widespread and quite different practice of viewing commercially produced films on mobile phones.

Innovative practice in non-professional filmmaking emerges against the backdrop of advances in technological developments in moving image production. That these innovations have been able to happen at all is due to a kind of push/pull development and take-up of new possibilities as technologies are tested, adapted and challenged by their users. More significantly, however, making films using mobile phones contributes to the de-professionalising and democratisation of filmmaking, and shapes new modes of media discourse through the ways in which such films are distributed and shared between filmmakers and their audiences.

The circumstances under which phone films are watched can vary greatly, affecting notions of understanding and levels of intimacy. Viewing may happen on the screen of the same mobile phone that was used to record the original images, on a different mobile screen such as a laptop computer or iPad etc., or digitally projected before a gathered audience at some form of communal screening event such as the Seoul International Extreme-Short Image and Film Festival¹ or Pocket Films Festival.²

In the absence of opportunities for exhibition via cinema and television, many phone filmmakers rely on film festivals, or sections within them, for the screening of their films to live audiences in real-world settings. Alternatively, any cursory viewing of online video sharing sites, such as YouTube or Vimeo, reveals that such exhibitive opportunities represent a somewhat compromised cinematic experience whilst reaching a potentially greater number of spectators. Be they distributed online or screened live to one or more viewers, phone films vary widely in nature;

from documentary recordings, fiction drama, to experimental video. Similarly, adherence or otherwise to genre conventions well established in traditional cinema since the early twentieth century, is played with or even subverted in phone films' lack of restriction with regard to being screened in theatrical cinemas or even indoors. It would be surprising if such a form of filmmaking, undertaken largely by amateur or proto-professional filmmakers, did not also refer to pre-existing film form, and so it does. The phone film may share some of the characteristics of cinematic form we are generally familiar with, or may be rooted in some kind of audio-visual experimentation. Moreover, in its novel use of innovative technologies and capitalizing on societal shifts in the ways media are shared, the phone film demands a nascent aesthetic of its own, distinct from traditional cinema viewing. My primary consideration here is not to explain the exact formal characteristics of phone films as vehicles for film texts, but to come to understand the nature of the connection between filmmaker and audience via the mobile phone.

I will avoid making value judgements about whether phone films promote notional qualities of such things as artistic merit or ethical and social value. Whilst potentially important, such a project requires more extensive attention than I can give it here. Therefore, rather than undertaking a detailed reception analysis of selected texts, I intend a more circumscribed, phenomenological analysis of certain aspects of a spectator's experience of phone films at the moment of their screening or exhibition. By this I mean interrogating how spectators engage and interact with live action phone films that evidence some kind of creative ambition on behalf of a filmmaker or makers — to express lived experience and communicate perceptions of physical sensations. The phone film's formal character will not reveal its ontological potential; neither does it substantially assist us in defining how meaning is created. Its way of connecting filmmaker to the spectator, however, is crucially important. If not then constituting what David Rodowick terms a Deleuzian "minor

cinema,"³ the phone film might more accurately be called a hybrid cinema, implying "a hybrid form, mixing documentary, fiction, personal, and experimental genres, as well as different media,"⁴ challenging the limitations of any isolated genre to represent real experience.

When and how the spectator apprehends the phone film image subtly but significantly affects its material instrumentality, with profound consequences for the nature of its reception. When a phone film is viewed on the screen of a mobile phone, this particular circumstance of spectator engagement foregrounds a nascent medium specificity: The filmmaker and spectator are connected to one another through the exchange and sharing of a prototypal filmic experience. Whilst not involved in a physically, co-present form of engagement with screen-based moving images, both of them are nonetheless engaged in a kind of participatory experience: What Laura Marks calls "a dynamic subjectivity between looker and image."⁵ The screen image is something they share at a moment of the spectator's choosing and over which they can exercise a measure of control over duration, intimacy and privacy, and not as an event that has been externally constructed, fixed temporally and spatially. In a functional yet transformative sense, therefore, at the moment of spectator engagement with the film, the mobile phone encapsulates more than straightforward telephony and the ability to record moving images: the pocket-sized, hand-held mobile phone camera becomes a cinema projector and distributive medium, bringing together possibilities for casual or creative filmmaking and the exhibitiv potential of shared personal expression. In other words, the mobile phone camera functions, simultaneously, as a device of image capture and narrative dissemination.

What binds filmmaker, film and spectator together is sometimes an attempt to deal with aspects of mobility, both instigated and observed by the mobile phone, but the complexities of that engagement are most often contained within the urge to tell

and share stories through moving images. Thus, the phone film transitions from being a particularised kind of audio-visual media artefact or private record of the filmmaker's personal experience, to become the material component of a potentially novel or innovative discourse. Viewing conditions pertaining at the moment of spectatorial experience (to one or several people) subtly but significantly affect the material instrumentality of the phone film text, with profound consequences for the nature of its reception. Logical inferences can therefore be made about the phone film as a contemporary phenomenon of inter-personal engagement, situated within a particular social and cultural dynamic. Being a portable, intrinsically mobile moving image media, phone films are viewed outside in shared public spaces, or in temporarily personalised, individual areas of public/private space. Manifestly, phone films are mediated through the mobile phone as camera and film distribution apparatus. As part of a philosophical project, however, it is more useful to interrogate the phone film's particular persuasiveness as a new mode of creative image making and sharing between spectators and filmmakers that use representational aspects of bodily movement in its expression.

There was an almost predictable sense of endism prevalent during the late 1980s and early 1990s during the transition from analogue to digital filmmaking, perhaps stoked by adherents to Francis Fukuyama's notion of the pre-millennial (and premature) "end of history."⁶ Anxieties emerged over the ability of narrative discourse to continue telling tales in quite the same way and to quite the same effect post, what could be termed, the digital break. On-going questions of narrative's fitness for purpose (linked to political considerations) and powers of persuasion (and its effectiveness within a literate society) nag vaguely as disruptive change attacks from all sides, including the virtual. Yet narrative continues, flourishes, assumes new forms and modes of address, and is mediated by the instrumentality of the media that deliver it to our senses.

Phone films link the filmmaker and spectator in an overtly direct relationship of individualised communication. They foreground a cellular, one-to-one interaction, in a quasi-biological or, as Gilles Deleuze reconceptualises it whilst building on the physiologically sensitive philosophy of Henri Bergson, a rhizomatic sense. The classical Deleuzeian notion of conceptualising the rhizome is of it “having no beginning or end, always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance.”⁷ Phone films are one such example of an alliance of filmmaker with spectator, coming together to experience creative moving images and perhaps, or inevitably, to share experiences of sense-based perceptions. This gets us a little closer to the central thrust of my argument; that phone films facilitate the physical, body-centred, cellular nature of the spectator’s engagement with phone film texts and their makers.

The notion of the rhizome is useful in undertaking a narratology of phone films currently being made and shared within post-digital society, because it foregrounds the cell-to-cell relationships of shared storytelling that many filmmakers and spectators subscribe to. The emergence of such a new mode of media discourse creates opportunities for filmmaker/audience engagement with a particularised kind of meaning creation; holding up the possibility of sharing an empathic or deeper understanding of filmic narrative. I introduce the notion of narrative in the present context to indicate how the narratives carried by phone films enable stories to be told and shared between filmmaker and spectator. Told via the individuated, ergonomically pleasing hand-held mobile phone, these stories speak primarily of personal, sensory experience. Whether fictional dramas, music videos, documentary accounts of real events, or some other hybrid, faction blend of the real and the imagined, phone films often default to someone telling stories based in personal experience. As I will indicate later, such films repeatedly reference the body and sensory perception, evoking the sense of what objects feel like as we look at them, as

objects and as images. Marks uses the term “haptic visuality”⁸ to describe this phenomena, suggesting an amalgam of tactile sensation, our learned perceptions of touching the surfaces of objects, and our inner-felt bodily apprehension of things, including moving images. Whilst Marks cautions us that “the haptic image forces the viewer to contemplate the image itself instead of being pulled into narrative.”⁹ I feel it is important to note how narratives of tactility are discursively shared within phone films.

In presenting a rhizomatic philosophy of phone film narratives, I hope to draw out a Deleuzian-Guattarian smooth space of thought, over which to map some characteristics that might hint at an emergent medium specificity. Being such a recent media phenomenon, a single overarching aesthetic is perhaps yet to emerge, yet the ways in which phone films express narratives that often implicate the human body as a central concern are striking. In this respect, taking narrative as a privileged framework for analysis does not irrevocably curtail its scope or applicability within the present phenomenological investigation.

I take Brian Massumi at his word when he suggests to readers of *A Thousand Plateaus*, “the reader is invited to lift a dynamism out of the book entirely, and incarnate it in a foreign medium.”¹⁰ Thus, consideration of the medium - a book or a film for example — does not conclusively negate how rhizomatic thinking is brought to bear in an analysis of digital film narratology. Rather, the rhizome welcomes the foreign medium, inviting trans-mediality. Therefore, it is possible to talk of rhizomatic thinking as contributing or influencing what we might eventually understand as a medium specificity of the phone film. New possibilities for narrative filmmaking, refined if not created post the digital break, indicates that Deleuze and Guattari were, in effect, future-proofing their concept of the rhizome whilst formulating it during the 1980s. This was at a time when technologically advanced companies, societies and individuals across the world were opening up

new possibilities in the ways people told audio-visual stories to one another via digital devices.¹¹

The binomial impulse from the Russian Formalists onward has been to present oppositional pairings such as *fabula* and *sjuzhet*, story and plot, thematic and modal as necessary components of a study of narratology. Such binary thinking about narrative construction becomes ineffectual in a post-digital context in which phone films function and in which multi-valent meanings adhere to a core discursive framework. Without discounting the contribution the semiotic can make to our understanding of film narrative in general, an analytical approach avoiding structuralism, linguistic or semiotic, is required; especially so when the narrative is located in non-literary media. Thus, the rhizomatic toolbox comes to our aid.

Massumi notes that the aim at La Borde, the experimental psychiatric clinic where Guattari practiced as a psychoanalyst from the mid-1950s until his death in 1992, “was to abolish the hierarchy between doctor and patient in favour of an interactive group dynamic that would bring the experiences of both to full expression in such a way as to produce a collective critique of the power relations in society as a whole.”¹² Thus, the genesis of a philosophical analysis of the porous boundaries around and within writer and reader, sender and receiver, filmmaker and audience was even then being pre-vised through its practical application in a human setting. The specific mode of narrative storytelling in phone filmmaking follows this same logic of a non-hierarchical relationship between filmmaker and film spectator. Neither one rather than the other owns the narrative because it does not constitute a commodity to be easily sold, bartered or exchanged. In essence, it is a subversive form of media production.

The narrative discourse at the heart of the cell-to-cell relationship described by cell cinema derives its communicative power from the alternating current of its reciprocal dynamic. It is imbued with a democratising impulse through its function

of sharing. The domestic home viewer of a DVD film is still only permitted to receive information from the director or filmmaker. Even in such a case, the viewer is definitively placed in the position of a receiver of pre-ordained ontological truth from an extraneous authorial entity.

So, a specifically rhizomatic (or rhizomatically specific) form of analytic reason finds validity. The cellular nature of the discursive engagement within the phone film exchange reflects the rhizomatic absence of a position of origin. Phone film narratives are continually negotiated and re-negotiated at points across their discursive formation. Narrative meaning moves in and out of focus as the story is told, retold and shared. Therefore, a non-hierarchical engagement with narrative is one characteristic of phone films, where stories are accessed from many points, both in the real world and virtually. The phone filmmaker becomes part of the audience who, individually or severally, collaborates in the process of making, and so continues the process of the film's becoming. Identity is fixed for neither filmmaker nor audience. The phone film, as distinct from its pre-digital antecedent, incorporates the possibility of never reaching a state of finality or completeness. Such a creative process, as the imaginative application of phone/camera technology allows, is a shifting, indefinite phenomenon of representation and expression of the local and familiar, to the distanced and definitively unfamiliar Other.

The possibility of, or even tendency for, a given phone film's narrative having a non-linear structure reflects a digital break with the indexical. Likewise, the narrative is no longer shackled to a linear, Aristotelian progression. Instead it carries with it a latent possibility of a rhizomatic dramaturgy, characterised by diverse meanings and poetic representations entering and exiting through porous boundaries. Phone film discourse becomes the leaky system of conduits through which meaning can travel and leach out to join with receptive minds.

Accepting that phone films can be considered to fall into the rather ill-defined category of new media, having a digital or computer-mediated origin, certain models announce themselves as more or less capable of narratological analysis. Sean Cubitt suggests that “narrative is only one among several modes of organisation characteristic of new media (and) that this has an impact on certain universalist claims for narrative analysis.”¹³ Whilst Cubitt correctly recognises the limitations in undifferentiated claims for narrative analysis, noting that it “restricts itself to a more or less strictly chronological model of temporal experience,”¹⁴ his critique omits a consideration of phone film’s typically porous temporal boundaries, requiring a re-thinking of its relationship with narrative, linear or otherwise. Therefore, an inherent irrationality emerges in considering phone film narratives only as experiential phenomena locked into a fixed temporal order. Phone films, and the narratives they carry, are accessible from multifarious points of temporal entry, with narrative meaning created and exiting in similar ways.

As with narrative literature, where the process of narrative meaning construction is not completed until the text is read and understanding exists in the reader, so the spectator of a narrative phone film completes the hermeneutic circuit once the film has been viewed. When such spectatorship is subsequently shared with others in temporally and spatially separate locations, the cell cinema dynamic creates a smooth space of connected points that extend the possibilities for a collaborative construction of narrative meaning or, to again invoke Deleuzian phraseology, becoming meaning. Following this logic, the phone film’s process of immanent meaning creation is consummately rhizomatic.

More acutely than might have been the case prior to the digital turn, the becoming-narrative within the phone film can potential express shifting meanings to many audiences or spectators in temporally and spatially separate locations. Therefore, a question to ask about narrative within phone films is, therefore, not the

how of its technological existence, but the why of its philosophical truth. With the possibility of rhizomatic entering and exiting of multifarious meaning comes the possibility of fragmented, individualised and perhaps even relativized, notions of truth. While such truths that can be found in phone films may interact reflexively with a number of genre conventions, phone films do not constitute a discrete genre. Disparate narrative concerns and a typical embracing of heightened realism mitigate an unmediated adherence to genre conventions. In acknowledging his use of Leo Tolstoy's concept of infectiousness, Daniel Shaw notes that, "unlike everyday events, occurrences in narrative films are selectively arranged to 'infect' us with the requisite emotions; the conventions of the genre codify the most effective arrangements."¹⁵ In their rhizomatic infectiousness, phone films extend and go beyond the boundaries of genre whilst retaining traces of its organising structure.

What often results, therefore, is creative expression through the communicating of an apprehension (and not final comprehension) of the phone film narrative as itself a creative act. There is pleasure to be had in the mere recognition of creativity as a perceived end in itself. Since this kind of creative discourse is not an equation to be calculated and balanced, we can only philosophically question the characteristically creative disruption that also lies at its heart. The becoming-narrative of cell cinema is concomitant on accommodating, even diffusing, otherness: The filmmaker becoming the spectator and the spectator becoming central within the process of narrative meaning construction.

Phone films are not broadcast to many recipients and should not be thought of as a mode of mass media engagement. Instead, they embody the potential for a particularly direct form of cell-to-cell narrowcasting, of a bi-directional transmission of narrative meaning. Phone films contain the potential to connect individuals, transnationally, within the oft-quoted global digital village, wherein their rhizomatic tendency invites narratives to morph and move freely across national and cultural

barriers. To this extent at least, the post-digital does not prescriptively delineate inclusion and exclusion of narrative possibilities within determinate boundaries. Thus, the phone film is inherently unable to pull up the drawbridge between the authorial voice and the spectator as *Other*.

The ontological truth of the spectator's engagement with phone films in their generality, however, rests on shifting foundations. The nature of a phone film's visual characteristics, and its linkage to technological developments of mobile phone equipment, mean that it expresses and reflects both contemporary visual culture and the symbolic use of domesticated apparatus. The phone film privileges the particularities of its technological form, foregrounding certain relations, experiences and spectatorial effects over, say, the deconstruction of complex meaning within its various mediations. Whilst phone films involve an aesthetic that is, of course, not homogenized or uniform across all films, and the spectatorial experience is not similar in every case, the spectator often pre-visualises the nature of their engagement with technological devices for familiar purposes. The ubiquity and familiarity users have with their personal mobile phones contributes to the ease with which they, ergonomically and psychologically, interact with the new possibilities they present. In some, perhaps indeterminable way, they contribute to feelings of identification for, and empathy with, the moving images the screen presents.

The perception of physical, bodily-sensed experience may lie at its metaphorical heart yet, as existential phenomena, the event of watching films (made) on the screen of a mobile phone speaks of a different kind of cinematic experience to that of traditional cinema, television or even computer screen. A recurring aesthetic characteristic of phone films involves the hand-held camera in describing the movement of the filmmaker whilst recording the image. It is an aesthetic of forward progression, always in passage, following a line of flight but always one that

communicates the sensation of physical experience, represented in moving images at the moment of image capture.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes of the blind man's walking stick, describing his ambit of personal (bodily) space being extended into what he calls "an area of sensitivity"¹⁶ whose reach expands his immediate sensory universe. More than a metaphor, Merleau-Ponty likens this phenomenon to "providing a parallel to sight"¹⁷ thus locating it firmly in the realm of the senses. The notion of extending bodily space serves as an important analogy of how a camera phone becomes an extension of the body.

Writing about the locus around which the relationship of the body, hand, eye and screen comes together, Vivian Sobchack admits to having "a carnal interest and investment in being both 'here' and 'there', in being able both to sense and to be sensible, to be both the subject and the object of desire" where "objectivity and subjectivity lose their presumed clarity."¹⁸ The physicality of this empathy finds its source in identification with the body of the Other as much as with its screen representation. What Sobchack calls "mimetic sympathy"¹⁹ I believe may even prefigure a sensual enhancement of how we experience films. Expanding upon sense perceptions of real events and objects in the world, the augmented tactility of many phone films focusses the filmmaker and spectator's personal experience of the image as being effectively analogous to one-another. In this, the phone film functions as a particularly democratic mode of media discourse. Similarly, the objectified apparatus of the hand-held mobile phone acts in parallel with the senses, connecting spectator to filmmaker not merely through the aural and visual senses, but through the sensation of touch. During the transformative process of film production; from the capture of real events to the reception of representational moving images of the human body by the spectator, the phone/camera transitions from being a particularised kind of audio-visual apparatus for recording a

filmmaker's personal experience, to become a material artefact for potentially innovative discourse.

Whilst a film is being shot, the mobile phone screen functions as a kind of bodily-connected, personal exhibitiv device, standing in for the eyes of the filmmaker. Layering the potential for signification onto its more prosaic uses as a mobile telephone and device for exchanging text messages, it must be remembered that the mobile phone is also a screen-based apparatus for exchanging audio-visual meaning. In this way, the screen becomes a proxy for both the camera and projector of the cinema theatre, embodied in the filmmaker. The cerebral sensations the spectator feels watching the film are not merely augmented by an inferred filmmaker, but are instigated by the actual sense of touch, of hand on screen, controlling viewing conditions and even where and when viewing takes place.

Signifying itself the pleasurable ownership of a desirable object, the phone/camera exemplifies a personalized object of empathic participation in physical experience, encouraging in the spectator a sense of capture and ownership of the image and all it contains.

Whilst perhaps possessing no prior knowledge of the narrative content of a given phone film, an individual phone film spectator can nonetheless exercise a level of control over the circumstances of their spectatorship and how they understand the narrative. They can be an active agent, influencing such factors as temporal and spatial viewing conditions, duration of the screening, aspects of picture and sound quality, and even frame size as they move their hand-held phone closer or further away. The body's actions on these factors influences how film narrative is received and cognitive meaning created. Detailed narrative content is typically suppressed at the expense of personal control, which in turn supplies its own narrative. It typically becomes an engagement with a location-unspecific social process in addition to a reception of artistic expression. Simultaneously, it shares the

formal tracery of cinematic form, whilst foregrounding auxiliary characteristics that signal a latent medium specificity.

Phone films have the potential to simultaneously quote the realist cinema of the past, and to re-situate it within a different cultural idiom or digital expression of narrative discourse. The films themselves may share a naïve realist aesthetic with commercially available cinema, but the digital technologies by which they are apprehended and experienced mitigate the creation of meaning in the same way. The immediacy of inter-personal discourse within the phone film renders the more impersonal relating of a universalised narrative by an external creator superfluous. It is as if this kind of digital media has, not an anti-narrative tendency, but effects a re-coding of cinematic realism.

Phone films thereby function both as a mode of cinematic address, involving the projection of the image to audiences in cinematic spaces such as film festivals, and as a circumscribed yet individualised moving image spectacle when viewed on mobile phones. As Nicholas Rombes puts it, "Hand-held screens have liberated not only the spectator from the theatre, but the screen as well."²⁰ Watching phone films on a mobile phone screen carries with it the promise of an enhanced encounter with the sensual, divorced from the physical distancing of theatrical projection. The screen of the taking camera phone, being in a sense inseparable from that of the viewing camera phone recreates (or procreates in a Benjamin-like reproducibility) the moving images it gathers.

In a somewhat physiological conception of the body's function in human perception, Henri Bergson looks inside himself (as we all must) to offer the following: "The truth is that my nervous system, interposed between the objects which affect my body and those which I can influence, is a mere conductor, transmitting, sending back, or inhibiting movement."²¹

So, for Bergson, perception cannot be sited within the body's nervous system. It is affected by, but cannot itself affect, objects in the world outside the body. Therefore, the true characteristic of perception lies elsewhere, in some other body-centred process or, as Bergson says, "while the detail of perception is moulded exactly upon that of the nerves termed sensory, perception as a whole has its true and final explanation in the tendency of the body to movement."²² The process we then move through, which might therefore constitute a kind of coming to understand the world through its images, follows a trajectory from peripheral to body-centred experience. As Bergson goes on to explain, "There is, first of all, the aggregate of images; and then, in this aggregate, there are 'centres of action,' from which the interesting images appear to be reflected: thus perceptions are born and actions made ready."²³ Thus, perception external to the body stimulates affective states within the body, such as the sensation of pleasure at seeing an image. Yet this sensation can only exist as an affective state in our own body or, as Bergson puts it, "we cannot annihilate our body without destroying our sensations."²⁴ Without recognising the primacy of our own bodies in perceiving images, we cannot fully appreciate sensation as a personal experience. Therefore, our sensation of film images would merely be theorised rather than lived, describing the intellectual concept and not the experience. Put another way, in the isolation of individual perception we are only able to perceive images that invite a vicarious empathy with sensations experienced by the bodies of others.

Moreover, Bergson reminds us that remembered sensation can often be more powerful than immediate experience, and that the more we dwell on the memory of a sensation, the closer we feel we come to, not a representation of sensation, but to a re-playing of that experience in reality. However, Bergson also cautions us against making hasty conclusions, saying that "because the memory of a sensation prolongs itself into that very sensation, the memory was a nascent sensation."²⁵ Repeated

experience of watching a variety of films affirms our general perception of how screen images affect us sensually. Sensation comes to be regarded as more intense through bodily habit as well as memory. Repeated experience of watching films reinforces the notion in us that at times, as Bergson puts it, "it is impossible for me to say whether what I feel is a slight sensation which I experience or a slight sensation which I imagine."²⁶ We should not wonder then that questions persist over film's potential for illusion. "This is natural," Bergson continues, "because the memory-image is already partly sensation."²⁷ As with traditional cinema, the image on the mobile phone's screen is clearly there, conjuring up recollections of associated memory-images. It refers to memory of the body's sensation of remembered experience and, through that, perception of filmic events unfolding on the screen.

In a more focussed consideration of phenomenological experience, Merleau-Ponty brings us securely back to show how the physical act of seeing is contingent on objective thought about the world. He stresses that to see is "a certain manner of approaching the object, the 'gaze' in short, which is as indubitable as my own thought, as directly known by me."²⁸ With still more relevance for our perceptions of the moving image he goes on to say, "My visual body is certainly an object as far as its parts far removed from my head are concerned, but as we come nearer to the eyes, it becomes divorced from objects."²⁹ So we can infer from this that the converse will be true; that the closer the screen is to the eyes, the more the peripheral vision is filled with the moving image which also becomes divorced from external objects outside our body. Thus, the phone filmmaker, through the hand-held phone screen, establishes a channel of reference more directly aligned with that of the spectator.

Thus the permanence of one's own body, if only the classical psychology had analysed it, might have led to the body no longer conceived as an object of the

world, but as our means of communication with it, to the world no longer conceived of as a collection of determinate objects, but as the horizon latent in all our experience and itself ever-present and anterior to every determining thought.³⁰

The intimate physical connection of the body with the mobile phone of the phone filmmaker, and the similar linkage of the cell cinema spectator with the moving image on the mobile phone screen, connects perceptually the filmmaker with spectator. By way of example, the phone film *COLORS, We The People*³¹ by Pascal Laurent foregoes a realistic representation of time to concentrate the spectator's gaze on the movement of bodies through urban space. Similarly, in *Fear Thy Not*,³² Sophie Sherman takes the spectator with her on a walk along a path beside a canal, as she continually repeats an incantatory, biblical-sounding phrase, all the while examining her free hand (her hidden one presumably holds the camera phone) prominently in the frame. The body is not merely implicated but featured in such films. A general audience observation of other visual digital genres, such as games, would reveal them as foregrounding a decorative appearance. Whilst important to consider for their socio-cultural impact, they are different rather than lesser forms of art and culture, playing up form, style, surface, artifice, and spectacle and, most importantly in the present context, of communicating a primarily ocular-centric visual sensation.

In conclusion, is it possible to mount a positive case for such an aesthetic? Phone films might indeed be considered decorative and superficial rather than media for the sagacious communication of complex meaning, but does that necessarily make them a lesser form of artistic expression and moving image culture? Could the phone film's technological reproducibility even suggest the heralding of a new poetics of contemporary media?

The digital reproducibility of identical copies of a virtual original, distinguishable only at the moment of their spectatorship as live event, certainly

asks new questions of filmmakers and audiences. This is not simply about what constitutes real experience, but what is felt and what is perceived as personal or shared sensation. Whilst continuing to avoid making crude value judgements about phone films as statements of artistic intent, I contend that the particular conditions of phone film's spectatorship indeed points toward the possibility of a new poetics of filmic expression, in which perceived bodily sensations are not merely represented on the surface of the mobile phone's screen, but embodied within the discourse the images initiate.

Much of phone film's power to persuade as an emerging phenomenon within the broader contemporary cultural discourse resides in the fact that it is not yet completely incorporated into powerful institutional structures of both a commercial and public culture nature. Within the structure of their mode of address, phone films function as potentially anti-establishment, even subversive media. Their speed and cheapness of production and distribution means that phone films and filmmakers are reflexive to contemporary events in a way that professionalised cinema and TV is not. This reflexivity can often be in tension with a potentially ephemeral downplaying of how subject matter is treated, so that the flow of moving images and sounds across the hand-held mobile phone lends their screens an appearance of elasticity, variability and transience. Images can arrive, occupy a portion of the spectator's sensory field with sound and vision, and then leave. In this way mobile phone screens designate circuits of transient production and exhibition as much as they constitute display formats. Even before we consider their choice of formal subject matter, viewing conditions are often transient and fleeting, broken into fragmented periods of inattentive or distracted watching, leaving only a residue of remembered sensations.

Phone films represent a link between temporally and spatially dispersed spectatorial environments and the mobile bodies of those engaging with the images

they contain, and can be seen as an informal network built to move film texts around. Drawing on the Deleuzian-Guattarian concept of the rhizome, the inter-cellular nature of phone film discourse is revealed through filmic sharing of narrative experience. Although predominantly an individuated form of engagement with moving images, viewing circumstances can facilitate isolated (or isolating) individuality or spark practices of congregation in pairs or more to share a small and intimate screen. Thus, the nature of audience engagement and sensation of spectacle are qualitatively affected in unanticipated ways. As with other moving image media, such as watching films on SmartPads and laptop computers, but especially so with inconsistently regulated or non-institutionalised phone film production, a consistent or standardised form of discursive environment has thus far proven impossible to design. And this becomes one of the current characteristics of engagement with phone films: Outside of a disconnected collection of film festivals and online film sharing sites, phone films find their way to audiences of individuals and groups of spectators in almost random, indeterminate ways, affecting the levels of intimacy their cell-to-cell (or cell-to-cells) connections enable.

It has been my intention to interrogate specific notions of how the human body is manifest and re-presented in phone film engagement. This, I believe, describes an enhanced encounter with the sensory and sensual, challenging the physical distancing of traditional, theatrical cinema projection. I hope to have shown that phone films implicate the mobile phone and the human gaze in forging a link between people; a bridge to the *Other* inferred by a bodily connection through vision, appealing to an immediate if mediated sensory experience. Merleau-Ponty locates such encounters firmly within phenomenological experience. Expanding this line of thought reveals the act of seeing the body's screened representation as contingent on objective thought about the body's movement within the world and between people, connecting

through vision, appealing to an immediate if mediated sensory experience. As Merleau-Ponty says, “to look at the object is to plunge oneself into it.”³³ To look into the image is likewise to enter into it. To empathise with the subject represents a move closer perceptually to their body, psychologically aligned with their point of view and to become, if not a mirror, then more like them.

NOTES

1. The Seoul International Extreme-Short Image and Film Festival, 2012, http://www.sesiff.org/project/en_main.asp.
2. Festival Pocket Film, 2012, <http://www.festivalpocketfilms.fr/spip.php?rubrique91>.
3. David N. Rodowick, *Deleuze's Time Machine* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 140.
4. Laura Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses* (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 8.
5. *Ibid.*, 164.
6. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), xi.
7. Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London and New York: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 27.
8. Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 162.
9. *Ibid.*, 163.
10. Brian Massumi, foreword to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London and New York: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), xv, and Brian Massumi. *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari*. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), 8.
11. See D. M. Boyd, and N. B. Ellison, “Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13:1 (2007), <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/boyd.ellison.html>, and Gordon Goble, “The History of Social Networking,” *Digital Trends* (2012): 16, <http://www.digitaltrends.com/features/the-history-of-social-networking/>.
12. Brian Massumi, foreword to *A Thousand Plateaus*, x.
13. Sean Cubitt, “Spreadsheets, Sitemaps and Search Engines: Why Narrative is Marginal to Multimedia and Networked Communication, and Why Marginality is More Vital than Universality,” in *New Screen Media: Cinema/Art/Narrative*, ed. M. Rieser and A. Zapp (London: BFI, 2002), 3.
14. *Ibid.*, 4.
15. Daniel Shaw, *Film and Philosophy* (London: Wallflower Press, 2008), 53.
16. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London and New York: Routledge, 1962), 165.
17. *Ibid.*, 165.
18. Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 66.
19. *Ibid.*, 76.
20. Nicholas Rombes, *Cinema in the Digital Age* (London: Wallflower Press, 2009), 65.
21. Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (Mineola, NY.: Dover, 2004), 40.
22. *Ibid.*, 41.
23. *Ibid.*, 44.
24. *Ibid.*, 59.
25. *Ibid.*, 174.
26. *Ibid.*, 175.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 77-78.
29. *Ibid.*, 175.
30. *Ibid.*

31. *COLORS, We the People*, dir. Pascal Laurent (2010), mobile phone, http://www.reelport.com/index.php?id=300&L=no'%2F**%2FXoR%2F**%2F'8'=8&movie_id=36106&last_page=start.
32. *Fear Thy Not*, dir. Sophie Sherman (2010), mobile phone, <http://www.sophie-sherman.com/search/label/very%20short%20films%20%20>.
33. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 78.