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Between iPhone and YouTube: movies on the move?

JAN SIMONS

Digital Movies: On- and Offline Venues

Through a fortunate coincidence – or was it really a coincidence? – the advent of 3G cell phones equipped with photo and video cameras occurred almost simultaneously with the rise of YouTube, one of the icons of Web 2.0. In 2004, two thirds of all mobile phones shipped worldwide were camera phones; YouTube was officially launched in the U.S. in November 2005, with local versions launched in Europe, Latin America and Asia in 2007. These two developments could not but meet, as the camera phone made every owner a potential film-maker, and YouTube provided a free platform to publish, distribute and exhibit self-made movies. The rest, one is tempted to say, is history. But is it?

On the one hand it is: in 2006 YouTube announced that more than 65,000 videos were uploaded every day, and that it received about 100 million views per day. In 2010, YouTube is the largest online video provider in the U.S., with a market share of 43% and more than two billion views per day. It is the third most visited website on the internet behind Google and Facebook, with 70% of its traffic coming from outside the U.S. and hundreds of millions of videos viewed on mobile devices every month. 1 Of course, not all content on YouTube is produced by amateur film-makers and quite a lot comes from professional and commercial film companies and television broadcasters, much of which is copyrighted material uploaded ‘illegally’. Although figures are hard to come by, DIY movies, many of which are made with cameras built-in to mobile devices or computers, seem to constitute the bulk of YouTube’s supply.

On the other hand, the mobile phone movie has certainly found its way to other venues, such as a fast-growing festival circuit dedicated to cell phone movies, variously termed ‘pocket movies’, ‘cellular movies’, ‘pocket cinema’, ‘Ciné Pocket’, ‘Mobi Film’, ‘Mobi Fest’, ‘Shorts’, to name a few. Just a few years after what was allegedly the first mobile phone movie festival, in Atlanta in 2004, almost every major city around the globe had its own mobile phone movie festival. In addition, many established film festivals, including the Sundance Film Festival, the San Francisco International Film Festival, the Tribeca Film Festival, the Edinburgh International Film Festival, the Rotterdam International Film Festival and even the Festival de Cannes opened sections dedicated to this ‘new kid on the block’. 2

Predictably, both local and international versions of these events were launched, sponsored and promoted by cell phone manufacturers such as Nokia, the uncontested market leader in the 3G cell phone era prior to smartphones, with Samsung, Vodafone and others desperately seeking content for their hardware and services. Accordingly, these festivals opened their entries up to actual and potential DIY film-makers among the owners of 3G cell phones, as well as to ‘directors, other professionals, students and spectators’, in order for them ‘to anticipate, explore and question this new field of creation’, as the first edition of the Paris Festival Pocket Films in 2005 put it. This formula is revealing in and of itself: the mobile film was an invention ‘before the fact’. These terms and the events created around them did not refer to a newly emerging phenomenon that needed to be identified and labeled, but functioned to fill a void created by what was at that point, a new technology.

This rapidly emerging – and now gradually dissolving – festival circuit fulfilled two purposes, other than providing content for mobile phone manufacturers and telecom providers. First of all, it prevented the relatively conservative film culture from missing out on possible future developments opened by new technologies, some ten years after the changes brought about in independent film-making by the advent of relatively cheap and portable digital video cameras. In other words, it was hoped that the mobile phone camera could meet its own Lars von Trier. Indeed, in 2005 the South African film-maker Aryan Kaganof produced SMS Sugar Man, allegedly the first feature length movie entirely shot with mobile phone cameras. Second, by opening cinema screens to entries by anyone who felt the desire to make their mobile phone movies public, the mobile phone festival circuit might allow the relatively closed milieu of film-makers and producers to follow the flow of an upcoming participatory culture, and create something like a ‘Dogma 2.0’.

However, with these two functions came a double agenda. The rise of the mobile phone film festival circuit can also be considered an attempt to incorporate new technologies and a select company of talented and innovative film-makers into the already existing structures and operations of cinema. The major strategic function of the mobile phone film festival circuit may very well have been to adapt the ‘cinematographic field’ to new technologies, players, and practices, and at the same time to seal it off against the ‘cult of the amateur’ that lead to the prominence of YouTube. From a systems theoretical point of view, the burgeoning of a mobile phone film festival can be seen as part of an adaptive strategy in which the ‘institution of cinema’ had specialized over more than a century: preservation through innovation. A response to YouTube, indeed. If this is true, one might ask whether the gradual dissolution of the mobile phone film festival circuit in the last couple of years is a symptom of the success of this strategy, or of its failure. Was the mobile film festival circuit the avant-garde of a 21st century film culture, or the rearguard of a new digital media culture? Or, to rephrase the question in yet another way, do mobile phone films belong to cinematic or to digital culture?

Pocket Films: Movies at your Fingertips

In a modernist way of thinking, champions of mobile phone films expected that new technologies would bring new modes of film-making and new, cinematic forms, formats, styles and stories. Mobile phone film festivals would provide professional, as well as prospective and wannabe film-makers, with a playground upon which to experiment with new tools, and to explore their affordances as well as their limitations. Since the mobile phone film was not an already existing type or genre of film, but rather an idea conjured up by the arrival and rapid distribution of the 3G cell phone, the first question to answer was: what is a mobile phone film? The answer turned out to be far from simple.

A glance at the ‘Call for Entries’ of some of the major mobile phone movie festivals reveals the confusion around the definition of mobile phone movies. The German Mobile Film Festival and the French Festival Pocket Film state that ‘pocket films’ or ‘mobile films’ are movies shot with mobile phone cameras (‘films tournés avec téléphone mobile’) and ‘Filmes … die mit einem Mobiltelefon gedreht wurden’), whereas the Toronto festival Mobifest defines mobile movies as ‘made-for-mobile movies’. Films made with mobile phone cameras are not necessarily made ‘for’ display on a mobile phone, even if this ‘new tool’ is, as the Paris Pocket Film Festival states in the announcement of its first edition in 2005, the first device ‘that is camera, projector, and broadcast screen (écran à diffusion) at the same time’. The same festival nevertheless presents a section ‘Films pour Grand écran’ and ‘Films tournés avec téléphone mobile’ and ‘Films pour écran de poche’ (Films for the Pocket Screen), while the Canadian Mobifest has a category of ‘Animation’ next to a category ‘Shot on Mobile’. These categorizations suggest that not all mobile phone movies are shot on mobile phones, and that not all mobile phone films are shot for the ‘pocket screen’ of the mobile phone. As French film theorist Roger Odin writes in an essay about the ‘pocket film spectator’, films shot with mobile phones are cinematic films, (‘Les films tournés avec téléphone mobile sont des films de cinéma’), since they were conceived for the big screen.9

4. Other titles also lay claim to the honorary title of ‘first feature length mobile phone movie’, such as Dutch film-maker Cyrus Frisch’s movie Why Didn’t Anybody Tell Me It Would Become This Bad in Afghanistan (2007). The first major movie to be distributed exclusively through mobile phones is (claimed to be) Rage, directed by Sally Potter and released in 2009. The confusion is probably due to the temporal gap between the shooting of SMS Sugar Man in December 2006, and its release in 2008.
To complicate matters, although it is possible to shoot, show and distribute movies with a mobile phone – mobile phones allow users to upload movies and photos directly to YouTube, Flickr, or social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace – between shooting and showing, there is usually a stage of post-production and editing, for which mobile phones are not very well equipped. The German Mobifest allows mobile movies to be edited ‘either on or outside of the mobile phone’ (‘Die Filme können innerhalb oder außerhalb der Telefonie geschnitten werden’) and the Brussels festival Cine Pocket strongly recommends its prospective submitters edit their movies, which must be shot using a mobile phone, on their computers (‘Mais il reste souhaitable de copier et de monter le film sur ton pc’). Editing, however, means a lot more than the selection and arrangement of shots, and usually comprises the addition of sound, titles, color adjustments, filters, virtual camera movements, split screens, double exposures, and – since the computer is agnostic about the origins of the data it processes – the creation of special effects and computer generated images. In this case, what does the phrase ‘made’ or ‘shot with a mobile phone camera’ actually mean? Many of the entries of each of the mobile phone festivals are, as one of the aforementioned categories of the Toronto Mobifest made clear, animations that were entirely created on computers, not shot using a camera at all.

If production and post-production techniques do not provide a very strong basis for distinguishing mobile phone movies from other types of film, perhaps the mobile phone movie should describe ‘movies made for the mobile phone’. The term ‘pocket cinema’ seems to point in this direction, evoking the portability, mobility, and easy digestibility of the ‘pocket book’, which we currently refer to as the paperback. Of course, any book can be published in hard cover as well as in pocket book format, and many classical texts have been published as cheap pocket book editions for a wide popular readership. But since the pocket book was designed to be carried around and read in circumstances that did not particularly favour a long and concentrated read, such as commuting, pocket books encouraged the emergence of easily digestible, highly formulaic and forgettable literary genres such as the detective novel, the thriller, and adventure, horror and romantic love stories. Although none of these genres is exclusively published in paperback format, these genres represent the prototypical content of the paperback, as is evident in any airport bookshop. The prominence of these genres in the pocket book department, however, has more to do with pragmatic considerations of literature most suitable for reading in particular circumstances than with the materials and technologies used for their production.

Could the same be said about ‘pocket movies’? In principle, any movie could be displayed on a mobile phone screen, or any other portable device. Apple’s (American) iTunes Store, for instance, offers movies, television shows, music videos and computer games for downloading and playback on iPhones, iPods and iPads, implicitly demonstrating that ‘mobile movies’ are no longer and actually never have been restricted to cell phones, although only the latter combine the functions of recording and screening movies. Nevertheless, nobody has ever called these downloadable objects ‘mobile movies’ or ‘pocket movies’, even when they are offered in a special iPhone or iPad format. Most of these films, television shows and music videos were produced for a theatrical release or for screening on a television set or home cinema technology with large, high-resolution screens, which will soon be able to compete with the quality of a cinema screen. As with the pocket book, for reasons that are partly technological but mainly pragmatic, these audiovisual objects, though in principle playable on mobile devices, do not qualify as pocket movies.

Although mobile devices are usually marketed and considered high-tech appliances, their image quality still lags behind the quality of cinema, television, and even computer screens. Not only is the size of mobile phone screens much smaller, they have a relatively low resolution, slow frame rate, and a limited color range compared to LCD and plasma TV screens, or the ‘silver screen’ of the cinema. Moreover, mobile phones and other portable devices are usually used to watch movies ‘on the go’, in circumstances quite similar to those in which people read pocket books: when waiting for a plane, a train, or a bus, during a journey, in the holidays, at a beach. That is, they are viewed mostly in situations that are not very suitable for total immersion into the fictional world of a feature film, or the extended argument of a documentary movie, because they are filled with competing sensations, such as distracting events, other people, tasks and duties that require attention, and poor lighting conditions, such as reflecting sun beams.

It is tempting to transform these technological and pragmatic limitations into medium specific aesthetics, which would specify the distinctive features of the mobile phone movie. In the early stages of the mobile phone movie, typically modernist attempts were made to identify these qualities. For example, Australian new media consultant and producer Juliana Pierce christened the mobile phone display ‘the fourth screen’, suggesting that movies had found yet another window next to the cinema screen, the television and video screen, and the computer screen. Pierce also observed that ‘Wide shots, pans, surround sound, mood lighting and anything with too much detail is almost no go for mobile movies’. According to German critic Reinhard W. Wolf, the small size of the mobile phone display makes the use of close-ups almost mandatory, while the low frame rate is prohibitive for fast editing and fast movements of both characters and camera, and the limited colour range imposes the requirement of working with large and brightly colored surfaces. Moreover, since the sound capacities of mobile phones are also modest compared to the high fidelity equipment of today’s movie theatres and home cinemas, and given the often noisy environments in which mobile phones movies are viewed, pocket movies should not rely on dialogue or intricate sound effects either. Given the circumstances in which mobile phone movies are most likely to be watched, and the technological constraints such as the limited storage capacity of most mobile devices and bandwidth of wireless internet connections (if available at all), it is not surprising that early critics recommended mobile phone movies be short and have a

simple storyline with a clear, preferably surprising closure. As Australian film-maker Joe Miale pointed out, micro-movies should be ‘caricature based’ rather than character based.13

According to these recommendations, Isabella Rossellini’s mini-series Green Porno14 fits the bill for the perfect pocket movie. The two series consist of eight very short movies, each of them featuring Rossellini in the male part of a couple of insects, and explaining and executing the sexual act of that species. Rossellini wears simple, brightly coloured costumes, and performs in similarly simple and brightly coloured sets, so that the images are reminiscent of children’s drawings, and appear to be a mixture of live action and animation. Each film ends with the fulfillment of the sexual act and its sometimes lethal consequences – a clear, sometimes funny, but always surprising form of closure. With this playful dialectics between childish representation and adult content, ecological education and pornographic curiosity, Green Porno allegorizes the tension between the new but technologically immature ‘fourth screen’ of mobile devices and its adult counterparts, cinema and television.

Although produced with the ‘fourth screen’ of mobile devices in mind, the Green Porno series exemplifies the ambiguous status of the pocket movie. It was not shot with mobile phone cameras, but in a professional film studio with professional film equipment. Neither was it made for exclusive distribution for mobile devices. The series garnered its fame in the independent film festival circuit, and is available only in streaming format from the Sundance Film Festival website and, as is to be expected today, on YouTube.15 Rossellini herself is the harbinger of something new, as are most micro-movies or pocket films. Or, to remain in her website and, as is to be expected today, on YouTube. 15 Rossellini herself is the harbinger of something new, as are most micro-movies or pocket films. Or, to remain in the independent film festival circuit, and is available only in streaming format from the Sundance Film Festival website and, as is to be expected today, on YouTube. 15 Rossellini herself is the harbinger of something new, as are most micro-movies or pocket films. Or, to remain in

Critics and producers such as Pierce, Wolf, and Miale might take the constraints of the mobile phone as the basis of a distinctive mobile phone movie aesthetics, yet this aesthetics is itself a relatively small subset of the stylistic and formal repertoire derived from the venerable traditions of classical Hollywood and European art cinema.17 The mobile phone movie merely ‘remediates’ the familiar forms and formats of preexisting ‘old media’ of cinema and television.18 Film theorist Roger Odin highlights the remediating function of mobile phone films in general, and mobile phone film festivals in particular. For Odin, the mobile phone film remediates the loss of the indexical bound of the cinematic image to the real by heightening the viewer’s awareness of the materials, techniques and procedures used in digital film production. In his view, the mobile phone movie is to contemporary mainstream cinema what avant-garde and experimental film was to the mainstream cinema of old. 19 The mobile phone movie’s main function is to remind the spectators of contemporary digital cinema of Godard’s famous dictum from the sixties of the previous century: ‘Ce n’est pas une image juste; c’est juste une image’.

Although these attempts to formulate a mobile phone movie aesthetics tend to specify it in terms of the limitations of these movies’ intended window of display, or its hoped for effect on the spectator rather than in terms of the mode of production, they cover a small portion of the whole spectrum of actual practices and virtual possibilities involved. On the one hand, these approaches fall victim to the superficial similarities between recording or watching movies on mobile devices and domestic or cinema screens. On the other hand, they cleave to the modernist idea that media technologies generate their own specific aesthetic properties and requirements. When approached from the perspective of digital media, mobile phone movies start to look quite different.

**Moving Images: Images on the Move.**

After Pierce’s formulation of the fourth screen, critic Alex Munt has categorized the mobile phone display together with the computer screen as ‘S’ (for ‘small’) next to the ‘M’ (medium-sized) wide-screen television, the L (large) 2D theatrical cinema screen, and the XL (extra large) sized 3D cinema screens, as in Imax cinemas. 20 Yet another critic, Ted Brown, has classified the mobile phone display as a “third” digital screen’ that comes after the first, analogue, cinema screen, and the second, electronic, television screen. 21 Whether these forms of categorization take size or technology as the criterion for classification, they function first of all to demonstrate how futile, volatile and transient any divisions have become since screens began to leave their dedicated niches in cinema theatres and living rooms. At this point, screens have become so ubiquitous that any categorization that takes the cinema screen as its starting point looks like a hopelessly old-fashioned attempt to preserve the cinema’s privileged status.

It is the omissions from these categorizations that are more telling: ‘urban screens’, the huge dynamic billboards that increasingly adorn the streets, squares, and public spaces in urban environments; ‘skinned walls’, or buildings with video walls; wide-screen televisions in public

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17. For a more recent version of this argument, see Benoît Labourdette, Tournez Un Film Avec Votre Téléphone Portable, Editions Dikx, 2008.
19. Odin, ‘Le “Pocket Film Spectateur”’.
spaces or public transport to transmit information, advertisements or entertainment; video walls used at rock concerts or sports events; the small screens of navigation systems; DVD players and game consoles in cars and boats to keep the kids quiet, or the guests busy. Times Square and Piccadilly Circus are no longer the only places ‘augmented’ with audiovisual information. In the rare cases in which there are no screens in one’s immediate environment, one still has a mobile phone, iPod or iPad to turn to.

The reason for the selective blindness of the aforementioned categorizations is quite obvious: their primary criterion for selection was not size or technology, but content. The categories only cover screens that are used – or are described as being used – for the screening of movies, whether these are feature films or micro-movies. This categorization fails to do justice the contemporary variety of screens and content, and demonstrates how narrow one’s view may become if new media are approached from the perspective of already existing media – media about to be ‘remediated’. We have seen the proliferation of screens in homes, offices, shopping malls, stadiums, museums, bars, waiting rooms, airports, train stations, coaches, planes and trains. Screens come in all sizes and forms, and in private as well as public spaces. As the moving image itself leaves its dedicated habitats – the cinemas and living rooms – these become display windows, among many others. With this migration, the moving image acquires new forms and functions. Feature films and television shows become special cases of the ubiquitous and multi-functional moving image that has become the icon of today’s ‘visual culture’.

Ironically, outside the cinema or the living room, the moving image is often subject to technological, practical and pragmatic constraints quite similar to those identified for pocket films by early critics Pierce, Miale, and Wolf. Images displayed on mega screens, such as image skins and urban screens, often suffer from difficult to control lighting conditions, noise from their immediate environments, and competition from events, incidents, traffic, and other screens, all of which vie for the attention of the passersby. Relatively low resolution, low frame rates and poor lighting conditions make detailed images, panoramic landscapes, the use of subtle colours, fast camera movements and fast editing as much a ‘no-go’ as they were said to be for mobile phone movies. In addition, the images on these huge screens often come without sound, both because it would drown in the surrounding noise, and add to the often already loud noise in urban environments.

Moreover, the attention span of the urban passerby is perhaps even shorter than that of the mobile phone user. The city dweller tends to be ‘on the move’, and has to divide their attention over a multitude of sensorial, social, and commercial impressions at once: in a cognitive and perceptual sense, the urban passerby is permanently ‘multi-tasking’. For quite similar reasons to mobile phones, then, the content displayed on such screens had better be short, bright, and instantly intelligible, and animations, commercials, and very short movies suit the conditions of mega-screens best. Thus, the constraints identified for mobile phone movies are not specifically bound to the technology or the size of the display, but rather to the practical conditions in which moving images are viewed. As a consequence, genres that used to lead a very marginal existence at best in cinema and television as we knew them have gained prominence on both mega and micro-screens. Animations, music videos, shorts, and commercials have become mainstream.

The multitude of screens that populate the world are no longer exclusively dedicated to movies, as they were when located in cinema theatres. Mobile phone and computer screens are mostly used for reading or typing SMS messages or emails, taking written or photographic notes, browsing the internet, playing games, making calculations, consulting maps, or searching for addresses or telephone numbers. Now, both mega screens and the micro-sized screens of mobile phones and portable devices are – as are those of desktop and laptop computers – used to display text messages, graphics, animations, photographs, maps, drawings, news reports, advertisements, entertaining distractions, traffic information, crowd control instructions at huge public events, live reports of sports matches or political rallies – along with art works, ‘pocket movies’, and other DIY products made and uploaded by whoever feels like sharing their talents with a larger audience.  

Of course, this ecumenical cohabitation of diverse content has been made possible by the digitization of most media. Because all these media share the same digital language of ones and zeros, they do not only co-exist, but begin entering into all sorts of new configurations, happily mixing and exchanging properties, procedures, forms and formats that used to be considered specific particular media. Digital technologies have turned computers into that which Lev Manovich has called a ‘meta-medium’ that not only combines ‘cinematography, animation, computer animation, special effects, graphic design, and typography’, but also make formerly ‘autonomous’ media exchange and remix ‘fundamental techniques, working methods, and ways of representation and expression’. Since the arrival of the Graphical User Interface (GUI), for instance, procedures that were formerly typically cinematographic, such as zooming and panning, were transferred to almost all applications. The representation of content in windows on computer screens allows users to scroll up- and downward, pan from left to right, and zoom in and out of particular details. In a sense, one could say that all media have become ‘moving images’.

Cinema itself has been deeply transformed by this process of hybridization. It has become difficult to tell a frame’s live action from its animated parts, sharp cuts between shots have been substituted with undetectable transitions between frames, and the art of editing is no longer to select and arrange shots into scenes and sequences, but to de-compose and re-compose, analyse and synthesize pixels and layers into dynamic images, of which every part can be changed separately and constantly, without regard for temporal boundaries. Since the beginning of film history, the shot or still photograph has been considered the basic unit of the cinematographic language – yet it no longer plays a significant role in digital image processing. A film semiotician would be hard pressed to apply Christian Metz’s famous ‘Grande Syntagmatique’ – a taxonomy of film segments that are identified by clear temporal


and spatial discontinuities – to today’s movies. Shots, sequences, and habitual ways of editing have not completely disappeared; the majority of contemporary Hollywood movies still use these methods. Yet, this way of editing has just become one option, a ‘mode of narration’ amongst many others.

So-called ‘PowerPoint Movies’ are examples of ‘meta-movies’ that draw on a mix of traditional and novel modes of narration. The most famous example is probably Al Gore’s An Inconvenient Truth, which includes graphs, maps, statistical information, photographs, drawings and movie images; Michael Welsh’s educational YouTube movies The Machine is Us/ing Us and An Anthropological Introduction to YouTube are also good examples. Not surprisingly, PowerPoint movies can be found among mobile phone film festivals as well, such as David Bakker’s A Short History of Nearly Everything, which summarizes the 624 pages of Bill Bryson’s book in just four minutes, and was entered into the 2008 edition of the Groningen festival Viva La Focus. On a different note, the cell phone movie Objets à Usages Multiples is shot and edited in a rather conventional way, but satirizes the current convergence of media and the contemporary visual culture than Bazin’s concept of the film image as a reflective redemption of the real. And because the first thing an image has to communicate is that it is there in the first place, the medium has in a very literal sense become the message. That is, their main task can be immersed. On the contrary, outside the walls of the cinema auditorium, the moving image is no longer to tell stories, to present characters with which an audience can identify, or to represent a world of events, adventure and romance in which an audience can be immersed. On the contrary, outside the cinema theatre, moving images are used to inform, to entertain, to seduce, to impress, to persuade or to shock. That is, their main task is communication rather than representation. Moving images have become part and parcel of an urban and architectural environment in which the ‘lessons of Las Vegas’ – where the design of a building serves to communicate rather than to reveal the building’s structure and function, as the principles of modernist architecture would have it – have become general wisdom and where communication presides over representation. And since the urban and everyday environment is full of stimuli that compete for our attention, communication on screens outside theatres or living rooms had better be bold rather than subtle: Eisenstein’s approach of film editing as a ‘slap in the face’ for the spectator is more pertinent to contemporary visual culture than Bazin’s concept of the film image as a reflective redemption of the real.

Among many others, another example of ‘remix’ mobile phone movies is Henry Reichold’s Free Run, submitted to the Paris Festival Pocket Films in 2007. After opening with a documentary shot of a mass of passengers of the London subway leaving the elevator and walking towards the camera, we see a collage of moving and still images, films, photographs, animations, drawings and postcards of London landmarks and traffic, through which the protagonist navigates on a skateboard. This film cleverly summarizes the history of cinema: from the opening shot, which is an obvious allusion to the Lumière brothers’ film Sortie des Usines Lumière, which itself epitomizes the industrial era, to the remix mode of the movie itself, and the highly individualized, idiosyncratic and subjective ways of locomotion of the skateboarder, which symbolize the post-industrial and postmodern era, and its digital information and communication technologies is represented by. Free Run demonstrates that nowadays, moving images are made equally with computers as with cameras, if not more so. Moreover, although submitted to a mobile phone film festival, Free Run certainly has not been made with a mobile phone, nor is there any reason to assume that it should be exclusively displayed on mobile phones. Rather, Free Run offers a ‘pocket history’ of the cinema.


PowerPoint movies do, however, exemplify the transition to ‘cinema outside the cinema’ in another sense. Outside the walls of the cinema auditorium, the main function of (mixed) moving images is no longer to tell stories, to present characters with which an audience can identify, or to represent a world of events, adventure and romance in which an audience can be immersed. On the contrary, outside the cinema theatre, moving images are used to inform, to entertain, to seduce, to impress, to persuade or to shock. That is, their main task is communication rather than representation. Moving images have become part and parcel of an urban and architectural environment in which the ‘lessons of Las Vegas’ – where the design of a building serves to communicate rather than to reveal the building’s structure and function, as the principles of modernist architecture would have it – have become general wisdom and where communication presides over representation. And since the urban and everyday environment is full of stimuli that compete for our attention, communication on screens outside theatres or living rooms had better be bold rather than subtle: Eisenstein’s approach of film editing as a ‘slap in the face’ for the spectator is more pertinent to contemporary visual culture than Bazin’s concept of the film image as a reflective redemption of the real. And because the first thing an image has to communicate is that it is there in the first place, the medium has in a very literal sense become the message.

Research into keitai, that is, 3G phone use in Japan and South-East Asian countries such as South Korea, has shown that users send photographs or videos to peers, family members or colleagues to ask for advice on the choice of clothes, instructions for a task at hand, to bring an interesting event or amusing anecdote to their attention, or to simply let them know that they are thinking of them. In many of these cases, the particular content of these messages is less important than or even peripheral to, the actual intention the message is meant to express: communication presides over representation. Again, this has less to do with the particular medium or technologies that are being used to produce and distribute them, but rather with the pragmatic and practical circumstances under which these images circulate and communicate.

iPhone and YouTube

Where does this leave the mobile phone movie, in terms of cinematographic type or genres of film? First of all, it seems quite obvious that the mobile phone movie partakes in a more general process of ‘remediation’ that is not restricted to cinema, but extends to media in general. The moving image has become one of the raw ingredients of the digital meta-medium: not only can it be mixed and mingled with all other media, but its production, storage, distribution, and exhibition are no longer tied to specific channels and windows. That is, mobile phone movies are certainly not movies produced with mobile phone cameras: the majority of entries of mobile phone movie festivals contain computer generated animations, special effects, and collages of non-cinematic pictures, graphics, texts, and typography. Nor are mobile phone movies especially suitable for display on mobile phones alone. Since the mo-
bile phone display shares technological and pragmatic constraints with other non-cinematic screens, they circulate just as easily among urban screens, image skins, monitors in public transport, portable devices, and screens in public places and shopping malls. One reason for the gradual dissolution of the mobile phone movie film festival circuit may very well be the dissolution of the mobile phone movie into a more general digital media culture.

One aspect of the mobile phone film festival circuit that has received very little comment is the ‘sociological’ basis of its participants. Not only are the organizers and jury members of most of these festivals members of the professional media culture – be they film-makers or producers themselves, film critics, or curators of film museums – but the formats, modes of presentation and qualities of most of the entries into the festivals betray a more than amateur involvement in film-making. Although the professional backgrounds of the entrants are hardly ever mentioned, the video’s titles, framing, editing, sound effects, and production values suggest that the competitors have had professional training, and experience in handling scripts, actors, staging, film equipment and editing software. In this sense, it is revealing to compare the entries into mobile phone festivals such as the Brussels Cinépocket or the Paris Festival Pocket Films, with the Groningen festival Viva La Focus, which recruits its submitters from the region of Groningen. Whereas the former festivals host movies of quite professional quality, the latter hosts movies of DIY makers, mostly high school students and other youths from the Groningen region. The relation of the former to the latter is that of Vimeo to YouTube: festivals moderated by professional gatekeepers versus an open platform, with no professional standards to filter its entries. It is probably not coincidental that mobile phone movies submitted to mobile phone film festivals can usually not be found on YouTube.

Insofar as the primary function of mobile phone film festivals appears to be to incorporate a new mode of film-making into that of traditional cinema, the festivals seem to be fighting a lost rear-guard battle. The mobile phone movie is part of a digital mediascape, rather than an expansion of, or appendix to, cinema. Odin’s observation, recall, was that the ‘pocket film spectator’ is a reflective spectator who comes to contemporary mainstream cinema with questions in mind about the means and technologies of production. This means that the mobile phone movie and the mobile phone movie festival circuit is a playground, or training ground, in which prospective film-makers and film spectators can prepare themselves for the ‘free run’ into the future of digital meta-media. In that sense, the mobile phone festival circuit can be seen as an opening to the future, and its gradual demise a sign of its success.

On the other hand, the mobile phone film festival circuit can – and probably must – be seen as an attempt to draw a boundary between the professionals of the moving image making business and the rising tide of DIY film-making culture epitomized by YouTube. The message these festivals intend to broadcast is that, although economically and theoretically the practice of film-making has become within anybody’s reach, it takes more than a mobile camera and cheap and user-friendly software to make interesting movies. In this sense, in spite of their open invitations to submit movies, these festivals are attempts to close off the ranks of the professionals to the DIY amateurs knocking at their door. In that sense, too, these festivals are a response to YouTube. It remains to be seen whether the gradual dissolution of the mobile phone film festival is a sign that this battle, too, has been lost.